

Pakistan implodes with Balochistan explosion

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE/AGENCIES ■ New Delhi/Karachi

Five people, including three Frontier Corps (FC) personnel, were killed and 30 others injured in a terrorist attack by suspected Baloch militants in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province on Sunday. Four terrorists, including the suicide bomber, were killed in counter-operations in Noshki district of the province.

The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for the attack, and said 90 military personnel had been killed. Earlier last week, in the same province, the BLA militants ambushed the Jaffar Express, carrying 440 passengers, near the mountainous terrain

of Gudalar and Piru Kunri in Bolan district on March 11. The militants killed 21 passengers and four paramilitary soldiers before the Army eliminated all 33 terrorists on March 12.

As regards the latest incident, a suicide attacker rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into a convoy of Paramilitary Frontier Corp (FC) on the Nushki-Dalbandin National Highway; chief of the local police station Zafarullah Sumalani said adding that the initial investigations suggested that it was a suicide attack.

Sumalani also said evidence from the site of the attack suggested that a suicide attacker rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into the FC convoy.

Soon after the attack, security forces launched an immediate counter-

operation, killing four terrorists, including the suicide bomber, newspaper Express Tribune said.

It also quoted security sources to say that the attack was carried out by militants from the banned BLA.

Claiming that a total of 90 Pakistani military personnel were killed in the attack on their convoy on Sunday, a statement by the BLA said, "The Majeed Brigade, the Fidayee unit of the Baloch Liberation Army, targeted a convoy of the occupying Pakistani military a few hours ago in a VBIED Fidayee attack near Rakhshan Mill on the RCD Highway in Noshki. The convoy consisted of eight buses, one of which was completely destroyed in the explosion."

It added, "Immediately after the attack,

the Fateh Squad of the BLA advanced and completely surrounded another bus, systematically eliminating all military personnel on board, bringing the total number of enemy casualties to 90."

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi and Balochistan Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti all condemned the attack and expressed sorrow over the loss of lives.

Immediately after the attack, the Fateh Squad advanced and surrounded another bus, systematically eliminating all military personnel on board
 — BALOCH LIBERATION ARMY

Sharif, in a statement, said, "Such cowardly acts cannot shake our resolve against terrorism." He also directed that the injured be provided with the best possible treatment. "Those who play with the peace of Balochistan would be brought to a tragic end," Bugti said in an official release.

Minister Naqvi condemned the blast and extended condolences to the victims' families and wished a swift recovery for the injured.

Denouncing the attack as an act of brutality, Naqvi emphasised that anti-state elements are attempting to destabilise the country and asserted that such cowardly acts would not shake the nation's resolve, according to a statement shared by the Ministry of Interior on social media.

Balochistan government spokesperson Shahid Rind also condemned the attack "targeting innocents."

Balochistan has witnessed an uptick in terrorist attacks over the past year. Bordering Iran and Afghanistan, Balochistan is home to a long-running violent insurgency.

Baloch insurgent groups frequently carry out attacks targeting security personnel, government projects and the \$60 Billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects in this oil and mineral-rich province.

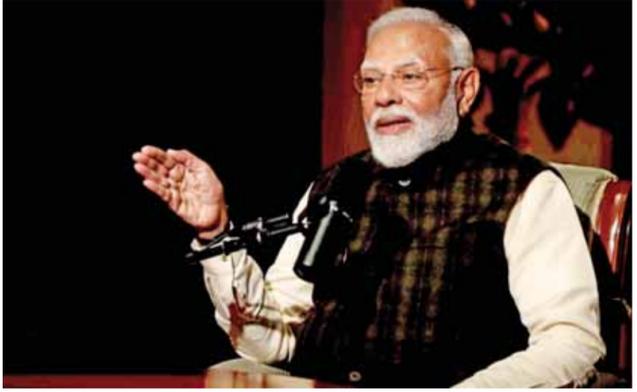
In the past, the railway tracks in this area have been attacked by Baloch militants using rockets or remote-controlled bombs, and the BLA claimed responsibility for most of the attacks.

PM bemoans lack of will and wisdom in Islamabad

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that every attempt to foster peace with Pakistan was met with hostility and betrayal and hoped that wisdom would prevail on the leadership in Islamabad to improve bilateral ties. In a podcast with Lex Fridman released on Sunday, Modi recalled that he had specially invited his Pakistan counterpart Nawaz Sharif for his swearing-in ceremony in 2014 with the hope that the two countries could turn a new leaf.

"Yet, every noble attempt at fostering peace was met with hostility and betrayal. We sincerely hope that wisdom prevails upon them and they choose the path of peace," the Prime Minister said in his over three-hour interaction. Modi said he believed that even the people of Pakistan long for peace because they also must be tired of living in strife, unrest and relentless terror where even innocent children are killed and countless lives are destroyed. The Prime Minister said



Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a podcast with Lex Fridman in New Delhi

his first attempt at improving bilateral relations was a gesture of goodwill.

"It was a diplomatic gesture unlike any in decades. The very people who once questioned my approach to foreign policy were taken aback when

they learned I had invited all SAARC heads of state and our then President Pranab Mukherjee beautifully captured that historic gesture in his memoir," Narendra Modi said.

"This was a testament to how clear and confident India's foreign policy had become. This sent a clear message to the world about India's commitment to peace and harmony, but we didn't get the desired outcome," he said.

To a question on how he now view the 2002 post Godhra riots and its aftermaths, Modi said the discourse was an attempt to create a false narrative and his political opponents in power at the Centre wanted him to be punished but the courts cleared his name. Modi said there were many involved in misinformation to target him. "If you review the data from before 2002, you will see that Gujarat faced frequent riots. Curfews were constantly being imposed somewhere. Communal violence would erupt over trivial issues such as kite flying contests or even bicycle collisions," Modi said.

Modi said the riots in Gujarat in 1969 lasted for more than six months and that was an era when he was nowhere on the political horizon. He said the Godhra train burning incident took place barely three days after he was elected as a legislator of the Gujarat Assembly.

Lashkar Commander gunned down by Indian forces in Jhelum

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Top Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) commander, wanted by Indian security agencies for several deadly terror attacks in Jammu and Kashmir, was killed by gunmen in an attack in Pakistan, officials said on Sunday.

Zia-ur-Rehman alias Naadeem alias Abu Qatal alias Qatal Sindhi was gunned down in the Jhelum area of Punjab on Saturday evening. His security guard was also killed, the officials said, quoting information received from the neighbouring country.

Abu Qatal was under heavy protection from the Pakistan Army, with both Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists and plainclothes Pakistani military personnel assigned to his security. The attack took place near Zeenat Hotel, close to Dina Punjab University in the Jhelum area. As Zia-ur-Rehman's convoy was passing through, unknown gunmen launched a barrage of gunfire.

Considered the most trusted handler of LeT founder and 26/11 Mumbai terror

attack mastermind Hafiz Saeed, they said 43-year-old Rehman was the main handler of the terror outfit involved in the planning of various attacks in the Poonch-Rajouri region of Jammu and Kashmir.

The officials said Rehman had infiltrated the Jammu region in early 2000 and exfiltrated in 2005. He had a wide network of Over Ground Workers in Poonch and Rajouri through his old contacts, they said.

In the various investigations conducted by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) into the gruesome terror incidents in Poonch-Rajouri region, his involvement was found, officials said.

He was charge-sheeted by the NIA under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and other sections for an attack on Hindu minorities in Dhangri Village of Rajouri District in 2023, they added.

Terrorists struck Dhangri village on January 1, 2023, and targeted villagers before fleeing the scene, leaving behind an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). While five people were killed in the firing by terrorists, two others died in the IED explosion the next morning.

Trump orders air strikes on Houthis, 31 dead

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ West Palm Beach (US)

The Houthi rebel-run Health Ministry says the death toll from US strikes on Yemen has climbed to 31, including women and children.

Anees al-Asbahi, a spokesperson for the ministry, said on Sunday that another 101 people were wounded in the overnight strikes. President Donald Trump said he ordered a series of airstrikes on the Houthi-held areas in Yemen on Saturday, promising to use "overwhelming lethal force" until Iranian-backed Houthi rebels cease their attacks on shipping along a vital maritime corridor. The Houthis said at least 18 civilians were killed.

"Our brave Warfighters are right now carrying out aerial attacks on the terrorists' bases, leaders, and missile defences to protect American shipping, air, and naval assets, and to restore Navigational Freedom," Trump said. "No terrorist force will stop US commercial and naval vessels from freely sailing the Waterways of the World." He also warned Iran to stop supporting the rebel group, promising to hold the country "fully accountable" for the actions of its proxy.

It comes two weeks after the US leader sent a letter to Iranian leaders offering a path to restarting bilateral talks between the countries on Iran's advancing nuclear programme.

Ram Mandir generates ₹400 crore as tax in five years

BISWAJEET BANERJEE/KAMLESH SRIVASTAVA ■ Ayodhya

The construction of the Ram temple has not only transformed the religious landscape of Ayodhya but has also had a profound impact on the city's economy. Over the past five years, the influx of tourists and devotees has surged tenfold, creating new employment opportunities and significantly boosting local businesses. This rise in religious tourism has also resulted in substantial revenue generation for the government.

Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust General Secretary Champat Rai disclosed that between February 5, 2020 and February 5, 2025, the Ram Mandir Trust contributed approximately ₹400 Crore in taxes to the government. Of this, ₹270 Crore was collected as GST, while the remaining ₹130 Crore came from other tax sources.

In the past year alone, over 16 Crore devotees and tourists visited Ayodhya, with five Crore devotees attending the court of Ramlala following the Pran Pratishtha ceremony.

During an inspection by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) about six months ago, the trust requested an economic analysis of Ayodhya.

From February 5, 2020 to February 28, 2025, the government received

₹396.26 Crore in taxes from the trust, rounded off to ₹400 Crore. The Maha Kumbh 2025 further contributed to the surge, with four to four-and-a-half lakh people arriving in Ayodhya daily for darshan. Around 1.5 Crore people visited Ramlala during this period.

Moreover, ten trains from the Kumbh Mela reached Ayodhya daily, carrying around 4,000 passengers per train. This brought approximately 40,000 to 50,000 visitors to Ayodhya each day.

The significant revenue generation from the Ram Mandir has not only enhanced the spiritual experience for devotees but has also strengthened infrastructure development and contributed to the government's revenue collection.

The Uttar Pradesh Rajkiya Nirman Nigam has been awarded a ₹200 crore contract for the construction of the Ram Katha Museum, the trust office, and a rest house.



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SpaceX crew arrives for NASA astronauts

Sunita Williams and other astronauts greeting each other after the SpaceX capsule docked with the International Space Station

Just over a day after blasting off, a SpaceX crew capsule arrived at the International Space Station on

Sunday, delivering the replacements for NASA's two stuck astronauts. The four newcomers representing the US, Japan and Russia will spend the next few days learning the station's ins and

outs from Butch Wilmore and Sunita Williams. Then the two will strap into their own SpaceX capsule later this week, one that has been up there since last year, to close out an unexpected extended mission that began last June.

Wilmore and Williams expected to be gone just a week when they launched on Boeing's first astronaut flight. They hit the nine-month mark earlier this month.

The Boeing Starliner capsule encountered so many problems that NASA insisted it come back empty, leaving its test pilots behind to wait for a SpaceX lift.

Wilmore swung open the space station's hatch and then rang the ship's bell as the new arrivals floated in one by one and were greeted with hugs and handshakes. "It was a wonderful day. Great to see our friends arrive," Williams told Mission Control. Weather permitting, the SpaceX capsule carrying Wilmore, Williams and two other astronauts will undock from the space station no earlier than Wednesday and splash down off Florida's coast.

New industries of Rs 500 cr to be established in Rajgarh region

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav said that industrial units would be established across various sectors in Rajgarh with an investment of approximately Rs 500 crore. He highlighted that during the recently held Global Investors Summit in Bhopal, investment proposals worth Rs 30 lakh crore were received for the state, ensuring benefits for every region. The Chief Minister also stated that vacant positions for both police personnel and school teachers are being filled. He assured that following the inauguration of the Rajgarh District Hospital, the region will soon receive the gift of a medical college. Additionally, he emphasized the development of a 275 km long railway line from Ramganj Mandi to Bhopal, further

boosting connectivity and progress. During the event, Chief Minister Dr. Yadav distributed benefits to beneficiaries of various government schemes, including the Swamitva Yojana, Mukhya Mantri Udyam Kranti Yojana, and the Food Processing Unit Scheme.

Yadav was addressing the inauguration ceremony of Shaurya Smarak, the District Hospital, and the Bhoomi Pujan ceremony for the night shelter building, new school building, and law college in Rajgarh on Sunday. During his speech, Chief Minister Dr. Yadav highlighted various public welfare schemes, including Ladli Laxmi, Ladli Behna Yojana, Ujjwala Cooking Gas Scheme, and Free Food Distribution, emphasizing that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, development is progressing in

every sector. He also announced that helpalps would be constructed in every assembly constituency. The Chief Minister emphasized that the implementation of state and central government schemes would bring prosperity to farmers' lives. He urged farmers not to sell their land, as upcoming projects will significantly enhance the region's growth. Chief Minister Dr. Yadav highlighted the Parvati-Kalisindh-Chambal river linking irrigation project, stating that it will transform both the geography and future of the Rajgarh region. He recalled that two decades ago, the area faced severe drought issues, but the pace of development has accelerated over the years. He assured that rapid progress will continue in the coming times. The Parvati-Kalisindh-Chambal project will benefit Rajgarh,

Narsingharh, Biora, Sarangpur, and Khilchipur. Additionally, the construction of four-lane roads, the Mohanpura-Kundalia project, and new industrial investments will further drive the region's transformation and economic growth. Yadav announced that 10 lakh solar-powered electric pumps will be installed annually for farmers, with a total of 30 lakh solar pumps to be set up over the next three years. Chief Minister Dr. Yadav also emphasized the government's commitment to women's empowerment through self-reliance and self-employment. He stated that industries based on women's labour, especially in the ready-made garment sector, will receive incentives of Rs 5,000 per female worker. Yadav started his address by hailing Maa Jalpa Devi and Bhainswa Mata, the symbols of

people's faith in Rajgarh. Chief Minister Dr. Yadav said that the citizens of the Rajgarh district are hardworking. Not only this, but the citizens who are firm and determined to follow Indian culture are the actual identity of Rajgarh. The taste of Dal-Baati and Dal-Bafla of this region is also unique. Minister for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Rajgarh District Incharge Chaitanya Kumar Kashyap, Minister of State (Independent Charge) Skill Development and Employment Department Gautam Tetwal, Minister of State (Independent Charge) Fishermen Welfare and Fisheries Development Narayan Singh Panwar, MP Rodmal Nagar and local MLA in their addresses expressed their gratitude to Chief Minister Dr. Yadav for the gifts given to the district.



Students come out after appearing in the B.ed entrance exam conducted by Indira Gandhi National Open University, at Career College in Bhopal on Sunday. Pioneer photo

Litopia 2.0: A grand literary celebration at Medicaps

PNB ■ Indore

Medicaps University's Literary Club, The Sahityik, successfully hosted the grand Litopia 2.0 Literature Festival, a vibrant celebration of literature, creativity, and intellectual discourse, bringing together literary enthusiasts for an enriching and immersive experience. The festival was inaugurated by renowned writer and Sahitya Academy Awardee, Prof. Dr. Garima Dubey, along with Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, Prof. (Dr.) D.K. Patnaik. In her keynote address, Dr. Dubey highlighted the role of literature in shaping intellectual and cultural growth, urging students to develop

a habit of reading and writing. The event was further graced by Pro Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Brajshish Patnaik, Dean Academics, Dr. A.A. Koser, Club Head, Dr. Shalini Modh, and esteemed faculty members from the Department of Languages. The two-day festival featured an array of engaging literary activities, including: Book Fair - A paradise for book lovers, Harry Potter Quiz - A test of magical knowledge, Legacy Beyond the Benches - A motivational talk inspiring young minds, Detective Game - A Case Study - Encouraging analytical thinking, Mic Drop - A platform for creative expression, Adding to the excitement, the renowned theater group "Anvarat" mesmerized the

audience with a powerful performance, while students showcased their wit and legal acumen through "Medicaps Ki Adalat." Beyond literature, food and game stalls brought a festive vibe to the event, making it a truly interactive and immersive experience. The grand festival concluded with the distribution of certificates and prizes to winning participants. Club Head Dr. Shalini Modh expressed her heartfelt gratitude to all contributors, acknowledging their efforts in making Litopia 2.0 a resounding success. The festival once again reinforced Medicaps University's commitment to fostering creativity, literary enthusiasm, and intellectual growth among its students.

Cloudy conditions bring temporary relief from heat in Bhopal

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

After enduring scorching heat, Madhya Pradesh is set to experience much-needed relief as the Meteorological Department has issued a thunderstorm and lightning warning for isolated areas in the next 24 hours. Affected districts include Rewa, Mauganj, Satna, Panna, Damoh, Sagar, Chhatrapur, and Maihar. The weather changed abruptly with total cloud cover in the State capital on Sunday, providing some respite from the intense heat. Although the day temperature remained close to 40°C on Saturday, Sunday saw partly cloudy skies, which made the conditions more pleasant. Narmadapuram recorded a day temperature of 39.8°C, while Bhopal saw a dip



in mercury to 35.2°C, offering some relief to residents. This change in weather was especially welcomed by those fasting during Ramadan, as the hot and humid conditions eased up during the middle of the fasting month. Before Sunday's shift, temperatures across the state had ranged between 37°C and 40°C, but with the change, they now

hover between 34°C and 37°C. This decline in temperature was a welcome change for the people in the region, who had been struggling with the extreme heat. In the next two days, a further drop of 2 to 3 degrees in both day and night temperatures is expected. Between March 18 and 19, light rain showers are likely in parts of Jabalpur,

Narmadapuram, Indore, Bhopal, Shahdol, and Gwalior divisions. On March 19, moderate showers are anticipated, especially in the eastern parts of the state. The change in weather is attributed to a cyclonic circulation system over Rajasthan, which has been causing cloud cover in some areas and light drizzles in others. This system is expected to persist for a couple of days, bringing further cooling effects to the region. Despite the hot temperatures that have surpassed 39°C in many cities and nights that remain warm, the overall weather pattern has shifted in the last few days, offering a much-needed break. The combination of cloud cover, occasional rain, and the active system will ensure a gradual decrease in temperatures for the entire state in the coming days.

Youth killed by slitting throat

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Youth was brutally murdered by having his throat slit and being stabbed in the chest at Band Master Square in the state capital on Sunday morning. Initial investigations by the police reveal that eunuchs are the prime suspects in the case, with two eunuchs also sustaining injuries during the incident. The motive behind the attack remains unclear. According to Talaiya police, the incident occurred around 8 am. The deceased, identified as Adil, was found lying in a seriously injured state on the road. Despite being rushed to Hamidia Hospital, he succumbed to his injuries during treatment. The crime scene is located just 200 meters from Talaiya police station. Adil's brother reported that some friends arrived at Adil's residence around 6 am in a car. They left the vehicle near the house and departed on a bike. By 8:30 am, the family was informed that Adil was found critically injured on the road. Eyewitness Munnawar Ali recounted the attack, stating, "I saw four eunuchs assaulting Adil by kicking and punching him. Despite our attempts to intervene, they did not stop. During the altercation, one eunuch sustained injuries, and another had a hand injury." Talaiya police station in-charge CS Rathore confirmed the initial findings, stating, "Preliminary investigation suggests that Adil was stabbed by eunuchs during a confrontation. We are reviewing CCTV footage and questioning those involved. The suspects are also undergoing treatment for their injuries, and the investigation is ongoing." Adil had been married since February 22 last year. Notably, his brother, Aamir Barkhedi, was also murdered in the Jahangirabad area previously, raising concerns over a possible connection between the two.



BJP MLA Bhagwan Das Sabnani with children of Nepali community in a sacred thread ceremony (Janeu Sanskar) organised by Pravasi Nepali Sampark Manch, at Badrinath Garhwali Samaj Temple in Bhopal on Sunday. Pioneer photo

Fire at Gwalior hospital, 150 patients rescued

PNB ■ Gwalior

A fire broke out due to an electrical short circuit at the maternity ward of Kamla Raja Hospital in Madhya Pradesh's Gwalior on the intervening night of Saturday and Sunday, police said. Following the fire, around 150 patients from the entire hospital, including those from the maternity ward, were transferred to the Super Specialty Hospital. Two fire tenders were deployed to the site and successfully brought the fire under control. "There were around 13 patients in the section of KRS hospital, along with 9-10 others, making it 22-23 patients in total. As soon as the fire broke out, patients were evacuated, but the smoke spread throughout the hospital. All patients have now been evacuated and shifted to the Super Specialty

Hospital," Vinod Singh, a Sub-Divisional Magistrate, told. He added that there were no casualties and that the patients were being examined for effects of smoke inhalation. Atibal Singh Yadav, a fire officer with the Gwalior Municipal Corporation, said that two fire tenders were brought in and successfully controlled the blaze. "We received information about a fire in the maternity ward of the hospital and immediately alerted six stations. Two fire tenders arrived quickly and controlled the fire,"

Yadav told. Eyewitnesses said that a patient's attendant broke a window glass to help evacuate patients with the assistance of hospital staff. "It was around 1:30 to 2 AM. People were sleeping outside when we heard screaming from doctors and others about a fire. Our patient was in the ICU, and we were scared. When we looked through the window, we saw patients trapped inside. We broke the glass using an oxygen cylinder to let the smoke out and help evacuate them," an eyewitness told. Dr Rita Mishra, Assistant Superintendent of the Super Specialty Hospital, described the chaotic situation, saying, "I got a call from a doctor about the fire. We rushed to the hospital and called the supervisors and cleaning staff as well. There was a lot of smoke everywhere, but Dr Archana guided efforts to ventilate the area."

Cop killed in mob attack in Mauganj, Chief Minister promises stern action

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav has promised strict action against those responsible for the violent incident in Mauganj, which resulted in the deaths of a police officer and a civilian. Expressing condolences for Assistant Sub-Inspector (ASI) Ramcharan Gautam, CM Yadav took to social media platform X to emphasise on his commitment to law and order. He announced that Section 163 has been imposed in the area, and senior police officials, including the DIG of Rewa and SP of Mauganj, have been deployed to manage the situation. The injured police personnel have been shifted to Rewa Hospital for treatment. On Sunday, the police have arrested six persons in the case. The incident occurred in Gadara village, Shahpur police station area, when a police team, along with a Tehsildar and SHO, responded to a dispute between two groups. However, the situation escalated, and the villagers turned aggressive, attacking the officers with sticks and stones. Tragically, ASI Ramcharan Gautam lost his life in the retaliatory action.

Superintendent of Police (SP) Vivek Kumar of Rewa confirmed that the situation is now under control, with a heavy police force deployed in the area. The injured officers are receiving medical treatment at Civil Hospital and Ashirwad Hospital in Mauganj. Yadav has directed the Director General of Police (DGP) to personally oversee the case and ensure stringent measures against the perpetrators of this 'inhuman and unfortunate' act. Notably, a group of tribals allegedly kidnapped and killed a man, then attacked a police team that attempted to rescue him, resulting in the death of a cop in Madhya Pradesh's Mauganj district on Saturday (March 15). The incident took place in Gadra village, about 25 km from the district headquarters and police have taken five persons into custody in connection with the violence, he said. "Two persons including an ASI (assistant sub-inspector) have been killed and other policemen have sustained minor injuries," Rewa Range Deputy Inspector General of Police Saket Pandey told media. Police had to fire in the air after being surrounded by the mob to move to safety. Asked about the police firing, Pandey said that he was on his way to the spot. "Let me reach there and check it out," he said.

AIIMS Bhopal CTVS department celebrated Holi with patients

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

On the auspicious occasion of Holi, the Department of Cardiothoracic Surgery at AIIMS Bhopal celebrated this sacred festival with great enthusiasm along with patients and their families. The purpose of this event was to spread joy and express care and affection toward the patients. Doctors, nurses, and hospital staff distributed sweets among the patients and shared joyful moments with them, making the festival special for everyone. On this occasion, AIIMS Bhopal's Executive Director, Prof. (Dr.) Ajai Singh, said, "Holi is a festival of joy and unity, and AIIMS Bhopal believes in celebrating every festival with its patients and their families. Such events not only enhance the healing process but also strengthen the mental well-being of the patients. Our efforts are not limited to medical services alone; we also strive to ensure that our patients feel hope and a sense of belonging."

Seminar on 'Tradition of Samvat in India' held at Maharshi Panini University

PNB ■ Ujjain

A one-day international seminar on "Tradition of Samvat in India: Distinctiveness and Evidence" was organized on March 15, 2025, by the Jyotisha Department at Maharshi Panini Sanskrit Evam Vedic Vishwavidyalaya, Ujjain, in collaboration with Maharaja Vikramaditya Shodhpetha. Addressing the seminar as the special guest, Gordana Nis from Ukraine highlighted the similarities between Ukraine's calendar and the Vedic Panchang. She explained that both calendars are based on the natural cycles of the sun, moon, seasons, and agriculture. Emphasizing global unity, she advocated for a universal calendar and described the Vedas as the source of all knowledge. The chief guest, Prof. Mangalam Srinivas Shrikant from Tamil Nadu, elaborated on the distinctiveness of the Tamil calendar, noting that multiple Samvats have existed throughout history, each holding unique cultural and historical significance. In his remarks, Prof. Kedar Narayan Joshi, former Acharya

Gordana Nis from Ukraine highlighted the similarities between Ukraine's calendar and the Vedic Panchang

of Vikram University, Ujjain, highlighted that India has over 25 Samvats, including the Vikram Samvat, which is widely followed not only in India but also in other countries. Delivering the presidential address, Vice-Chancellor Prof. Vijay Kumar questioned why India continues to follow the Gregorian calendar despite decades of independence. He pointed out that Nepal officially follows the Vikram Samvat, suggesting that India could do the same. The seminar witnessed participation from scholars, social workers, students, and researchers from Nepal, Ukraine, and various regions across India, fostering an interdisciplinary dialogue on the cultural and historical importance of Samvats.



People shop at a special market during the holy month of Ramadan and ahead of the Eid-ul-Fitr festival in Bhopal on Sunday.

CM expresses grief over martyrdom of ASI at Mauganj

Bhopal: Chief Minister Mohan Yadav has expressed deep sorrow over the martyrdom of ASI Ramcharan Gautam, who lost his life in an attack on a police team that had reached Gadra village in the Shahpur police station area of Mauganj district following reports of a dispute between two groups. He extended his condolences to the bereaved family on behalf of the state govern-

ment. Yadav has directed the Director General of Police (DGP) to visit the site and oversee the situation personally. He has also ordered strict action against all those responsible for this tragic and inhuman incident. Meanwhile, the injured police personnel have been shifted to Rewa Hospital for treatment. In the unfortunate attack on

the police team, which included the regional Tehsildar, police station in-charge and ASI Ramcharan Gautam was martyred in retaliatory action. Following the incident, authorities swiftly imposed Section 163 in the area to maintain order. Senior officials, including the DIG Rewa and SP Mauganj, reached the spot to bring the situation under control.

Govt ensuring basic amenities and spiritual upliftment

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav has said that the state government is committed to fulfilling the basic needs of the general public while also supporting their spiritual progress. He emphasized that India's global identity has been shaped by its spiritual values and the principle of 'live and let live'. Chief Minister Yadav made these remarks while virtually addressing the foundation-laying ceremony for the construction of the 414-foot-high Sumeru Mountain at Atishay Kshetra Baraso in Bhopal. Chief Minister Yadav stated that India is renowned as a nation that upholds the right to life for all. He emphasized



that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India is achieving global recognition across all spheres of life. He further highlighted that alongside the spiritual brilliance of India's rich knowledge tradition, the country's reputation and influence on the world stage continue to grow. Chief Minister Yadav stated that special initiatives are being taken to promote cow rearing in the state. Efforts are

being made to encourage both milk production and its increased consumption. To support cow rearers, incentives have been introduced for milk production, and grants for cow shelters have also been increased. Chief Minister Dr. Yadav highlighted that Madhya Pradesh currently ranks third in India in milk production, intending to make it the top state in the country. He announced that a Rs 5 per liter bonus would be provided on milk, which will help increase farmers' income and contribute to the overall prosperity of society. Chief Minister Dr. Yadav praised the schools, colleges, hospitals, and other public welfare works being undertaken in Baraso, and said that the state government has also made special innovations in

the field of knowledge acquisition through the new education policy. Chief Minister Yadav highlighted the historical, archaeological, and religious importance of Baraso. The programme organised at Baraso of Bhind was also addressed by New and Renewable Energy Minister Rakesh Shukla, Digambar Sagar Ji Maharaj, and Param Puja Ramdas Ji Maharaj. Minister Shukla thanked the donors and other contributors who donated for the Gashala, school, and hospital, etc., being built here. Acharya 108 Subal Sagar Maharaj said that under the leadership of Chief Minister Yadav, who is a strict vegetarian, activities in the field of religion, culture, and spirituality have expanded in the state.

Chief Minister appeals to cooperate in vaccination campaign

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav has said that a healthy childhood is the basis of a strong future. Vaccination protects children from serious diseases and boosts their immunity. Chief Minister Yadav has appealed to the people of the state to play an active role in making the vaccination campaign a success to protect children from serious diseases on National Vaccination Day. CM Yadav has called upon to take the pledge to participate in achieving the cent percent target of vaccination for a better health and a healthy India on National Vaccination Day.



Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav pays tributes to Kadam Singh, father of Union Minister for Forest and Environment and Climate Change Bhupendra Yadav, at his residence in Jamalpur, Gurugram on Sunday. Pioneer photo



Residents deposit their taxes at BMC ward no 45 office, as the office remained open on Sunday. Pioneer photo

Shukla attends Brahmin Business Summit

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Deputy Chief Minister Rajendra Shukla attended the "Mega Brahmin Business Summit-4" held in Ahmedabad, where he engaged in a dialogue with intellectuals from the Brahmin community. During the event, he shared his views on the economic, educational, and business upliftment of the Brahmin society. The summit also witnessed the presence of Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel, Union Minister C.R. Patil, former Governor Kalraj Mishra, former Deputy Chief Minister Nitin Patel, Rajya Sabha MP Mayank Nayak, and several other dignitaries. The three-day summit features over 300 stalls set up by Brahmin entrepreneurs, offering guidance to promote busi-

ness and startups. Efforts are being made to disseminate information about various state and central government schemes, encourage new entrepreneurs, and boost business through B2B/B2C meetings. During the summit, outstanding individuals from the Brahmin community were honored with the prestigious "Brahm Ratna Award." A job fair was also organized to provide employment opportunities for youth, aiming to benefit a large number of job seekers. The summit saw the participation of over 2 lakh members of the Brahmin community from across the country. In addition to business activities, the event included religious ceremonies, cultural programs, and mass wedding celebrations.

Mining department imposes penalty of Rs 24.5 crore

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

The Department of Mineral Resources MP has imposed a fine of Rs 24.5 crore on Moin Khan and his three associates who are absconding in the fake call center case in Bhopal, penalty was imposed in the case of illegal excavation, they were engaged in illegally. Moin Khan, a former BJP leader, is accused of operating an illegal crusher along with his two associates. Due to the big action of the Mineral Department after the police, Moin and his relatives have gone underground. The houses of Moin and his close ones are locked. Illegal excavation was going on even after the lease expired. According to Prashant Tiwari, Mineral Officer of Tikamgarh,

Moin Khan, a former BJP leader, is accused of operating an illegal crusher along with his two associates

the team of Mineral Department and SDM had recently raided Premtura village. During this, it was found that despite the expiry of the lease, illegal excavation was being done and a crusher was being run. After measuring the illegal excavation and storage, the team has issued notices to the accused by imposing a fine of Rs 24 crore 50 lakh. Three teams of Bhopal Police are searching for accused Moin, his sister Zahida and brother. Bhopal Police is also

searching for TI Jitendra Garhwal, ASI Pawan Raghuvanshi, ASI Manoj Singh and Head Constable Dharmendra, who are absconding on corruption charges for demanding Rs 25 lakh in exchange for not making Moin an accused. Moin's close BJP councillor Mona Jain, who came to Bhopal to deal in exchange for Moin, is also absconding. His last location was traced to Ujjain. Another aspect related to this case is that Moin Khan is the brother-in-law of Afzal Khan, the main accused in the fake call center case of Bhopal. According to the police, Afzal Khan invested the illegal money he earned through Moin Khan in buying land in Tikamgarh and in other business.

SSB Academy Training Centre inaugurated

PNS ■ Indore

A grand inauguration ceremony of the S.S.B. Academy Training Centre was held with much enthusiasm, graced by the presence of Cabinet Minister Mr. Kailash Vijayvargiya as the chief guest. The academy aims to provide specialized training for candidates aspiring to clear competitive exams such as NDA, TES, CDS, and AFCAT under the expert guidance of Patron Lt. Gen. M.G. Datar and Capt. Ashok Maheshwari. During the ceremony, Nandlal Sabhagrah, an interview room, a lecture hall, and a computer lab

were also inaugurated along with the commencement of all courses on the academy's grounds. Addressing the gathering, Mr. Kailash Vijayvargiya emphasized the importance of a holistic education approach, stating, "Culture and skill development are essential along with education." He commended the academy for taking a bold initiative to foster both skill enhancement and cultural growth among students. Lt. Gen. M.G. Datar also lauded the establishment of the academy, remarking, "It is commendable to have such an academy in our township."

Free health check-up camp held for women employees

Jabalpur: A free health check-up camp was organized for the women employees of Madhya Pradesh Power Transmission Company (M.P. Transco) at Tarang Auditorium, Rampur, with special cooperation from Chief Medical and Health Officer, Jabalpur, Dr. Sanjay Mishra. The camp aimed to provide comprehensive health care services to female employees. The event commenced with a welcome ceremony where M.P. Transco's consultant Ajay Srivastava, Chief Engineer Atul Joshi, and SC Ghosh greeted the senior female doctors present for the camp.

Organized under the joint aegis of M.P. Transco and the Health Department, the camp witnessed a large turnout of female employees availing free health services. The check-up included examinations by senior gynecologists, pathology tests, and distribution of free medicines. MP Transco's health camp coordinator Kshama Shukla, along with RK Dixit, Ms. Anju Nikhre, Shradha Tiwari, Nusrat Siddiqui, Rishika Uike, Suresh Trivedi, Iqbal Khan, Tarun Vijaykar, and Sumant Mishra, provided volunteer services, ensuring the successful execution of the event. From the Health Department,

the medical team included Dr. Vinita Lunawat, Dr. Anupama Patel, Dr. Anshu Sahni, Dr. Rakhi Vajpayee, Dr. Nisha Sahu, and Nursing Officers/Pharmacists Pratibha David, Varsha Nageshwar, Deepti Chhadar, Meena Thakre, Sarita Verma, Sarla Dhurve, Shilvia Sharma, Ashrita Qureshi, Saini Malviya, Sonam Sahu, and Rahul Meshram, who extended their full support throughout the camp. The initiative received appreciation from employees and officials alike, highlighting M.P. Transco's commitment to promoting health and well-being among its workforce.

Important decisions for systematic development of cities

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Under the leadership of Chief Minister Mohan Yadav, important decisions have been taken for the systematic development of cities along with promoting industrial development and investments in the state. The process of 2 metropolitan areas (metropolis) in the state is being carried out by the Urban Development and Housing Department. The process of developing the first metropolitan area by combining Indore-Ujjain-Dewas and Dhar is underway. Similarly, the process of developing the second metropolitan area by combining Bhopal-Sehore-Raisen-Vidisha-Biora (Rajgarh) is in progress. Their formation will help in establishing Madhya Pradesh as an economic development centre. In line with the vision of the Central Government, the major divisional headquarters of the state Gwalior, Sagar, Rewa, Jabalpur, Narmadapuram and Shahdol are being developed as Regional Economic Growth Hubs. This effort of the state government will boost the economy of the state as well as promote new opportunities for employment, business and

investment. The land in the urban areas of the state is a valuable resource, its systematic use is very crucial for urban development. Keeping this in mind, TDR (Transfer of Development Rights) rules have been made. An online process has been prescribed for the implementation of these rules. TDR portal has been prepared for the online process. This portal facilitates the transfer of development rights to builders and property owners. This gives them additional construction capacity as compensation. The Green FAR concept has been presented for the development of green areas, wooded areas and city forests under the Integrated Township Policy. This concept will not only enhance urban beauty, but is also proving to be an important step towards environmental protection and sustainable development. The state government has formulated the Integrated Township Policy-2025 to promote sustainable urban development. The objective of this policy is to develop well-organized, modern and self-reliant townships through the participation of private and public sectors. This policy will pro-

mote better basic facilities, green residential areas and smart infrastructure. The land pooling concept has also been adopted in this policy, which will give land owners an opportunity to participate in development with proper compensation. Automatic Building Permission and Approval System has been developed to ensure transparency and accountability in the process of building permission in the state. So far 2 lakh 60 thousand applications have been approved in the state.

National certification for four Ayushman Arogya Mandirs

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Boosting healthcare infrastructure in the state capital, four Ayushman Arogya Mandirs have secured National Quality Assurance Standards (NQAS) certification. The National Health Systems Resource Centre awarded the certification after rigorous assessment, with scores ranging from 84.07% to 92.84%. The assessment, conducted in February, involved evaluating records, patient care protocols, and staff efficiency. It also incorporated interviews with community health officers, auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs), and ASHA workers regarding their field experiences. The evaluation focused on seven service packages, including maternal and child health, adolescent healthcare, family welfare services, and management of communicable and non-communicable diseases. It also covered neonatal care, outreach

activities, and compliance with national health programmes. Chief Medical and Health Officer (CMHO) Dr Prabhakar Tiwari said that all health institutions in the district are providing quality services. He emphasised that healthcare facilities are being run in line with quality standards to ensure efficient medical care. A special vaccination drive against measles and rubella has been launched alongside National Immunisation Day to enhance immunisation coverage and awareness. The initiative is part of India's goal to eliminate measles and rubella by 2026, with a target of 95% coverage for MR1 and MR2 vaccines. A Vaccination Awareness Week will be observed from March 17-22. The week-long programme will feature rallies, training sessions for health workers, pledge ceremonies, wall paintings, and signature campaigns to raise public awareness.

MKVVCL shares power saving tips

Bhopal: As summer temperatures rise, electricity bills often follow suit due to increased use of cooling appliances. The Madhya Kshetra Vidyut Vitaran Company (MKVVCL) on Sunday provided practical tips to help consumers regulate their energy consumption efficiently without compromising comfort. For air conditioner users, experts suggest setting the temperature at 27°C to reduce compressor workload and electricity usage. Lower settings force the AC to work harder, leading to higher consumption. Running a ceiling fan alongside the AC improves cooling efficiency and reduces energy use. AC filters should be cleaned every 10-15 days to maintain performance. Dusty filters make the AC run longer, increasing electricity costs. Sealing gaps in windows and doors with thermocool prevents cool air from escaping. Cooler users should ensure proper ventilation to allow hot air to exit. Blocked airflow reduces efficiency, making the cooler work harder.

Facelift for diagnostic facilities at State-level Hamidia Hospital

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Gandhi Medical College (GMC) will soon offer in-house CT scan and MRI services at Hamidia Hospital under new National Medical Commission (NMC) regulations requiring hospitals to manage these facilities themselves. The shift aims to improve patient convenience and streamline diagnostic services at the government-run hospital. The hospital administration has completed preparations, with a Rs 6 crore CT scan machine being installed in Block One. A Rs 12 crore MRI machine is expected within a week. Currently, these services operate under a private partnership in the old hospital building, requiring patients to travel 700 metres in extreme heat, often on stretchers or wheelchairs, to access the facilities. The new in-house services, set to begin in April, will be located near the emergency

department, ensuring immediate access for critical patients. Both hospital authorities and caregivers believe this transition will not only reduce patient discomfort but also enhance efficiency in emergency care. Delays caused by the long commute to the diagnostic centre often prolong treatment. With the new arrangement, emergency cases will receive quicker diagnoses, leading to faster medical interventions. Meanwhile, GMC has also received renewed approval for kidney transplants at Hamidia Hospital. Seven transplants have been successfully conducted, but the eighth was delayed due to technical reasons. With clearance now granted, preparations are underway to resume the procedure soon, further strengthening the hospital's organ transplant capabilities. This version retains your original meaning while slightly refining the flow. Let me know if you'd like any further adjustments!

Will high benchmark rates stifle Bhopal's real estate growth?

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

The recent proposal to increase collector guideline rates by an average of 18% in 1,283 locations across Bhopal has come in for stringent opposition with critics arguing that frequent hikes in benchmark property rates inflate real estate costs, slow down development, and push housing out of reach for the middle class. While the government claims these increases reflect market trends and earn enhanced revenues for the state, realtors and buyers say they distort the sector and limit accessibility. Benchmark property rates, or circle rates, serve as the minimum valuation for tax purposes. While these rates prevent underreporting of

property transactions—a common method of circulating black money—their unchecked rise creates an artificial price ceiling. In Bhopal, where affordability fuels real estate growth, inflated valuations often exceed actual market demand. Developers struggle with high land acquisition costs, while buyers must prove a high-taxed income or secure large bank loans to afford properties. Once purchased, stamp duty and registration fees further burden them. The result is stagnation: unsold inventory piles up, new projects slow down, and urban development suffers. The latest proposal, open for objections until March 19, suggests rate hikes in areas witnessing increased com-

mercial activity, land diversions, or major infrastructure upgrades. Some locations are set for a fourfold increase, while rates in parts of Jahangirabad, Sultania Road, and could double. MP Alok Sharma, who had earlier stalled a 200% guideline hike in November 2024, has called for a meeting of public representatives to ensure a balanced approach that neither chokes real estate nor harms government revenue. Realtors, led by CREDAI President Manoj KRED, argue that guideline rates should remain stable for at least three years. They point out that while land use has remained unchanged for two decades, guideline rates fluctuate unpredictably. Unlike Indore, where proper-

ty rates have seen steadier adjustments, Bhopal's rapid hikes have made real estate unaffordable, deterring investment and pricing out the middle class. Any increase in circle rates directly impacts property tax, further straining buyers. Meek has urged the government to roll back rates to pre-COVID levels and follow a more scientific approach to valuation. Beyond affordability, high circle rates monopolise land ownership. As smaller developers and individual buyers struggle to meet financial requirements, large investors and business groups dominate the market, limiting competition. This disproportionately affects self-employed professionals and small business owners,

who find it harder to secure formal financing. Moreover, with real estate increasingly used as a tax enforcement tool, transactions either move into informal channels—reviving the black money problem—or stall altogether. While curbing black money is necessary, arbitrary hikes in benchmark rates hinder economic growth. Experts suggest revising circle rates based on actual transaction data and implementing a graded taxation system that encourages both affordable and high-end housing. If rates continue to rise without a clear methodology, Bhopal risks driving away investment, slowing development, and making home ownership an unattainable dream for many.

PUBLIC NOTICE

It is informed to the general public that I, Ex-Serviceman No. (15417834-H) Rank Sepoy Dinesh Jalkhara, father Mangu Singh Jalkhara, I am retired from Army Medical Corps. In my Army documents, my wife Vandana Jalkhara date of birth has been erroneously recorded as 14/07/1988, but in Aadhaar card, PAN card and class 10th mark sheet, my wife date of birth is 14/07/1987, which is completely correct. Therefore, in all my Army documents, my wife date of birth should be written and read as 14/07/1987 only. If any discrepancy is found in this regard, then the entire responsibility will be mine. Dinesh Jalkhara father Mangu Singh Jalkhara Dugwada Post Atar Tehsil Khandwa District Khandwa M.P.

OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE ENGINEER CONSTRUCTION DIVISION NO.1, C.P. ADMN., PWD, BHOPAL No. 52/SAC/2025 Bhopal, dated 11.03.2025							
SHORT TENDER NOTICE							
Sealed tenders Form "A" are invited on behalf of Governor of M.P for the following works from Registered Contractors with the Government of M.P.P.W.D. in appropriate class. The tenders will be received through registered AD Post or speed post service in the office mentioned. The department will not be responsible for any postal delay.							
S. No.	Name of work	cost of tender form (Rs)	1) probable amount of contract (Rs in lakh) 2) Earnest Money (Rs)	Last date & time of issue of blank tender form	1) Date of receipt of tender 2) Office	1) Date time of opening of tender 2) office	1) period i/c rainy season. 2) Centralised registration in MPPWD 3) 1st call
1	Construction work in Shilpi society, ward No. 82 for samajik evam sanskritik karykram hetu samudai Bhawan. (Vidhyak Nidhi)	Rs. 2000.00	1) Rs. 8.47 (Rs Eight lakhs Forty seven thousand only) 2) Rs. 16,940/-	20.03.25 upto 5.30 PM	1) 21.03.25 upto 5.30 PM 2) O/o the Executive Engineer Constn. Dn. No.1. CPA PWD Bhopal	24.03.25 Upto 11.00 AM 2) O/o the Executive Engineer Constn. Dn. No.1. CPA PWD Bhopal	1) months i/c rainy season. 2) Centralised registration in MPPWD 3) 1st call
2	Development and beautification work in Shilpi society, ward. 82 of society park (Vidhyak Nidhi)	Rs. 2000.00	1) Rs. 8.47 (Rs Eight lakhs Forty seven thousand only) 2) Rs. 16,940/-	-do-	-do-	-do-	-do-
3	Pathway work in Shilpi society, ward. 82 of society park (Vidhyak Nidhi)	Rs. 2000.00	1) Rs. 4.24 (Rs Four lakhs twenty thousand only) 2) Rs. 8,480/-	-do-	-do-	-do-	-do-

Note
 1) Blank tender form can be obtained on payment of non-refundable cost shown above from the office of the under signed during office hours.
 2) Validity of tender will be 120 days from the date of opening of tender.
 3) In case of holidays the tender shall be received/opened on the next day.
 4) Application for purchase of blank tender shall accompany with following documents. If the contractor fails to submit these required documents tender form will not be issued to the applicant.
 i) Copy of the valid registration certificate as a contractor with Govt. of M.P. registered in appropriate class. In case of firm or partnership submit copy of DEED & power of Attorney, Current Income Tax clearance certificate.
 ii) Registration certificate of GST and copy of pan card.
 iii) Affidavit in prescribed format.
 iv) Other terms & condition can be seen at the office of the undersigned on any working day.

Executive Engineer
Construction Division No.1,
C.P. Admn. P.W.D., Bhopal

G-24343/24

₹88 Crore drugs seized in northeast

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

A massive consignment of methamphetamine tablets worth ₹88 Crore was seized and four members of an international drug cartel were arrested in Imphal and Guwahati zones, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on Sunday.

Shah also said the drug haul is a testament to the stellar performance of the bottom-to-top and top-to-bottom approach towards investigation and asserted that the Narendra Modi government's crackdown on drugs will continue. "No mercy for drug cartels. Accelerating the Modi govt's march to build a drug-free Bharat, a massive consignment of methamphetamine tablets worth ₹88 Crore is seized, and 4 members of the international drug cartel are arrested in Imphal and Guwahati zones," he wrote in a social media post.

The home minister expressed his "heartfelt" congratulations to the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) for the success. Acting on a tip-off, the officers of NCB Imphal zone carried out an operation on March 13.

The NCB team intercepted a truck near the Lilong area and recovered 102.39 kg of Methamphetamine tablets from a toolbox in the rear section of the truck, according to an official statement. Two occupants of the truck were arrested, it added. Without delay, the team immedi-



Consignment of Methamphetamine tablets worth ₹88 crore seized by Narcotics Control Bureau PTI

ately conducted a follow-up operation and apprehended the suspected receiver of the contraband from the Lilong area, the statement said. A four-wheeler, used for drug trafficking, was also seized and the man was subsequently arrested, it said.

The suspected source of the contraband is Moreh town in Manipur. Further investigation is underway to nab others involved in the case, the statement said.

In another operation on the same day, officers of the NCB-Guwahati zone intercepted an SUV on the Assam-Mizoram border near Silchar and seized 7.48 kg of Methamphetamine Tablets concealed inside the spare tyre of the vehicle, it said. The occupant of the vehicle was arrested, according to the statement.

The source of the contraband was Moreh and the suspected destination was

Karimganj in Assam, the statement said. Further investigation to nab others involved in the case is going on, it said.

Meanwhile, the Narcotics Control Bureau would be taking over the probe from the Mizoram State Excise Department into the seizure of about 46 kg of crystal meth from Brigade Bawngkawn in Aizawl on March 6. In this case, four people involved in the drug syndicate have already been arrested.

The investigation is being taken over by NCB to probe the international and inter-state linkages of the drug trafficking network, the statement said.

The Northeastern region has emerged as one of the most vulnerable areas of India from the point of view of drug trafficking owing to its geographic location, it said. Identifying this vulnerability, the Ministry of Home Affairs augmented the strength of the Narcotics Control Bureau in 2023 to further strengthen the "war against drugs" in the region.

The Narcotics Control Bureau, through its five zonal units and a regional headquarters in the Northeast, has been continuously working against drug traffickers operating in the region, particularly those involved in the trafficking of synthetic drugs such as Methamphetamine tablets, popularly known as YABA, it said.

These tablets pose a threat to not only the young population of the region, but also to the security of the nation as a whole, the statement said.

Seven year jail term for using forged passports

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Anyone found using a forged passport or visa for entering, staying or exiting India will be punished with a jail term of up to seven years and a fine to the extent of ₹10 Lakh if the new immigration bill is approved by Parliament.

The legislation, piloted by the Union Home Ministry, also provides for mandatory reporting of information about foreigners by hotels, universities, other educational institutions, hospitals and nursing homes to enable tracking of overstaying foreigners.

All international airlines and ships will also be required to submit at a port or place in India the passenger and crew manifest, the advance information of passengers and crew on board of such aircraft, vessel or other mode of transport.

"Whoever knowingly uses or supplies a forged or fraudulently obtained passport or other travel document or visa for entering into India or staying in or exiting from India, shall be punishable with an imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than two years, but may extend to seven years and shall also be liable to fine which shall not be less than one lakh rupees, but may extend to ten lakh rupees," according to the bill introduced in Lok Sabha on March 11.

It also says that any foreigner who enters into any area in India without a valid passport or other travel document, including visa required for such entry in contravention of provisions of the law or of any rule or order given in pursuance thereof, shall be punishable with an imprisonment for a term which may extend to five years with a fine which may extend to five lakh rupees or with both.

The legislation empowers the Centre to exert control over places that are "frequented by any foreigner" and require the owner to close the premises, permit its use under specified conditions, or refuse admission to all or a "specified class" of foreigners.

The Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025 is a comprehensive legislation to regulate all matters relating to foreigners and immigration.

Matters relating to foreigners and immigration are presently administered through four Acts—the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920, the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939, the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act, 2000.

All these laws are now proposed to be repealed.

While the Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025 consists of several existing provisions in the four Acts proposed to be repealed after simplification and harmon-

isation, it also has certain new provisions to meet the present-day requirements.

This legislation is in line with the government's policy of simplification of laws, ease of doing business and minimising compliance burden.

It seeks to balance the requirements of national security and related issues of immigration of foreigners with the need to promote economic growth and tourism in the country. However, it is not connected with any matters related with grant of citizenship.

"The Bill will help in tackling the problem of illegal migration into India and facilitate tracking of movement of overstaying foreigners within India.

The legislation empowers the Centre to exert control over places that are "frequented by any foreigner" and require the owner to close the premises, permit its use under specified conditions

It will also help in reducing the compliance burden," an officer said.

While Indian visas of all categories to foreigners can be granted in physical or sticker form by Indian missions or posts located abroad, the Bureau of Immigration (BoI) grants electronic visas under seven categories to people from 167 countries.

Besides, visa-on-arrival is granted by immigration authorities at six designated airports to nationals of three countries - Japan, South Korea and the UAE (only for such UAE nationals who had earlier obtained e-visa or regular or paper visa for India).

The stay and movement of foreigners in India and their exit are regulated by the BoI and state governments and Union Territory administrations.

According to existing laws, all foreigners on long-term (more than 180 days) student, medical, research, employment, missionary and project visas are required to register with the Foreigners Regional Registration Officer (FRRO) or the Foreigners Registration Officer (FRO) concerned, having jurisdiction over the place where the foreigner intends to stay, within 14 days of arrival. Pakistani nationals are required to register within 24 hours of their arrival.

Other laws that cover foreigners in India include the Citizenship Act, 1955, which regulates acquisition and termination of Indian citizenship as well as acquisition and registration of foreigners as Overseas Citizens of India (OCI).

Jairam Ramesh slams government over air pollution report

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Congress on Sunday criticised the government after a world air quality report ranked India as the world's fifth most polluted country, and demanded that all "anti-people" environmental law amendments over the past 10 years be rolled back.

In a statement, Congress General Secretary (Communications) Jairam Ramesh said the Swiss air quality technology company IQAIR has just released its 2024 World Air Quality Report which finds that India is the world's fifth most polluted country.

The Rajya Sabha MP said in his statement that according to the report, India's population-weighted average concentration of fine particulate matter is 50.6 µg/m3 which is 10 times the WHO's annual guideline level of 5 µg/m3.

He claimed that according to the report, 74 of the world's 100 most polluted cities are in India, and national capital New Delhi is the second-most polluted city in the world after Biryhat in Meghalaya.

"Among the lesser-known tragedies of



PIONEER PHOTO

the non-biological PM's reign is the rapidly deteriorating air quality nationally and

the inattentiveness and policy chaos that has characterised the government's

response to it," he said in his statement.

Ramesh cited several studies in the past about air pollution-linked fatalities in the country. In early July 2024, he said, a study published in the prestigious Lancet journal showed that 7.2 percent of all deaths in India are associated with air pollution which comes about 34,000 deaths each year in just 10 cities.

The former environment minister said that around the same time, a study by the Centre for Science and Environment revealed that the government's interventions in pollution control are poorly designed, with the National Clean Air Program (NCAP) largely focused on mitigating road dust rather than industrial, vehicular, and biomass emissions -- the source of PM 2.5 that are the leading causes of mortality.

To make matters worse, in the last five years, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has left more than 75 percent of the Environment Protection Charge (EPC) and Environmental Compensation (EC) funds unspent, he claimed, adding that in total ₹665.75 Crores have been left unutilised.

India to host regional counter terror conclave

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

India will host a two-day conclave of 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) grouping and some of its dialogue partners beginning Wednesday that will focus on firming up a comprehensive strategy to combat the threat of terrorism and extremism. The conclave of the experts working group (EWG) on counter-terrorism under the framework of ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) mechanism is also expected to deliberate on the evolving regional security scenario, officials said.

The ADMM-Plus is a platform comprising 10-nation ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and its eight dialogue partners India, China, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the US. The EWG conclave to be held in Delhi will be co-chaired by India and Malaysia.

The defence ministry said here on Sunday delegations from 10 ASEAN members and the bloc's eight dialogue partners along with Timor Leste and ASEAN Secretariat will be participating in the meeting. "India will co-chair the EWG on counter terrorism for the first time," the ministry said. Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh will deliver the keynote address at the opening ceremony of the conclave on Wednesday. It will be the first meeting for activities planned for EWG on counter-terrorism for the ongoing cycle from 2024-2027. "Discussions will focus on evolving a robust and comprehensive strategy designed to tackle the evolving threat of terrorism and extremism," the ministry said.

"The meeting aims to share the on-ground experience of the defence forces of ASEAN and its dialogue partners.

It will lay the foundation for the activities/exercises/seminars/workshop planned for the cycle 2024-2027," it added in a statement.

The ADMM-Plus has been focusing on seven areas of practical cooperation such as countering terrorism, maritime security, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian mine action and cyber security. EWGs have been established to facilitate cooperation in these areas.

The EWGs are each co-chaired by one ASEAN member state and one dialogue partner following a three-year cycle.

The task of the co-chairs is to lay down the objectives, policy guidelines and directions for the EWG.

Parliamentary committee recommends consolidation of all Ayush drugs

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

A parliamentary committee has recommended the consolidation of all AYUSH drug related standard-setting processes under a single independent drug controller in alignment with the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940, and its associated rules.

To achieve this, the ministry should establish a streamlined and inclusive mechanism that actively involves stakeholders in the development of pharmacopoeial standards, ensuring greater efficiency and uniformity, said the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare in a report presented in the Rajya Sabha this week.

Additionally, the Pharmacopoeia Commission for Indian Medicine and Homoeopathy (PCIM and H) and Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences (CCRAS) may come together to coordinate and collaborate in this initia-

tive, the committee emphasised in its 165th report on "Demands for Grants 2025-26 (Demand No. 4) of Ministry of Ayush". This will enhance the scientific testing and evaluation of a larger number of ASU&H (Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, and Homoeopathy) drug samples to ensure safety, efficacy, and quality, strengthening the foundation of research and standardisation in the sector.

The committee flagged that the statewide reach of Arogya Fair/Ayurveda Parv is less compared to the size of India with its 28 states and eight Union Territories.

It recommended that the reach should cover 50 per cent of Indian states in the coming year and eventually all of the country in the near future to propagate the Ayush System for the prevention and treatment of common ailments.

It recommended that the ministry leave no stone unturned in efficiently and effectively implementing the IEC (Information, Education, and

Communication) Scheme, thus generating awareness amongst the common masses, especially in rural, urban slum, hilly and tribal areas. The committee also took note of the financial and physical performance made under the international cooperation scheme with respect to budgetary allocation and set objectives. It recommended that going forward communication should be made with first-world countries like the UK and the US for promoting AYUSH among the Indian diaspora as well as their native citizens.

Underlining the potential in promoting AYUSH-related healthcare travel to India, the panel said that the Ministry has to chalk out strategies to vigorously promote the AYUSH system of medicine in international markets, and support investment and exchange of exports to boost Ayush products in the global market.

"The Ayush Ministry should keep the consideration that Ayush Vision@2047 has a target to enhance the contribution of the

Ayush Sector up to 7.7 per cent of GDP," it said. It suggested that the strategic course of action viz.

Road shows abroad, CMEs for the foreign audience, familiarisation trips, strategic marketing communication through a professional agency, collateral audio-video content and social media marketing can further be taken up by the Ministry for the achievement of the Mission Objective of the scheme. The committee also recommended that the ministry give equitable impetus to all sub-components of the capacity building and continuing medical education (CME) in Ayush under the Ayurgyan Scheme.

Underlining the vital role of research and innovation in Ayush Drugs for prioritised diseases, the committee recommended collecting data on safety, standardisation and quality control for Ayush products and practices in order to develop evidence-based support on the efficacy of Ayush drugs and therapies.

In order to inculcate scientific aptitude and expertise relating to Ayush systems, the ministry should chalk out a strategy for the development of potential human resources and their management in the Ayush system, the report said.

The committee reiterated its recommendation that the outcome of the research scheme should successfully demonstrate the effectiveness of Ayush systems and the novel technology successfully developed out of such research and development must harness the potential of Ayush in the interest of public health delivery. The committee expressed happiness and welcomed the laying of the foundation of a WHO Global Traditional Medicine Centre (GTMC) at Jamnagar, Gujarat and said that increasing collaboration with WHO in the Ayush Sector is significant in the global acceptance of traditional medicine and Ayush healthcare.

Such events will certainly help with the rapid growth of traditional medicine.

PM to inaugurate Raisina Dialogue

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will on Monday here will inaugurate the three-day Raisina Dialogue, India's flagship conference on geopolitics and geo-economics that will be joined by delegates from 125 countries.

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybaha are among those attending the 10th edition of the conclave.

In a first, a delegation, including a senior security official, from Taiwan is also attending the deliberations reflecting growing cooperation between the two

The Raisina Dialogue is being hosted by the leading think-tank Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in partnership with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)

sides in the last few years, people familiar with the matter said. The Raisina Dialogue is being hosted by the leading think-tank Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in partnership with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). It will witness the participation of representatives from about 125 countries including ministers, former heads of state

and heads of government, military commanders, captains of industry, technology leaders, academics, journalists, scholars on strategic affairs and experts from leading think tanks, MEA said on Sunday.

Officials said foreign ministers from 20 countries are attending the deliberations. The visit to India of the Ukrainian foreign minister comes as the US is stepping up efforts towards a temporary ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia to end their conflict. New Zealand Prime Minister Luxon will deliver the keynote address at the inaugural session on Monday.

The theme of this edition of the Dialogue is "Kalachakra People, Peace and Planet". Over the course of three days, decision-makers and thought leaders of the world will engage each other across conversations in various formats, over six thematic pillars.

The pillars are: Politics Interrupted: Shifting Sands and Rising Tides; Resolving the Green Trilemma: Who, Where, and How; Digital Planet: Agents, Agencies and Absences; Militant Mercantilism: Trade, Supply Chains and the Exchange Rate Addiction; The Tiger's Tale: Rewriting Development with a New Plan and Investing in Peace: Drivers, Institutions, and Leadership.

In various sessions, the participants will discuss the state of the world and explore opportunities for cooperation on a wide range of contemporary matters.

New Zealand PM Christopher Luxon arrives on five-day visit to India

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Christopher Luxon on Sunday began a five-day visit to India with a focus on deepening the bilateral trade and economic ties.

On Monday, Luxon will hold wide-ranging talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and will attend the inaugural session of the Raisina Dialogue as the chief guest. Days ahead of the trip, the New Zealand prime minister Christopher Luxon said he will push for a comprehensive economic partnership with India and explore ways to strengthen bilateral security ties.

Luxon is visiting India from March 16 to 20 in his first trip to the country as the prime minister.

He is accompanied by one of the largest delegations a New Zealand prime minister has ever travelled with. The visiting leader was received at the Delhi airport by Union Minister Satya Pal Singh Baghel.

"What I'm looking for is just a much more comprehensive economic partnership and how we'd move that forward, Luxon said last week, adding, "I am determined that we are going to change the trading relationships with India big time."

The New Zealand Prime Minister also described India as an "important" power



New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon being received by MoS SP Singh Baghel upon his arrival, New Delhi PTI

in the Indo-Pacific.

"India is an important power in the Indo-Pacific and I will discuss with Prime Minister Narendra Modi what more we can do together to maintain peace and prosperity in our region," Christopher Luxon said. Christopher Luxon said travelling with a senior business delegation will help increase trade and business opportunities and promote

New Zealand as an investment destination. The delegation accompanying the New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon comprise ministers, senior business leaders, a community delegation of prominent Kiwi Indians and several parliamentarians.

Christopher Luxon will also visit Mumbai from March 19 to 20 before returning to Wellington.

Sambhal's Masjid whitewash begins

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ Sambhal

The whitewashing of the historic Jama Masjid in Sambhal district commenced on Sunday morning, following the directives of the High Court. A team of workers began painting the mosque's walls under the supervision of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), with committee members also present on-site.

The individual assigned the task of whitewashing stated, "A total of eight people are working on the project. We aim to complete the work within a week. Our instructions are limited to whitewashing the mosque, as directed by the ASI."

The painting work had been delayed on Saturday when the ASI team arrived with the painter but had to return after waiting for some time. The ASI team subsequently instructed the Jama Masjid committee to commence the whitewashing on Sunday morning. The High Court, on March 12, ordered the painting and decoration of the mosque, with ASI overseeing the process. Following this directive, the ASI team inspected both the outer and inner premises of the mosque on March 13 and identified the areas requiring whitewashing.

Orders were issued to whitewash the



Labourers whitewash the outer wall of the Shahi Jama Masjid following an Allahabad High Court directive to the ASI to complete the task in Sambhal in Uttar Pradesh PTI

outer part of the mosque.

On Saturday, a three-member ASI team, accompanied by three painters, arrived at the mosque and began cleaning some areas. Local arrangements for additional painters and workers were also made.

In light of the court's directive, security has been tightened around the Shahi

Jama Masjid area. The High Court formed a three-member committee, including officials from the ASI, a scientific expert, and a local administration representative, to monitor the process and ensure that the mosque's structure remains unharmed. Sambhal's Additional Superintendent of Police (ASP), Shrish Chandra, stated that heavy security arrangements have

been implemented. "A sufficient police force has been deployed. Peace will be maintained, and surveillance is being conducted through CCTV and drones," he said.

In a related development, the ASI team removed posters of 74 miscreants that had been affixed to the back wall of the mosque. The posters were removed to facilitate the whitewashing process. The head of the Jama Masjid Committee had opposed the placement of these posters.

The head of the committee remarked that the mosque is traditionally painted and decorated every year during the month of Ramzan. However, this year, the committee had to seek permission, which was initially denied. This prompted the committee to file a petition in the High Court. During the initial hearing, the High Court sent an ASI team to assess the mosque's condition. The ASI report concluded that whitewashing was unnecessary, but cleaning could be done. After the committee presented its argument, the High Court ordered the whitewashing and decoration, with ASI monitoring the process.

The ongoing whitewashing is expected to be completed within a week, restoring the mosque's aesthetic appeal ahead of Ramzan.

TMC to employ I-PAC to identify 'ghost voters'



West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee PIONEER PHOTO

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ Kolkata

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) is likely to employ the services Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC) to identify the "ghost voters" ahead of the 2026 Assembly elections.

TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee has told a virtual party meeting attended by several thousand leaders and workers right from the panchayat level that the party was in the process of employing agents and setting up committees at various levels to ensure the identification of fake voters.

The agents would be taken from I-PAC sources said.

In the meeting held on Saturday, Banerjee, who is also the nephew of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee alleged that "BJP has conspired with the Election Commission of India (ECI), to disenfranchise a large number of Bengal's electorate" in which case a large number of voters from BJP ruled other States had been given the same electoral photo identity card (EPIC) numbers in Bengal "so as to manipulate the 2026 Assembly elections."

The junior Banerjee said that the party rank and file had been alerted of the "nefarious designs of the BJP" after meticulously examining the irregularities in the voters' lists.

"We have chalked out a comprehensive plan to democratically counteract this fraud," he said.

Though he would not directly speak about I-PAC insider sources said that the volunteers of the poll agency would be employed in large numbers and "would be assisted by the party workers down to the booth level to avoid any double cross."

The party would make house-to-house

survey of the ID cards of new voters and will appoint booth level agents-1 (BLA-1) in every organisational district.

These agents would coordinate with the district election officers, electoral registration officers, and assistant electoral registration officers of the state administration. Similarly these agents would be assisted by another booth level agent, he said. The leadership was not keeping anything to chances.

"Even you cannot believe any professional agency to the full. Everyone and everything is saleable. So each agent will be shadowed by another agent," a TMC insider said interpreting the tactic of Banerjee who is also the party MP from Diamond Harbour winning the seat by more than 7.5 Lakh votes in 2024.

Earlier, the Chief Minister last month alleged that the BJP had been faking electoral rolls with "ghost voters" from outside states.

Referring to sample surveys done by the party workers from various areas she said how the BJP was registering 20,000-30,000 fake voters in every Assembly seat. "The ECI will conduct the polls by sending central forces. Voters who do not belong to Bengal will come and cast their votes. We will foil your plans. You employed these plans in Maharashtra, Haryana, Delhi but the leaders there failed to catch your trick. But here we will catch the fake voters. Khela Hobe (a new game will be played in Bengal) until we throw you out of the State," she had said.

The BJP leadership however countered the TMC's allegations saying the electoral rolls were prepared by State Government officials and the TMC being the largest party its own members and the government officials should explain the irregularities if there was one.

Dilip Ghosh frontrunner for Bengal BJP chief post

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ Kolkata

There is strong possibility of senior leader and former MP Dilip Ghosh once again getting nominated as Bengal's new BJP president in place of present State party chief Sukanto Majumdar who is presently a Union Minister, insiders say.

Though other names like those of State Opposition Leader Suvendu Adhikari, former MP Lockett Chatterjee may also be considered for the post they may lose out to Ghosh, a former State BJP president under whom the saffron party got stupendous success in 2019 parliamentary elections winning 18 out of 42 seats, sources say.

The process of nominating a new State president is likely to be completed before March 27 when Union Home Minister Amit Shah will visit Bengal, sources said.

Adhikari who has of late pursued a strong "Sanatani Hinutva" line and has been a strong contender for the top job may however, lose out to Ghosh considering the fact that a large section of the saffron outfit including the "Adi BJP", the ones who were with the party from the beginning and had not come from the Trinamool Congress unlike Adhikari who joined ahead of 2021 Assembly elections - are against him being nominated for the top State job.

"Unlike the TMC our party follows a

strong discipline. It is for the national leadership to take a call on the new State party chief. It may retain Sukanto Majumdar or may appoint a new one like Dilip Da (Ghosh) or anyone else, even Lockett di (Chatterjee). But things also will depend on what the newly elected district party presidents think," a party leader and a president of one of the district committees said apparently "forgetting" to mention the name of Adhikari in his list of probables.

When asked about his chances of getting nominated as the State party chief, the BJP leader reminded how "Suvendu da himself has insisted that a person cannot enjoy two posts at one point in time." Adhikari had earlier said that, "like a Chief Minister does not become a State party president an Opposition leader too does not become one. I have plenty of engagements and responsibilities."

On Ghosh's chances of getting nominated once again inside sources said that "the district BJP presidents have a role to play in the nomination of a new State president and as 17 out of 25 newly appointed district presidents are close to him it is likely that they support his cause," adding "the BJP has 42 organisational districts in the State out of which 25 have already received their new presidents. Now there is no impediment to electing a new State president because according to rules more than half of the total number of district presidents have to be elected before you go to

appoint a new State party chief."

The saffron leader's statement came at a time when senior BJP leaders were engaged in a core committee meeting on Sunday. When asked to comment on a possible new State chief Sukanto Majumdar before entering the meeting said, "change is a process of development and it continues to take place in a democratic party like ours. So anyone can be a party president, but the party will continue to work as a united group to bring about a change in the next year's Assembly elections."

The minders of saffron politics in Bengal said that the national BJP leadership's decision on the issue could make or break Adhikari's future considering the fact he has hardly enjoyed a smooth chemistry with Ghosh.

In fact the latter held him responsible for shifting his constituency from Midnapore, where he was a sitting MP and which he was confident of winning - to Burdwan Durgapur in 2024 general elections. Though he would not speak in public in private Ghosh held the anti lobby led by Adhikari for his loss.

That Ghosh had a big hand in the selection of new district presidents and that he has a bright chance to be at the helm once again could be a matter of concern for Adhikari insiders said ascribing his hard-line Hindutva stance in the State politics to his "sense of insecurity" at the possibility of ascendancy of Ghosh again.

Shah slams Congress for mocking Bodo accord

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Kokrajhar

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday said the Congress made fun when the BJP-led government signed the Bodo accord, but it brought peace and development in the region.

Addressing the 57th annual conference of the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) in Assam's Kokrajhar, Shah said the Centre gave ₹1,500 Crore for the development of Bodoland, which has a population of 35 Lakh.

He said 82 per cent of clauses of the Bodo accord has been implemented and the remaining will be done in the next two years. Shah also exhorted the Bodo youths to start preparing for the 2036 Olympics, which is proposed to be held in Ahmedabad.

Bodo youths now carry the tricolour in their hands instead of guns and this has been possible due to the signing of the peace accord in January 2020, Shah said.

Rift delays UP BJP's district presidents appointments

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ Lucknow

After two and a half months of rigorous effort, the Uttar Pradesh Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) announced district presidents for 69 districts on Sunday. However in 29 districts, the election was postponed at the last moment due to internal opposition, factionalism, and pressure from party leaders.

Notably, the district president could not be appointed in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's parliamentary constituency, Varanasi, state election in-charge Mahendra Nath Pandey's constituency, Chandauli, and Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Maurya's home district, Kaushambi.

Out of the 69 district presidents, 44 are new faces, while 25 have been given a second chance. At least 29 of them belong to dalit and backward castes. However, only five women made it to the list.

The BJP worked tirelessly from Lucknow to Delhi to prepare this team, keeping in mind the upcoming Panchayat

elections in 2026 and the Assembly elections in 2027.

The BJP has divided Uttar Pradesh into 98 organisational districts. The election process began in the first week of January, but due to internal opposition and pressure, state election in-charge Mahendra Nath Pandey, state president Bhupendra Singh Chaudhary, and general secretary organisation Dharampal Singh couldn't declare the district presidents in all districts simultaneously.

This situation is unprecedented for the BJP, where the state and national leadership failed to reach a consensus on district president appointments. According to sources, as soon as the appointments were announced, aspirants flocked to Delhi to lodge complaints against those involved in the election process and rival candidates. The central leadership intervened and ordered the postponement of elections in several districts due to the lack of consensus and unresolved caste equations. In Ambedkar Nagar, there is significant opposition to District President Trayambak Tiwari, while in Barabanki,

District President Arvind Maurya faces resistance. In Ayodhya, former MP Lallu Singh opposed the reappointment of the current district president and pushed for his close aide to be appointed.

In a surprising move, regional presidents were kept out of the district president appointment process.

Even on the day of the announcement, regional presidents were not informed about the status of district presidents in their respective areas.

Out of 15 organisational districts in the Awadh region, district presidents were announced for only nine. Appointments were deferred in Ayodhya district, Ayodhya Mahanagar, Ambedkar Nagar, Barabanki, Lakhimpur Kheri, and Sitapur. New district presidents were appointed in four districts, while incumbents retained their positions in five. The new faces include Vijay Maurya in Lucknow, Ravi Mishra in Balrampur, Anurag Awasthi in Unnao, and Mishrilal Verma in Shravasti.

Incumbents who retained their positions include Anand Dwivedi in Lucknow Mahanagar, Buddhi Lal Pasi in Rae

Bareilly, Ajit Singh Chauhan in Hardoi, Brajesh Pandey in Bahraich, and Amar Kishore Kashyap in Gonda.

Mixed results in eastern UP

Elections were postponed in Siddharthnagar and Deoria. In seven out of ten districts, new faces were appointed, while three incumbents retained their posts. The new appointees include Janardan Tiwari in Gorakhpur district, Devesh Srivastava in Gorakhpur Mahanagar, Dhruv Kumar Singh in Azamgarh, Vinod Rajbhar in Lalganj, Neetu Singh in Sant Kabir Nagar, Ramashray Maurya in Mau, and Sanjay Mishra in Ballia. Among them, Azamgarh district president Dhruv Kumar Singh had previously held the position from 2019 to September 2023. Meanwhile, Ashok alias Sanjay Pandey in Maharajganj, Durgesh Rai in Kushinagar, and Vivekanand Mishra in Basti retained their posts.

The BJP's struggle to maintain unity and balance caste equations highlights the internal challenges the party faces ahead of crucial elections in the state.



AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal, his wife Sunita and Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann during a visit to the Golden Temple in Amritsar PTI

Kejriwal backs Punjab CM

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Chandigarh

Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) supremo Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday asserted that Bhagwant Mann would complete his five-year term as the Chief Minister of Punjab, trashing Opposition parties' claims that he would be removed from the post. However, Kejriwal also said drugs and corruption were the biggest problems in Punjab where the AAP under Mann has been in power for the last three years.

Kejriwal and Mann offered prayers at the Golden Temple on the completion of three years of the party's government in the state on Sunday.

Kejriwal, the former Delhi Chief Minister, arrived in Amritsar on Saturday after completing a 10-day Vipassana meditation session in Punjab's Hoshiarpur.

During the Golden Temple visit, Kejriwal was accompanied by his wife Sunita Kejriwal, and AAP leaders, including minister Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal.

The AAP formed the government in Punjab in 2022 after winning 92 of the total 117 Assembly seats. Speaking to reporters in Amritsar, Kejriwal said, "On March 16, 2022, Mann saab took over as the Punjab Chief Minister. Today we came here to seek the blessings of Guru Maharaj (Almighty). In three years, they (gurus) guided us and gave us the strength to continue serving people."

"Today, the biggest problems in Punjab are drugs and corruption. Three Crore people of Punjab have come together to

wage war against drugs and corruption. This is a battle for nyay (justice)," he said.

Kejriwal said they prayed to God to give them strength so that they could continue to serve the people of Punjab.

"We are here to serve the people and not for power," he said. Asked about AAP's political rivals claiming that the Punjab Chief Minister would be changed soon, the party chief asserted, "Mann saab will complete five years, you do not need to worry. He will complete the next five years as well." Last month, Punjab Congress leader Partap Singh Bajwa had claimed that 32 AAP MLAs were in touch with him, ready to switch sides. He had also alleged that Mann was in touch with the BJP.

"When Kejriwal decides to remove him (Mann), he will pack his bags and join them (BJP)." Bajwa had alleged.

Meanwhile, Mann told reporters on Sunday that the AAP had pledged to make Punjab a 'rangla Punjab' (prosperous) and his government was working towards fulfilling the promise.

He claimed that 52,000 government jobs have been given to the youth of Punjab.

Mann said a war has begun against drugs and corruption in the state.

Earlier, the chief minister claimed that the work that has been done in the last three years had not been carried out even in the last 70 years.

"On 16 March 2022 in Khatkar Kalan, we had pledged to make Punjab a 'Rangla Punjab' (prosperous) again. We are working with good intentions and full honesty to fulfil the promise," he said.

Naxal-hit village gets mobile tower

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Raipur

A remote village in the Naxal-hit Sukma district of Chhattisgarh has got its first mobile phone tower, officials said on Sunday.

The tower, installed inside a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) camp in Tekulagudem village on Holi, will provide cellular connectivity to a clutch of villages in the interior region, they said.

Tekulagudem was of the first locations where the paramilitary force established a forward operating base in January last year, to undertake specific anti-Maoist operations and help the local administration usher in development works in the area as part of the Union government's declaration to eliminate Left Wing Extremism (LWE) from the country by March 2026.

"A BSNL mobile tower was erected on March 13 inside the Tekulagudem forward operating base of the CRPF, which is operated by its 150th battalion. This is the first such facility in this area," a senior official in the security establishment said.

"The village is located in the interiors of the Naxal violence-hit Sukma district,

and shares a border with Bijapur, another LWE-affected village in the Bastar region," he said. According to another official, the mobile tower will provide the much-needed cellular connectivity to villagers and security personnel in Tekulagudem and the adjoining hamlets of Timmapuram, Jonaguda and Puvarti.

Puvarti is the village of Hidma, the wanted Maoist commander of the first battalion of People's Liberation Guerrilla Army. According to CRPF officials, the BSNL officials travelled from Sukma headquarters and as far as state capital Raipur (around 600 kilometres) for the ceremony to operationalise the mobile tower switches. The villagers were also invited to the event, which came on the eve of Holi. A special camp was held on March 13 to distribute SIM cards to the locals and activate them, they said. The CRPF had established the Tekulagudem forward operating base, under the Jagargunda police station limits, in January 2024. On the day the base was set up, the force lost three of its personnel and 15 personnel were injured, when a fierce encounter broke out as Naxals attacked from multiple directions.

Constable sent to police lines for dancing on Holi

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Patna

A constable posted as security guard of RJD leader Tej Pratap Yadav was on Sunday sent to the police lines for dancing in uniform during Holi celebrations at the residence of the former Bihar minister.

According to a statement issued by the office of the Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) on Sunday, "Constable, Deepak Kumar, posted as security guard of MLA, Tej Pratap, is sent to police lines for dancing in uniform with immediate effect. Kumar will be replaced by another constable in the security of the MLA."

The RJD leader found himself at the centre of a fresh controversy on Saturday when the constable (posted as his security guard) was commanded by the former Bihar minister to perform a 'thumka' (pelvic thrust) or face suspension.

The lurid drama unfolded at the official residence of Yadav, the elder son of former chief ministers Lalu Prasad and Rabri Devi, during Holi celebrations.

One of the videos of his revelry that has gone viral on social media show the Hasanpur MLA regally seated on a sofa, placed on a make-shift stage, holding a mike.

"Ae sipahi, ae Deepak, abhi ek gana bajaenge jis par tumko thumka lagana padega. Nahin lagaoge to tumko suspend kar denge. Bura na maano Holi hai (Hey constable Deepak. We are going to play a song on which you shall perform a pelvic thrust. If you do not, you will be suspended. Don't mind. It's Holi)," Yadav can be heard as saying before a musical band bursts into a devotional song that is often played during the festival of colours in Bihar. The policeman did not seem much offended as although he did not break into a 'thumka', he nonetheless obliged Yadav by hopping a few times with his right arm raised high in the air. In a style reminiscent of the 'kapda faad Holi' that his father used to organise, Yadav tore off clothes of supporters who poured in to greet him, and also drove a scooter on the streets adjoining his house.

Editor's TAKE

From SAGAR to MAHASAGAR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Mauritius bolsters Indo-Mauritius relations

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent state visit to Mauritius marks a significant step in reinforcing the historical and strategic ties between the two nations. Received with warmth and enthusiasm by Mauritius' Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam, Modi's visit underscores the mutual commitment to fostering greater collaboration in infrastructure, defence, economic growth, and cultural exchange.

India and Mauritius share a long-standing relationship shaped by cultural ties, historical connections, and strategic interests. As a major partner in India's Indian Ocean Region (IOR) strategy, Mauritius plays a crucial role in regional stability and economic cooperation. Modi's visit, which comes a decade after his previous trip in 2015, aligns with Mauritius' National Day celebrations, reinforcing the historical linkage between the two nations. Mauritius, strategically positioned in the southern Indian Ocean, has traditionally engaged with global powers such as France and the United States. However, with India's growing strategic influence in the region, New Delhi has solidified its role as Mauritius' leading development partner and security provider. While Mauritius has explored economic ties with China, India remains focused on ensuring fair competition for Indian businesses and safeguarding regional security. One of the most significant outcomes of Modi's visit was the announcement of an upgraded partnership framework—transitioning from the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine to MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions). This enhanced partnership is designed to promote trade-driven development, capacity-building for sustainable growth, and mutual security, benefiting both India and Mauritius while strengthening regional collaboration. Mauritius holds a key position as the host of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Secretariat and is an active participant in the Indian Ocean Commission and the Colombo Security Conclave. This trilateral engagement ensures that Mauritius remains a pivotal player in the broader Indo-Pacific strategy, with India playing an instrumental role in its economic and strategic development. India views Mauritius as a vital neighbour with deep cultural and political ties. The recent political shift in Mauritius, with Ramgoolam's Alliance du Changement securing a decisive victory in the November 2024 general elections, necessitates a recalibration of bilateral relations. While former Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth's administration had closely aligned with India, Ramgoolam's previous tenure saw an exploration of other global partnerships, including closer economic engagements with China. Modi's swift visit following Ramgoolam's return to power signifies India's proactive approach in ensuring Mauritius remains within its strategic fold. This move is particularly important given the evolving geopolitical landscape in the Indian Ocean, where India has faced challenges from external players like China in neighboring Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

Modi's visit brought a renewed focus on several key areas of cooperation. India continues to support Mauritius through grants and concessional loans for major infrastructure projects, including the Metro Express, smart cities, and digital connectivity initiatives. The security partnership includes maritime surveillance, joint naval exercises, and enhanced intelligence-sharing to combat transnational threats in the Indian Ocean. Both nations are working on deepening trade relations through preferential trade agreements, investment in fintech, and capacity-building in key economic sectors. Given the significant Indian diaspora in Mauritius, cultural and educational collaborations remain a key pillar in bilateral relations, ensuring the preservation and promotion of shared heritage. Modi's visit to Mauritius marks a renewed commitment to strengthening Indo-Mauritian ties.

Religious supremacism in Pakistan

What began as a tool of political manoeuvring during the Zia-ul-Haq era has now morphed into an all-encompassing force, blurring the lines between faith and performance

Muhammad Ali Jinnah may have wished, "Religion should not be allowed to come into Politics... Religion is merely a matter between man and God", but reality proves that religion is not just allowed, but insisted, in everything that Pakistan does. It is an unleashed genie that is eating the sovereign from within. Hindsight suggests that it was perhaps inevitable given the dalliance with inherent supremacism in the sovereign idea that is predicated on the "land of the pure" ie, Pakistan, the only country in the world to be created in the name of religion.

Pakistan watchers would confirm that religion got truly valorised, accelerated, and institutionalised in the national bloodstream during the Shariaisation years of the Zia-ul-Haq dictatorship (1978-88). Geopolitics of the times (read, Afghanistan's Mujaheddin war) aided Zia's regressive project. The byproduct of creating the mujaheddin ecosystem in the '80s subsequently bred the phenomenon of the Taliban (and its various offshoots that were either India-facing or sectarian) and an accompanying air of religious extremism that was amplified by all subsequent governments. No so-called educated, moderate or well-travelled politicians could extricate themselves from the curse of invoking religion, and so even an Oxford-educated, married to a Westerner (Jewish to be precise), and self-proclaimed reformist, ultimately morphed to Taliban Khan ie, Imran Khan.

The surrender to religious fundamentalism was similarly mirrored in the realm of Pakistani cricket. Once the playing ground of flamboyant playboys who played hard and partied even harder with the likes of Imran Khan, Zaheer Abbas, Majid Khan, Asif Iqbal et al, took a U-turn to displayed piety and persona that reflected the nation's obsession with Puritanism. Beyond optics of sporting long beards, praying on pitches, and prefixing all public utterances with religious invocations like "bismillah rahman raheem" (In the name of Allah, the most gracious and the most merciful) and contextualising all situations with "inshaallah" (God willing) etc, — the postured fervour became highly religiously charged.

By itself, faith is perfectly healthy and can give the impetus for living life to the fullest, but when it spills out from a personal or private matter to a public insistence, the danger of enforced religiosity or even proselytisation is usually consequential. It could then distract from the task, in this case, cricket, to be secondary to religious pandering.

Like many of Jinnah's suggestions towards secularism (even if often contradictory), the invisibility of the same is mirrored in the



BHOPINDER SINGH

Pakistani dressing room. The '90s saw the sudden advent of Tableeghi Jamaat (Party of Preachers) stressing the 'authentic Islamic lifestyle' that went beyond a private/individual matter and became a matter of team routines. Pakistani cricket also got mired in embarrassing cricketing scandals (e.g., match-fixing), which led to the appropriation and demonstration of religiosity as a means of suggesting otherwise.

Soon accusations of only those who were visibly adherent getting selected saw the 'coincidental' conversion of Christian-born Yuusuf Youhana to a bearded and pious Mohammad Yousuf, diminishment of the career of Danish Kaneria (only Hindu in the squad) etc. But all this turn towards religiosity wasn't helping cricketing results (as was the case in the national narrative on all other fronts). In the moments of rare success against India, it took the Interior Minister to incredulously attribute the same as "Victory of Islam" and say that "Muslims all over the world are rejoicing".

In another instance a fast bowler, Waqar Yonus said that the sight of watching Rizwan kneeling in namaz "in front of Hindus was very special to him" — basically, the entire

country was caught in a vortex and normalisation of bigotry.

Not satisfied with their transformation, Pakistani players took to proselytising foreign players. Ahmed Shezad was infamously caught on camera during a Pak-Sri Lanka telling Tillakaratne Dilshan, "If you are a non-Muslim and you turn Muslim, no matter whatever you do in your life, straight to heaven" and after Dilshan's inaudible retort, Shezad responded, "Then be ready for hell fire" (incidentally, Pakistan lost the match).

Soon the depressing performances on the field led a slew of people like the then President Parvez Musharraf, PCB Chairman Shahryar Khan, coach Bob Woolmer to media manager PJ Mir all call out to curb overt religiosity as it was distracting and leading to poor performance.

Recently, Danish Kaneria who was also

one of the many Pakistani players accused of spot-fixing reiterated the discrimination that he faced when he accused, "Shahid Afridi was the main person telling me to convert, and he did a lot of times".

While guilty of corruption, he perhaps was singled out for a harsher treatment vis-à-vis other players, even though he took 261 wickets in Test cricket to just 48 for Shahid Afridi. Danish's career was cut prematurely with no hope for a return. The fourth-highest wicket-taker was on a roll and as he said, "PCB didn't support me because I was Hindu, and I would break all the records. They could not drop me based on my performance. They knew I could break all the records, and Pakistan has never had a Hindu rising through the ranks".

The accusation does not seem unreasonable. To think that there is no excess space, consideration and toxic naturalness for religiosity in the Pakistani dressing room is to live under a rock, and the resultant performance is only collateral.

(The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. Views expressed are personal)

AI-powered LASIK: The future of vision correction

SECOND Opinion



MAHIPAL S SACHDEV

In an era where technology is reshaping healthcare, ophthalmology is experiencing a paradigm shift with artificial intelligence (AI)-driven advancements in vision correction. The latest milestone in this evolution is the integration of FORESIGHT technology with the AMARIS 1050RS laser system—ushering in a new era of unprecedented precision, safety, and speed in LASIK surgery. With the capability to correct vision in under 10 seconds per eye, this innovation is poised to redefine the treatment of refractive errors. Myopia (nearsightedness) is emerging as a global health concern, with projections indicating that nearly half of the world's population could be affected by 2050. As dependence on digital screens increases, the demand for precise, safe, and minimally invasive vision correction solutions has never been greater.

While traditional LASIK surgery remains highly effective, it has continued to evolve to meet these growing demands—leading to the development of AI-assisted laser vision correction. At the core of this breakthrough is FORESIGHT, an AI-driven predictive system that enhances surgical precision. By analysing thousands of data points unique to each eye, FORESIGHT customises laser correction plans, allowing surgeons to predict surgical outcomes before the procedure even begins. This AI integration ensures unmatched accuracy through real-

time eye tracking and adaptive treatment planning, minimising potential complications by adjusting treatment based on real-time corneal analysis. The result is a safer, more effective procedure with faster recovery and superior visual outcomes. For the first time in Asia, FORESIGHT is available in India, along with AMARIS 1050RS—the world's fastest and safest refractive surgery technology. With this advancement, cutting-edge vision correction solutions such as CustomEyes and SmartSurf ACE have also been launched. CustomEyes offers a highly personalised approach to LASIK, tailoring treatment to the unique characteristics of each eye for superior results. Meanwhile, SmartSurf ACE provides a completely touch-free, blade-free LASIK experience, enhancing patient comfort and ensuring faster healing. These innovations mark a significant leap forward in refractive surgery, offering patients safer and more effective alternatives to traditional laser vision correction.

While LASIK remains the gold standard for refractive correction, AI-driven solutions are also revolutionising the management of complex corneal conditions like keratoconus. FORESIGHT-powered treatments such as Topography-Guided Removal of Epithelium for Keratoconus (TREK) and Topography-Guided Custom Ablation Treatment (TCAT) are bringing new hope to patients with irregular corneas. These techniques provide customised corneal reshaping for improved vision and reduced dependency on specialised contact lenses. Furthermore, their minimally invasive nature enhances safe-

ty and optimises patient outcomes, making them a game-changer in corneal treatment.

The continuous evolution of refractive surgery, driven by AI and next-generation laser technology, is setting new benchmarks in ophthalmology. Centre for Sight has been at the forefront of pioneering refractive techniques, from bringing Small Incision Lenticule Extraction (SMILE) to India to leading clinical trials for Smooth Incision Lenticule Keratomileusis (SILK). Today, with the adoption of AI-enhanced LASIK through FORESIGHT and AMARIS 1050RS, vision correction is entering an era of unparalleled precision and safety. The integration of AI into laser vision correction represents more than just technological progress—it signifies a commitment to patient-centric care. With faster procedures, enhanced safety, and optimised outcomes, individuals suffering from refractive errors now have access to the most advanced solutions available.

As technology continues to evolve, so does the promise of a future where perfect vision is within reach for all. The next decade will witness even greater strides in laser eye surgery, further solidifying technology's role in transforming lives through vision. With myopia on the rise, these advanced LASIK laser correction technologies are set to redefine vision correction by providing safer, faster, and more effective solutions to reduce dependence on glasses or contact lenses.

(The author is an eye surgeon, Chairman, and Medical Director of Centre for Sight. Views expressed are personal)

Leaderspeak



I do have tendencies to kind of go overboard. I have never shied away from that. For a lot of people, it might not have been something that they are able to process. But for me, it always comes from the right place. My competitiveness has not gone down. You can still be aggressive in your mind, but you do not necessarily need to express it out there every now and then out of frustration, which I have. I mean, in the recent past as well, I do not feel great about those things myself.

VI RAT KOHLI, INDIAN CRICKETER

Letters to the Editor

Festival of Colours or Divisive Tool?

Madam — In a display of outright arrogance, Uttar Pradesh Cabinet Minister and Niral Indian Shoshit Hamara Aam Dal (NISHAD) party president Sanjay Nishad shot his mouth off when he said that "those who have a problem with Holi colours should leave the country." Such a calculated push to divide communities through religious festivals is being increasingly used by BJP leaders.

In fact, another BJP leader had gone a step further, saying that Muslim men should wear tarpaulin hijabs if they wished to avoid Holi colours. And it is all the more regrettable that UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath defended a police officer who told Muslims to stay indoors if they did not wish to be smeared with colours, rather than condemning such open communal bias.

His words further reinforced the idea that India's religious minorities are expected to either assimilate into the dominant narrative or be excluded from public spaces. Holi, the festival of colours, has always been a celebration of joy, togetherness, and the breaking down of social divisions.

However, in recent years, political rhetoric has sought to distort this spirit, turning moments of harmony into flash-points of communal tension. The increasing use of festivals to push a divisive agenda has exposed the extent to which India's secular fabric is under threat.

Stuck in space no more

Madam—NASA and SpaceX have launched a joint mission to bring back veteran astronauts Sunita Williams and Barry Wilmore stranded in the international space station (ISS) and replace them with new crew. What has been originally scheduled to be an odyssey for eight days has now stretched past 285 days. The NASA duo (both 'Butch' and 'Sumi' are now household names) has garnered a lot of sympathy around the world. It is a matter of great relief that the countdown to the splashdown off the Florida coast is all set to begin.

The saga of the expedition has shown the risks involved in space travel and exploration. Professional astronauts venture into space and push back the frontiers of science and the boundaries of human knowledge despite being conscious of the fact that human space flight is inherently risky. Technical glitches are always possibilities. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Findings from experiments and research help to broaden our horizons. Imagining ourselves as the astronauts stuck on the remote orbital outpost is an exercise in self-evaluation and an appreciation of their resilience, adaptability, grit, agility, will power and courage.

The pair has rejected the adjectives 'stranded' and 'stuck' to describe their state and maintained that it is all 'fun' for them and they have enjoyed their time in space.

Vote for transparency

Madam — Apropos of the headlines 'EPIC Aadhar link on cards' (March 16), the absolute transparency of voter list and complete linking of the remaining 33 Crore Voter ID-Aadhar linking are imperative at the earliest possible. The political controversy on fake voters should be set at rest by eliminating the fake voter IDs.

Rather, a step further, like banks and Income Tax Department, Voter ID should also be linked with the PAN and mobile numbers to rule out any possibility of fake voter ID even in future and new voters should be registered with the multiple linking of Aadhar, PAN and mobile numbers.

In fact, broad based roll reforms should be considered by the Government and the Election Commission barring culprits and corrupt from contesting elections, making it mandatory to exercise franchise to vote and incorporating facility to vote from remote and distant locations through online voting facility for the voters outside their constituencies on the voting day.

The EC should make necessary arrangements for online voting facility from all the district headquarters in the country. The Opposition politics is still around caste and religion divide in the society and is likely to remain so in the distant future too. The aspirational youth of the young country should decide the future of the country.

The global race for resources in the Arctic

The Arctic is emerging as a critical frontier in the race for mineral wealth, fossil fuels, and geopolitical dominance. As ice continues to melt at alarming rates, new trade routes are opening, intensifying competition among global powers

FIRST Column

There has been increasing competition and conflict in the Arctic region for the exploitation of mineral wealth and fossil fuels. It has environmental consequences such as pollution, habitat destruction, impacts on wildlife and indigenous communities. In the warming world, the melting of ice in the Arctic Sea has been opening many new routes for trade in the region and the use of high-fuel oil in ship propulsion is becoming increasingly common. Diesel vehicles, open biomass burning and the use of high-fuel oil for engine propulsion in shipping are the largest global sources of black carbon, which consists of pure carbon in many linkages and is produced by incomplete combustion of fossil fuel and biomass by wildfires.

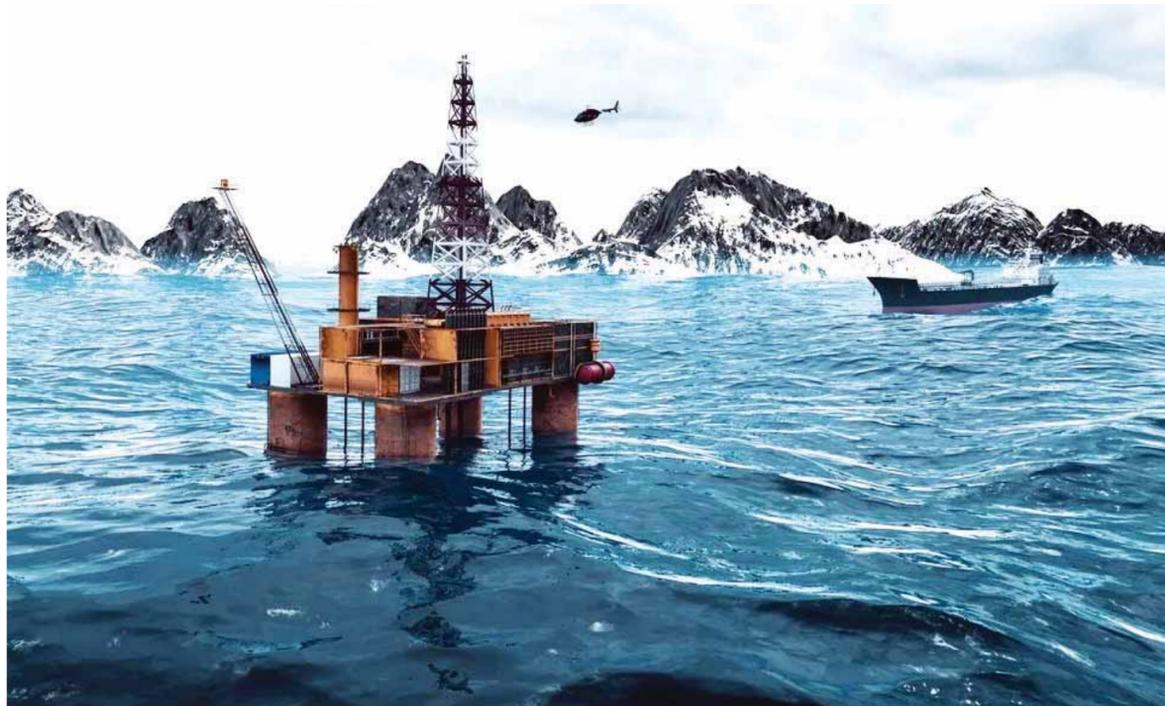
It can generate sufficient energy only next to carbon dioxide and its proximity around ice/snow sheets and glaciers of Arctic and Antarctica regions can extend the period of snow melting and can result in environmental catastrophes caused by the melting of glaciers and the rise in sea level. Eventually, it contributes to the warming of the planet.

South of the treeless Arctic region, we have the world's largest forests known as boreal forests covering large portions of Alaska, Canada, Scandinavia and Siberia. These forests have stored huge quantities of carbon and have protected the planet from further warming. Forests are rich in biodiversity and house numerous species of mammals, fish, plants of coniferous and broad leaved species, insects and birds. Studies have revealed that the warming of Arctic and Antarctic regions is three to four times higher than that of equatorial and tropical regions. Boreal forests are thus experiencing more warming than the global average, which in turn is adversely impacting its growth and regeneration.

The northern part of the forests is slowly expanding towards the Arctic region where ice has melted. Studies in Alaska's Brooks Range have also found that spruce trees have grown and established north of the tree line. Once inaccessible, the southern part has been kept open for commercial logging. The Anthropogenic pressure and wildfires have been causing the degradation of forests considerably. The gain in northern boreal forests is far too low as compared to the loss in the south.

Nearly 15 Million hectares of Canadian forests, constituting approximately four per cent of the geographical area of the country burned in 2023 and researchers found that it released 2371 megatons of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. This caused a jump in Canada's ranking of global emissions from 11th in 2022 to fourth in 2023, behind China, the US and India. The new trade routes due to melting ice in the Arctic are seen as an opportunity, which in turn boosts the use of high-fuel oil in ship propulsion causing further warming.

Portuguese-flagged Solong cargo ship collided



BK SINGH

recently with MV Stena Immaculate in the North Sea off eastern England setting both vessels ablaze and despite great firefighting efforts, it took two days to control the blaze. It caused oil leakage and such incidents have severe environmental consequences, especially threatening aquatic biodiversity.

Ever since February 24, 2022, Russian aggression in Ukraine began, decade-long cooperation between Russia and other Arctic countries on biology and nature conservation has been paused. The suspension of data boundary has made it difficult to understand how wildlife and ecosystems are changing during unprecedented warming. 2023 has been the warmest year recorded on the planet and 2024 has further broken this record and registered an average rise in global temperature by 1.56 degrees Celsius above the preindustrial temperature.

Data are also not available to find the impact of permafrost thaw that contains two and half times more carbon than what is already available in the atmosphere.



TRUMP ALSO REPEATEDLY BROUGHT OUT THAT THE US HAS PROVIDED \$350 BILLION WORTH OF DEFENCE EQUIPMENT DURING THE LAST THREE YEARS TO COUNTER RUSSIAN AGGRESSION, HOW UKRAINE WOULD PAY IT BACK?

The critical and rare earth minerals have applications in over 200 high-tech consumer products namely electric and hybrid vehicles, computer hard

drives, flat screen monitors and TVs, cellular telephones, and defence applications like electronic displays, guidance systems, lasers, submarines, radars sonar systems etc. The quantity used in some of the applications is insignificant, yet it is critical for the functioning of the technology. The magnets made have a relatively insignificant volume of the element as compared to the volume of the product but it is needed for the functioning of spindle motors, and voice coils of desktops and laptops.

Neodymium magnets are made of Neodymium, iron and boron which have the highest strength and can withstand 230 degrees Celsius temperature. Magnets are used in automobiles, computer hard disks and digital cameras. Lanthanum is used for digital and cell phone cameras and also in petroleum refining and steel making. Erbium is used in optical fibre and laser repeaters. Cerium is used in water purifiers and its alloys with other elements are useful for making catalytic converters. Europium, Terbium and Yttrium are used in phosphors that emit luminescence.

The traditional mining of these elements was labour-intensive; with lower wages and duly relaxed environmental laws, China proceeded and devel-

oped the infrastructure for extraction and processing of the minerals in a big way leaving the US far behind. China built mines to magnet industries and high-tech countries like the US and Japan had to depend on it. The territorial conflict between China and Japan in 2010 led to China using it as a weapon and putting an embargo on the sale of the minerals to Japan. China dominated the supply chain and even today major chunk of these elements mined outside China also continue to be shipped back to China for separation, refining and magnet production. To bring the US back to dominate the supply chain of rare and critical minerals Donald Trump in his second term as US President has moved to rename the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America, expressed taking over the Panama Canal from Panama and purchasing Greenland from Denmark for strategic reasons.

He has also vowed to end Russian aggression in Ukraine and stop the years-old war early. US Vice President D Vance asked why Ukraine was not thanking the US for billions of dollars in tax-payer-funded aid. Trump also repeatedly brought out that the US has provided \$350 Billion worth of defence equipment during the last three years to counter Russian aggression, how Ukraine would pay it back? Though Ukraine President Zelensky was initially hesitant, he has come forward to sign the rare earth deal with the US to pay back the military aid already provided by the Biden administration. Greenland has voted for the central right democratic party vocal against Trump.

The Arctic island holds large reserves of critical and rare earth minerals. It is also home to a US air-base and straddles a strategic route to the North Atlantic. Though Greenland wants independence, Trump has been outspoken about his desire to control the island. In his address to Congress recently he said, "he thought US is going to get Greenland one way or the other."

In an exclusive conversation with NATO's Secretary General recently, Trump reiterated that Greenland would be annexed to the US. It is an island of 56,000 people, whose ancestors were colonized 300 years ago by Denmark. Since 2009, the island has been on the path to independence and Denmark controls only foreign and defence policies. Trump has an eye on Greenland's oil and rare earth resources.

All these moves in the Trump 2.0 regime are to gain the upper hand in supply chain dominance of rare earth minerals. Russia is also expanding exploration and extraction of oil and gas in Western Siberia and opening new trade routes by cutting the ice, yet to melt in the ocean. The race in the Arctic region will surge greenhouse gas emissions at an unprecedented scale.

(Writer is a retired Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Head of forest force, Karnataka. Views expressed are personal)

Maha Kumbh: Sacred togetherness in the world's largest gathering

The Maha Kumbh Mela, a pilgrimage that draws over 450 Million people, is often hailed as the world's largest human gathering. Yet, beneath its spiritual significance lies a sociological marvel—a transient civilisation where hierarchies dissolve, altruism flourishes, and time itself seems to bend. This grand spiritual event holds immense religious significance, attracting not only devotees from across India but also pilgrims from around the world. Maha Kumbh is considered the ultimate confluence of all major Hindu rituals and traditions.

At first glance, the Kumbh Mela may appear to be a ritualistic pilgrimage, a momentary pause where millions immerse themselves in the holy rivers to wash away sins and attain spiritual liberation. However, beyond this sacred act lies a deep-seated cultural narrative. The event is an ancient ritual encapsulating centuries of collective memory, myths, and legends—a continuous reminder of India's quest for meaning in a chaotic world. Sociologists observe that the act of congregating at the confluence of sacred rivers transforms personal spirituality into a communal experience—a shared ritual of rebirth and renewal that transcends individual belief systems.

The suspension of social stratification

The Maha Kumbh Mela functions as a dynamic arena where India's social fabric is both displayed and redefined. In the temporary cities that spring up along the riverbanks, traditional hierarchies are simultaneously challenged and reaffirmed. The festival becomes a melting pot where age-old caste distinctions, regional identities, and modern socio-economic divides are momentarily blurred. Here, the paths of the pious ascetic, the devout seeker, and the curious traveler intersect.

Anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of "liminality"—a transitional phase where societal norms are suspended—finds vivid expression at the Kumbh. For weeks, the mela transforms into a liminal space where caste, class, and creed merge. A CEO and a farmer bathe in the same waters, a Dalit and a Brahmin share meals in community kitchens (langars). Turner termed this egalitarian bonding communities, a temporary but transformative unity. In this sacred space, the rigid hierarchies of everyday India dissolve, revealing a latent potential for radical equality.

The Kumbh Mela also offers a unique opportunity to meet various saint groups, such as the Naga Babas, Moni Babas, Kabootar Babas, and Manchan Wale Babas. Observing their daily routines, including their methods of prayer, deep meditation, and spiritual discourses, provides insight into the diverse spiritual practices within Hinduism. The mela is a place where every-

one is immersed in a sense of collective unity.

The Gift Economy: Altruism as Social Currency

Marcel Mauss's theory of the gift economy—where exchanges foster social bonds—comes to life at the Kumbh. Volunteers serve millions of free meals, ascetics offer blessings without expectation, and strangers share resources. This is not mere charity but a ritualised reaffirmation of interdependence. The mela's economy operates on trust rather than transactions, challenging modern capitalism's transactional ethos. In a world fractured by inequality, the Kumbh models a society where giving is sacred.

At the Kumbh Mela, people enthusiastically extend help—offering water, food, or prasad from saints. Receiving prasad through the Ganga is considered a divine blessing. This culture of generosity fosters an environment devoid of bias, where individuals unite in a shared spirit of giving.

A living tapestry of India's soul

Émile Durkheim's notion of "collective effervescence"—the electric energy of communal rituals—pulsates through the Kumbh. The synchronised bathing rites, devotional chants, and grand processions generate a transcendent solidarity. Pilgrims shed individual identities to become part of a cosmic whole, mirroring Durkheim's idea that religion is society worshipping itself. This collective energy is not just spiritual, it acts as a social glue, bridging the divides of a diverse nation.

To reach the Kumbh, pilgrims walk for miles, yet their faith and devotion energise them, making fatigue an afterthought. Wrapped in saffron, a color symbolising peace and devotion, they forget their individual identities and merge into a harmonious collective.

Cyclical Time and Social Renewal

The Kumbh's 12-year cycle mirrors India's ancient rhythms of renewal. Unlike linear time, which progresses toward an uncertain future, the Kumbh's cyclicity offers a ritualised "reset." Communities fragmented by modernity reunite, and generational stories are retold. This periodicity is not nostalgia but a sociological balm, healing temporal fractures and reaffirming continuity in a rapidly changing world.

Beyond its religious significance, the Kumbh Mela is a space where societal renewal unfolds daily. As millions journey to the sacred waters, they seek not just personal salvation but also a

symbolic cleansing of societal ills. The sheer scale of the event demands meticulous coordination and cooperation—elements that mirror the broader workings of democracy in action. In a country characterised by its diversity and complexity, the Kumbh Mela serves as a microcosm of India's pluralistic society, where order emerges from chaos through an intricate balance of tradition and modern administrative ingenuity.

Gender and Quiet Subversions

Historically, both men and women have held esteemed positions in Hindu traditions. In the Vedic period, religious ceremonies were considered incomplete without the participation of women. Even in Hindu worship, the names of goddesses are inseparably linked with deities, such as Lakshmi-Ganesh, Sita-Ram, and Radha-Krishna. Just as men uphold Hindu traditions, women play an equally vital role in preserving and practicing them at the grassroots level.

This devotion is clearly visible in the Maha Kumbh of 2025, where women have participated with great enthusiasm alongside men. Female religious leaders have taken part in rituals such as the Shahi Snaan and Akhara processions with the same fervor as their male counterparts. Pilgrims have sought blessings not only from male saints but also from female Mahatmas, demonstrating a shift from traditional social barriers. The high number of participants in the Kumbh can also be attributed to the active involvement of women, symbolising their empowerment and societal progress.

Conclusion

The event culminates on the auspicious occasion of Mahashivratri, dedicated to Lord Shiva, who shares equal reverence with Goddess Parvati. The Maha Kumbh Mela is not just a religious festival—it is a celebration of faith, equality, and the timeless spiritual essence of India.

The true miracle of the Kumbh Mela is not its sheer scale but its social vision—a blueprint for harmony in a divided world. It serves as a reminder that societies can momentarily choose cooperation over competition, shared purpose over self-interest. As climate crises and polarization threaten global stability, the Kumbh's ephemeral utopia whispers: "Another world is possible, even if only for 42 days."

The Kumbh Mela is more than a pilgrimage; it is India's subconscious dreaming aloud. In its chaos, we find order, in its transience, permanence. To study it is to glimpse the soul of a civilisation—not in its temples, but in its people's capacity to imagine, however briefly, a society built on sacred togetherness.

(The author is an assistant professor Maitreyi college University of Delhi. She works on gender issues. Views expressed are personal)

The five causes of action in the Bhagavad Gita

We all wish to be in control. Yet, we fail miserably because control is never truly in our hands. Lord Krishna explains in the Bhagavad Gita:

"The place of action, the doer, various instruments, different efforts, and the fifth—providence are the five factors of action." (Bhagavad Gita 18.14)

The Lord further states: "Whatever action a person initiates through body, speech, and mind, these five are its causes." (18.15)

Are we not constantly engaged in actions through our bodies, speech, and minds? Speech and mind are mentioned separately because our words have a profound impact on our lives. Speech is not just another sense—it can shape outcomes significantly. For example, consider an accident where both parties are at fault. If they apologise, the matter is resolved amicably. However, if they resort to harsh words, a fight ensues. Similarly, our thoughts operate on a subtler level than our physical senses, yet they wield immense influence over our lives.

The five causes of action

What are these five causes? 1. The Place of Action (Circumstances):

Our circumstances significantly impact our actions, yet we have no control over them. Are we in a scorching summer in Delhi or a freezing winter in Toronto? Are we raising a newborn in a nuclear family or a joint family? Such external factors shape our experiences, but they remain beyond our control.

2. The Doer (The Individual):

While we assume we are in control, the truth is that our nature governs us. Are we truly in command of our emotions and reactions? Hardly. In the same accident scenario, an aggressive person will likely escalate the situation, while a calm individual will seek resolution. Our inherent nature dictates our responses, often beyond our conscious control.

3. The Instruments (Resources Used):

The tools we have at our disposal also play a role. A person with a modern smartphone can communicate and function more efficiently than someone with an outdated or non-existent device. The availability and quality of resources impact our actions.

4. The Effort (Personal Endeavor):

Even our efforts are influenced by factors beyond our control. Our health, energy levels, and circumstances determine how much effort we can put in. While we may wish to exert ourselves fully, our limitations often dictate otherwise.

5. Providence (Divine Will):

This is the most decisive factor, and it is entirely beyond human control. Our past karmas (actions) shape our present outcomes. Success and failure are not solely determined by our present efforts but are deeply intertwined with the results of past actions (karmaphalas).

Are we in control?

Not at all. Control ultimately rests with God. Let's examine God's role in the five causes:

"Circumstances are under God's control, as He is the Creator of all situations.

"The Doer (soul), though possessing free will, is bound by past karmas and thus remains under divine governance.

"Instruments and resources originate from God, as He is the ultimate source of everything.

"Efforts are permitted by God, as He determines what we are able to do.

"Providence is part of God's justice, ensuring the consequences of past actions unfold accordingly.

The path forward

Understanding that God is the ultimate controller should inspire us to seek His guidance and refuge. As Lord Krishna advises:

"In all respects, take shelter in Me alone. By My mercy, you will attain supreme peace and the eternal abode." (Bhagavad Gita 18.62)

By surrendering to God's will, we can find true peace and liberation, rather than struggling to control the uncontrollable.

Conclusion

In our quest for control, we often overlook the deeper truth—true control lies with God. The Bhagavad Gita teaches that our actions are shaped by five factors: circumstances, the doer, instruments, effort, and providence. While we may influence some aspects, ultimate control remains beyond us.

Recognizing this should not lead to helplessness but to surrender and faith. Instead of resisting the inevitable, we can align ourselves with divine wisdom. By cultivating awareness of our nature, utilising our resources wisely, and making sincere efforts, we can act with greater clarity. However, accepting divine providence helps us navigate life with peace, rather than frustration.

As Lord Krishna assures, taking refuge in Him leads to supreme peace (Bhagavad Gita 18.62). True liberation lies not in control but in surrender—trusting that God's will is perfect and that every experience serves a higher purpose.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher. Views expressed are personal)

59 dead, 150 hurt in North Macedonia nightclub fire

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Kocani

A massive fire tore through a nightclub in North Macedonia's eastern town of Kocani early Sunday, killing 59 people and injuring 155, authorities said. The blaze broke out around 2:30 am during a concert by a local pop group at Club Pulse, Interior Minister Panche Toshkovski told reporters.

He said 39 of the dead had so far been identified. He said, following an initial assessment, pyrotechnics likely caused the roof to catch fire. Videos showed chaos inside the club, with young people running through the smoke as the musicians urged people to escape as quickly as possible.

As relatives gathered outside hospitals to await news, Kocani resident Dragi Stojanov was informed that his 21-year-old son Tomce had died in the fire. "He was my only child. I don't need my life anymore," he said. "One hundred and fifty families have been devastated."

Officials said the injured have been taken to hospitals around the country, including the capital, Skopje, many with severe burns. The effort was being assisted by multiple volunteer organisations.

Health Minister Arben Taravari said 118 people have been hospitalised, adding that he had received offers of assistance from neighbouring countries, including Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia.

"All our capabilities have been put to use, in a maximum effort to save as many lives as possible of the young people involved in this tragedy," Taravari told reporters, at times looking visibly shaken. This is the worst tragedy in recent memory to befall the landlocked nation, whose population is less than 2 million.

President Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova visited burn victims at a hospital in Skopje and spoke to parents waiting outside the building. "It's terrible... hard to believe how this happened," she said, her voice halting with emotion. "We must give these young people courage to continue."

In an online post, Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski wrote: "This is a difficult and very sad day for Macedonia. The loss of so many young lives is irreparable, and the pain of the families, loved ones and



Police officers investigate a nightclub after a massive fire in the town of Kocani, North Macedonia, on Sunday

friends is immeasurable." Family members gathered in front of hospitals and city offices in Kocani, some 115 kilometres east of Skopje, begging authorities for more information. The club was in an old building that was previously a carpet warehouse and has been running for several years, according to local media MKD. The fire caused the roof of the single-story building to partially collapse, revealing the charred remains of wooden beams and debris. Police cordoned off the site and sent in evidence gathering teams in an operation also involving state prosecutors.

A state prosecutor, Ljubco Kocovski, said several people were being questioned by police but gave no further details and stressed that the cause of the blaze was still being investigated. Interior ministry officials said authorities would investigate the venue's licensing and safety provisions, adding that the government had a "moral responsibility" to help prosecute anyone responsible. Police have arrested one man already, but didn't provide details on the

person's involvement.

As they awoke to news of the overnight tragedy, the country's immediate neighbours and leaders from further afield in Europe sent condolences. The European Union's foreign policy chief, Kaja Kallas, posted on X that she was "deeply saddened" and said the 27-nation bloc "shares the grief and pain of the people of North Macedonia."

North Macedonia is a candidate for EU membership. Condolences also poured in from politicians across the region, including Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama, the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. "I wish those who were injured a speedy recovery. Ukraine mourns alongside our (North) Macedonian friends on this sad day," Zelenskyy wrote on X. Pyrotechnics have often been the cause of deadly fires in nightclubs, including the one at the Cocktail club in Bucharest, Romania, in 2015 in which 64 people died.

B'desh HC upholds 20 students' death penalty for lynching university mate

Dhaka (PTI): The High Court on Sunday upheld a trial court verdict handing down the death penalty to 20 students of an elite university here for beating to death a fellow second-year student over his alleged political affiliation in 2019.

Court officials said the two-judge bench of Justice AKM Asaduzzaman and Justice Syed Enayet Hossain pronounced the verdict simultaneously wrapping up the hearing on the mandatory death reference and convicts' appeals against the lower court judgment. All the convicts, students of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), belonged to the now disbanded Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the student wing of deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League.

They lynched Abrar Fahad, a second-year student of BUET's electrical and electronics department on October 7, 2019 over a Facebook post by him criticising the government. Fahad's battered body was found in his university dormitory the next morning. Investigations later found that he was beaten to death with a cricket bat and other blunt objects for almost six hours by 25 fellow students. Both the BUET and BCL immediately expelled these students after Fahad's murder.

A Dhaka court sentenced to death the 20 convicts on December 8, 2021 when Awami League was in power. Apart from upholding the death penalty for 20 students, "the court also upheld the life term imprisonment for other five convicts, who too were BUET students," Attorney General M Asaduzzaman said.

Fahad's father told reporters after the High Court verdict: "We are satisfied with the High Court's ruling. However, the verdict must be implemented swiftly."

His brother Faiyaz said, "We did not expect to receive such a swift verdict from the High Court. We are satisfied with this ruling, although there are still many legal procedures remaining." Defence lawyer Azizur Rahman Dulu said the verdict disappointed him and added: "We will appeal to the Appellate Division, hoping to receive justice there." The convicts were tried in person but one of the death row inmates in the case, Muntasir Al Jamie, had fled a high-security prison at suburban Kashmir Central Jail last year.

Russia, Ukraine trade overnight aerial attacks

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Kyiv

Russia and Ukraine traded heavy aerial blows overnight, with both sides on Saturday reporting more than 100 enemy drones over their respective territories. The attacks comes less than 24 hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin met with US envoy Steve Witkoff to discuss details of the American proposal for a 30-day ceasefire in the war with Ukraine. Putin told a press conference on Thursday that he supported a truce in principle but set out a host of details that need to be clarified before it is agreed. Kyiv has already endorsed the truce proposal, although Ukrainian officials have publicly raised doubts as to whether Moscow will commit to such a deal.

Speaking to reporters in Kyiv on Saturday, after virtual talks between Western allies hosted by UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Zelenskyy voiced Ukraine's support for the 30-day full ceasefire proposal to discuss a longer-term peace plan, but said Russia would attempt to derail talks with conditions and "buts".

Starmer has told allies to "keep the pressure" on Putin to back a ceasefire in Ukraine, hailing Ukraine as the "party of peace". Starmer said Putin will "sooner or later" have to "come to the table".

In a statement earlier on Saturday, Zelenskyy had accused Moscow of building up forces along the border. "The build up of Russian forces indicates that Moscow intends to keep ignoring diplomacy. It is clear that Russia is prolonging the war," he said. However, Zelenskyy stressed that if Russia did not agree with the US proposal there would be "specific, harsh and straightforward" response from the administration of US President Donald Trump.

He also said that Kyiv's troops were maintaining their presence in Russia's Kursk region after Trump said Friday that "thousands" of Ukrainian troops had been surrounded by the Russian military.

"The operation of our forces in the designated areas of the Kursk region continues," Zelenskyy said. "Our troops continue to hold back Russian and North Korean groupings in the Kursk region. There is no encirclement of our troops."

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio spoke Saturday with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. In the call, they discussed next steps to follow up on recent meetings in Saudi Arabia and agreed to continue working towards restoring communication between the United States and Russia, State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce said in a statement.

Ukraine's air force said Saturday that Russia had launched a barrage of 178 drones and two ballistic missiles over the country overnight. The attack was a mixture of Shahed-type drones and imitation drones designed to confuse air defences. Some 130 drones were shot down, while 38 more failed to reach their targets.

Russia attacked energy facilities, causing significant damage, striking energy infrastructure in the Dnipropetrovsk and Odesa regions, Ukraine's private energy company DTEK said in a statement on Saturday. Some residents were left without electricity. "The damage is significant. Energy workers are already working on the ground. We are doing everything possible to restore power to homes as soon as possible," the energy firm said.

Falling drone debris in Russia's Volgograd region sparked a fire in the Krasnoarmeysky district of the city, close to a Lukoil oil refinery, according to Gov. Andrei Bocharov, who provided no further details. Nearby airports temporarily halted flights, local media outlets reported. No casualties were reported.

The Volgograd refinery has been targeted by Kyiv's forces on several occasions since Moscow launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine more than three years ago, most recently in a drone attack on February 15.

French-British blueprint doesn't foresee deploying 'mass' of soldiers in Ukraine, says Macron

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Paris

French President Emmanuel Macron has fleshed out some possible missions that could be undertaken by a military support force for Ukraine that Paris and London are working to put together with other nations, in a so-called "coalition of the willing" that could deploy after any ceasefire with Russia.

Speaking to French media ahead of an online summit that the UK hosted on Saturday, Macron said the French-British blueprint doesn't aim to deploy a "mass" of soldiers in Ukraine and instead envisages stationing troop contingents in key locations.

Macron's office said Sunday that it couldn't provide a recording of the French leader's exchange with reporters from regional French newspapers on Friday night. But according to La D p che du Midi and Le Parisien, the French president spoke of participating nations each deploying several thousand troops to "key points" in Ukraine. Their missions could include providing training and supporting Ukrainian defences, to demonstrate long-term support for Kyiv, the reports quoted Macron as saying.

Macron added that the proposed contingents from countries that are members of the NATO alliance would serve as "a guarantee of security" for Ukraine and that "several European nations, and also non-European, have expressed their willingness

to join such an effort when it is confirmed," La D p che reported.

Le Parisien cited Macron as saying that Moscow's agreement wasn't needed for such deployment. "Ukraine is sovereign. If it asks for Allied forces to be on its territory, it's not up to Russia to accept or not," he said.

Following Saturday's two-hour virtual meeting, Starmer challenged Russian President Vladimir Putin to sign up to a ceasefire in its war against Ukraine if he is serious about peace, and said allies will keep increasing the pressure on the Kremlin, including by moving planning for a peacekeeping force to an "operational phase".

Around 30 leaders were involved in the call, including Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and leaders from Australia, Canada and New Zealand, as well as officials from NATO and the European Union.

It was the second such meeting in two weeks, meant to help Ukraine face a change of approach by the US following the return of President Donald Trump, as well as gauging support for any future possible peacekeeping mission. Many more countries were involved this time than the previous meeting on March 2. According to Starmer, military planners will convene again in the UK on Thursday to progress practical plans to support Ukraine's future security.

Massive storm leaves at least 32 dead in US

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Piedmont

Violent tornadoes and high winds decimated homes, wiped out schools and toppled semitractor-trailers as a monster storm that killed at least 32 people ripped its way across the central and southern US.

Missouri resident Dakota Henderson said he and others rescuing trapped neighbours found five bodies scattered in the debris Friday night outside what remained of his aunt's house in hard-hit Wayne County. Scattered twisters killed at least a dozen people in the state, authorities said. "It was a very rough deal last night," Henderson said Saturday not far from the splintered home from which he said they rescued his aunt through a window of the only room left standing. "It's really disturbing for what happened to the people, the casualties last night."

Coroner Jim Akers of nearby Butler County described the "unrecognizable home" where one man was killed as "just a debris field."

"The floor was upside down," he said. "We were walking on walls."

Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves announced six people died in three counties and three more people were missing late Saturday as storms moved further east into Alabama, where damaged homes and impassable roads were reported. Officials confirmed three deaths in Arkansas, where Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders declared a state of emergency.

Georgia Governor Brian Kemp also declared an emergency in anticipation of the storm's shift eastward. Early Sunday morning, the Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency used its social media accounts to repost a National Weather Service tornado watch for parts of southeast Georgia.

In response to the watch, which warns



A vehicle sits in front of a damaged home and debris from a severe storm on Saturday in Wayne County

of isolated tornadoes and hail and gusts of 50 to 70 mph, Kemp posted a note saying his family was "praying for all those impacted by this storm system and those still in its path."

"We will continue to work closely with state and local officials to respond to damage and assess any needs following this weather event," Kemp wrote. Dust storms spurred by the system's early high winds claimed almost a dozen lives on Friday. Eight people died in a Kansas highway pile-up involving at least 50 vehicles, according to the state highway patrol. Authorities said three people also were killed in car crashes during a dust storm in Amarillo, in the Texas Panhandle.

The extreme weather conditions were forecast to impact an area that is home to more than 100 million people, with winds

threatening blizzard conditions in colder northern areas and fanning the wildfire risk in warmer, drier places to the south.

Evacuations were ordered in some Oklahoma communities as more than 130 fires were reported across the state and nearly 300 homes were damaged or destroyed. Governor Kevin Stitt said at a Saturday news conference that some 689 square kilometers had burned, sharing that he lost a home of his own on a ranch northeast of Oklahoma City.

To the north, the National Weather Service issued blizzard warnings for parts of far western Minnesota and far eastern South Dakota starting early Saturday. Snow accumulations of 3 to 6 inches were expected, with up to a foot possible. Winds were expected to cause whiteout conditions. Still, experts said it's not

unusual to see such weather extremes in March.

Significant tornadoes continued late Saturday, with the region at highest risk stretching from eastern Louisiana and Mississippi through Alabama, western Georgia and the Florida panhandle, the Storm Prediction Center said.

Bailey Dillon, 24, and her fiance, Caleb Barnes, watched from their front porch in Tylertown, Mississippi, as a massive twister struck an area about half a mile (0.8 kilometer) away near Paradise Ranch RV Park.

They drove over afterward to see if anyone needed help and recorded video of snapped trees, leveled buildings and overturned vehicles. "The amount of damage was catastrophic," Dillon said. "It was a large amount of cabins, RVs, campers that were just flipped over. Everything was destroyed."

Paradise Ranch said via Facebook that all staff and guests were safe and accounted for, but Dillon said the damage extended beyond the RV park itself.

"Homes and everything were destroyed all around it," she said. "Schools and buildings are just completely gone." Some images from the extreme weather went viral online.

Tad Peters and his father, Richard Peters, had pulled over to fuel up their pickup truck in Rolla, Missouri, on Friday night when they heard tornado sirens and saw other motorists fleeing the interstate to park. "Whoa, is this coming? Oh, it's here. It's here," Tad Peters can be heard saying on a video. "Look at all that debris. Ohhh. My God, we are in a torn ..." His father then rolled up the window.

The two were headed to Indiana for a weightlifting competition but decided to return home to Norman, Oklahoma, about six hours away, where they then encountered wildfire.

Over 1 lakh people join protest rally in Belgrade against Serbia prez, govt

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Belgrade

At least one lakh people descended on Belgrade on Saturday for a mass rally seen as a culmination of months-long protests against Serbia's populist President Aleksandar Vucic and his government.

Large crowds of flag-waving protesters clogged the downtown area of the capital despite occasional rain, with people hardly able to move and many stuck hundreds of metres away from the planned protest venue. Following apparent sporadic incidents between protesters and the police, university students — who have been leading the peaceful protests for the past four months — abruptly called for an end to the demonstration on Saturday, saying they no longer can guarantee safety at the rally.

Most of the protesters dispersed, but thousands remained on the streets as tensions surged. Police said the crowd reached 1.07, lakh people at the peak of the protest. Serbian independent media described the rally as the biggest ever in

the country, saying the numbers were much higher. All public transport in Belgrade was cancelled as protesters streamed into the city from various directions. The rally was part of a nationwide anti-corruption movement that erupted after a concrete canopy collapsed at a train station in Serbia's north in November, killing 15 people.

Almost daily demonstrations that started in response to the tragedy have shaken Vucic's firm grip on power in Serbia like never before in the past 13 years in charge. Many in Serbia blamed the crash on rampant government corruption, negligence and disrespect of construction safety regulations, demanding accountability for the victims.

Saturday's rally was dubbed "15 for 15", referring to the date of the protest and the number of people killed in the city of Novi Sad on November 1. The crowds fell silent for 15 minutes in the evening to honour the victims.

Ahead of the demonstration,



Vucic repeatedly warned of alleged plans for unrest while threatening arrests and harsh sentences for any incidents.

A deafening sound of whistles, drums and vuvuzelas filled the air on Saturday. Some protesters carried banners that read, "He's Finished!" Crowds chanted

"Pump it Up," a slogan adopted during past four months of student-led protests.

"I expect that this will shake his authority and that Vucic will realise that people are no longer for him," Milenko Kovacevic, a protester, said.

The massive rally is not the endgame in

a struggle for a more democratic Serbia, Dejan Simic, another protester, said. "This is just the beginning of the end, a process which I hope will end soon," he said.

Protesting university students have been a key force of the anti-graft movement with their call for justice. Students' determination has struck a chord among the citizens who are disillusioned with politicians and have lost faith in the state institutions.

Hundreds of police deployed in city: On Friday evening, tens of thousands of people staged a joyous welcome for the students who have been marching or cycling for days from across Serbia toward Belgrade. Interior Minister Ivica Dacic told state RTS broadcaster that 13 people were detained overnight. He said police detained six opposition activists for allegedly plotting to stage a coup and stir unrest.

By Saturday morning, people were assembling in various parts of the city as they marched toward the centre. The entire downtown zone was flooded with people

hours before the scheduled start of the gathering. Reflecting the tensions, police said they arrested a man who rammed his car into protesters in a Belgrade suburb, injuring three people. Hundreds of police officers were deployed inside and around government buildings and in front of the presidential palace.

Many railway and bus links toward Belgrade have been cancelled, in an apparent effort to prevent people from attending the rally. The transport company said the cancellation was made "for security reasons". Several reporters from neighbouring Croatia as well as Slovenia have been turned back from Serbia's border under explanation that their presence at the rally "represents a security risk".

Vucic claims West is backing protests: Vucic has rejected earlier proposals for a transitional government that would prepare an early election. Fuelling fears of clashes, Vucic's supporters have been camping in central Belgrade in front of his headquarters.

Judge stalls Trump's 18th-century law to speed deportations

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Washington

A federal judge on Saturday barred the administration of President Donald Trump from deportations under an 18th-century law that Trump invoked just hours earlier asserting the United States was being invaded by a Venezuelan gang and that he had new powers to remove its members from the country.

James E Boasberg, chief judge for the US District Court for the District of Columbia, said he needed to issue his order immediately because the government was already flying migrants it claimed were newly deportable under Trump's proclamation to El Salvador and Honduras to be incarcerated there. El Salvador already agreed this week to take up to 300 migrants that the Trump administration designated as gang members. "I do not believe I can wait any longer and am required to act," Boasberg said during a Saturday evening hearing in a lawsuit brought by the ACLU and Democracy Forward. "A brief delay in their removal does not cause the government any harm," he added, noting they remain in government custody but ordering that any planes in the air be turned around. The ruling came hours after Trump claimed the Venezuelan gang, Tren de Aragua, was invading the United States and invoked the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, a sweeping wartime authority that allows the president broader leeway on policy and executive action to speed up mass deportations. The act has only been used three times before in US history, all during wars. Its most recent application was during World War II, when it was used to incarcerate Germans and Italians as well as for the mass internment of Japanese-American civilians.

In a proclamation released just over an hour before Boasberg's hearing, Trump contended that Tren de Aragua was effectively at war with the United States.

"Over the years, Venezuelan national

and local authorities have ceded ever-greater control over their territories to transnational criminal organisations, including TdA," Trump's statement reads. "The result is a hybrid criminal state that is perpetrating an invasion of and predatory incursion into the United States, and which poses a substantial danger to the United States."

The order could let the administration deport any migrant it identifies as a member of the gang without going through regular immigration proceedings, and also could remove other protections under criminal law for people the government targeted. The Tren de Aragua gang originated in a prison in the South American country and accompanied an exodus of millions of Venezuelans, the overwhelming majority of whom were seeking better living conditions after their nation's economy came undone last decade. Trump and his allies have turned the gang into the face of the alleged threat posed by immigrants living in the US illegally and formally designated it a "foreign terrorist organisation" last month.

Authorities in several countries have reported arrests of Tren de Aragua members, even as Venezuela's government claims to have eliminated the criminal organisation. The government said Trump actually signed the order on Friday night. Immigration lawyers noticed the federal government suddenly moving to deport Venezuelans who they would not otherwise have the legal right to expel from the country, and scrambled to file lawsuits to block what they believed was a pending proclamation.

Boasberg issued an initial order at 9:20 am on Saturday blocking the Trump administration from deporting five Venezuelans named as plaintiffs in the ACLU suit who were being detained by the government and believed they were about to be deported. The Trump administration appealed that order, contending that halting a presidential act before it has been

announced would cripple the executive branch.

If the order were allowed to stand, "district courts would have licence to enjoin virtually any urgent national-security action just upon receipt of a complaint," the Justice Department wrote in its appeal.

Boasberg then scheduled the afternoon hearing on whether to expand his order to all people who could be targeted under Trump's declaration.

Deputy Assistant Attorney General Drew Ensign contended that the president had broad latitude to identify threats to the country and act under the 1798 law. He noted the US Supreme Court allowed President Harry Truman to continue to hold a German citizen in 1948, three years after World War II ended, under the measure. "This would cut very deeply into the prerogatives of the president," Ensign said of an injunction.

But Lee Gelernt of the ACLU noted the law has only been invoked three times before and contended that Trump did not have the authority to use it against a criminal gang rather than a recognised state. Boasberg said that precedent on the question seemed tricky but that the ACLU had a reasonable chance of success on those arguments, and so the order was merited.

Boasberg halted deportations for those in custody for up to 14 days, and scheduled a Friday hearing in the case.

The flurry of litigation shows the significance of Trump's declaration, the latest step by the administration to expand presidential power. Ensign argued that, as part of its reaction to the September 11, 2001 attack, Congress had given the president power to delegate "transnational" organisations threats on the level of recognised states. And Gelernt warned that the Trump administration could simply issue a new proclamation to use the Alien Enemies Act against another migrant gang, like MS-13, which has long been one of Trump's favourite targets.

Prez signs order to gut staff at Voice of America, other US-funded media orgs

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Washington

President Donald Trump's administration on Saturday began making deep cuts to Voice of America and other government-run, pro-democracy programming, with the organisation's director saying all VOA employees have been put on leave.

On Friday night, shortly after Congress passed its latest funding bill, Trump directed his administration to reduce the functions of several agencies to the minimum required by law. That included the US Agency for Global Media, which houses Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and Asia and Radio Marti, which beams Spanish-language news into Cuba. On Saturday morning, Kari Lake, the failed Arizona gubernatorial and US Senate candidate whom Trump named a senior adviser to the agency, posted on X that employees should check their email. That coincided with notices going out placing Voice of America staff on paid administrative leave.

"For the first time in 83 years, the storied Voice of America is being silenced," Michael Abramowitz, the organisation's director, said in a statement. He added that "virtually" the entire 1300-person staff was placed on leave.

"VOA promotes freedom and democracy around the world by telling America's story and by providing objective and balanced news and information, especially for those living under tyranny," Abramowitz said. One reporter, who spoke under the condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to speak to the press, said: "We expected something like this to happen, and it just happened to be today."

The press advocacy group Reporters Without Borders said it "condemns this

decision as a departure from the US's historic role as a defender of free information and calls on the US government to restore VOA and urges Congress and the international community to take action against this unprecedented move."

The Agency for Global Media also sent notices terminating grants to Radio Free Asia and other programming run by the agency. Voice of America transmits United States domestic news into other countries, often translated into local languages. Radio Free Asia, Europe and Marti beam news into countries with authoritarian regimes in those regions like China, North Korea and Russia.

"The cancellation of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's grant agreement would be a massive gift to America's enemies," said the network's President and CEO, Stephen Capus, in a statement.

Combined, the networks reach an estimated 427 million people. They date back to the Cold War and are part of a network of government-funded organisations trying to extend US influence and combat authoritarianism that includes USAID, another agency targeted by Trump.

The reduction is a dramatic blow at a staple of post-Cold War order that has long had bipartisan support. Voice of America's directors have included Dick Carlson, the father of conservative commentator Tucker Carlson. Thomas Kent, former president and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, said that Trump's intentions for the agencies are still foggy. Without these news sources, it will be that much harder for the country to get its messages to the world, he said. "Without the international broadcasting, the image of the United States and the Trump administration will be in the

hands of others, including the administration's opponents, (and) countries and people who consider the United States an enemy," said Kent, an international consultant on media ethics.

A video posted on X by Lake on Saturday talked about cost-cutting measures, not mentioning the employees and the mission of Voice of America. Her video was made at a building leased by VOA that Lake described as a waste of money. She said she would try to break the agency's 15-year lease on the building.

"We're doing everything we can to cancel contracts that can be cancelled, save more, downsize and make sure there's no misuse of your dollars," she said.

The letter places employees on administrative leave and says staff would continue to receive pay and benefits "until otherwise notified." It ordered employees not to use Agency for Global Media facilities and return equipment like phones and computers. The Trump administration has already made other steps to assert its authority over Voice of America, and this week cancelled contracts that allowed VOA to use material from independent news organisations, such as The Associated Press. The administration has also banned the AP from press pools that cover the president and moved to take charge of what news organisations are members of the pools, and the FCC is investigating news organisations like CBS.

Trump's order requiring reductions also includes several other, lesser-known government agencies such as the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, a nonpartisan think tank, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness and the Community Development Financial Institutions Fund.

Carney seeks alliances in Europe as he deals with Donald Trump

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Ottawa

New Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney is heading to Paris and London on Monday to seek alliances as he deals with US President Donald Trump's attacks on Canada's sovereignty and economy.

Carney is purposely making his first foreign trip to the capital cities of the two countries that shaped Canada's early existence. At his swearing-in ceremony on Friday, Carney noted the country was built on the bedrock of three peoples, French, English and Indigenous, and said Canada is fundamentally different from America and will "never, ever, in any way shape or form, be part of the United States".

"The Trump factor is the reason for the trip. The Trump factor towers over everything else Carney must deal with," said Nelson Wiseman, professor emeritus at the University of Toronto.

The 59-year-old former central banker will meet with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris on Monday and later travel to London to sit down with UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer in an effort to diversify trade and perhaps coordinate a response to Trump's tariffs.

He will also meet with King Charles III, the head of state in Canada. The trip to England is a bit of a homecoming, as Carney is a former governor of the Bank of England, the first noncitizen to be named to the role in the bank's 300-plus-year history. Carney then travels to the edge of Canada's Arctic to "reaffirm Canada's Arctic security and sovereignty" before returning to Ottawa where he's expected to call an election within days.

Carney has said he's ready to meet with Trump if he shows respect for Canadian sovereignty. He said he doesn't plan to visit Washington at the moment but hopes to have a phone call with the president soon.

Sweeping tariffs of 25% and Trump's talk of making Canada the 51st US state have infuriated Canadians, and many are avoid-

ing buying American goods when they can. Carney's government is reviewing the purchase of US-made F-35 fighter jets in light of Trump's trade war.

The governing Liberal Party had appeared poised for a historic election defeat this year until Trump declared economic war and repeatedly has said Canada should become the 51st state. Now the party and its new leader could come out on top. Robert Bothwell, a professor of Canadian history and international relations at the University of Toronto, said Carney is wise not to visit Trump.

"There's no point in going to Washington," Bothwell said. "As (former Prime Minister Justin) Trudeau's treatment shows, all that results in is a crude attempt by Trump to humiliate his guests. Nor can you have a rational conversation with someone who simply sits there and repeats disproven lies."

Bothwell said that Trump demands respect, "but it's often a one-way street, asking others to set aside their self-respect to bend to his will." Daniel Béland, a political science professor at McGill University in Montreal, said it is absolutely essential that Canada diversify trade amidst the ongoing trade war with the United States. More than 75% of Canada's exports go to the US. Béland said Arctic sovereignty is also a key issue for Canada.

"President Trump's aggressive talk about both Canada and Greenland and the apparent rapprochement between Russia, a strong Arctic power, and the United States under Trump have increased anxieties about our control over this remote yet highly strategic region," Béland said.



China delivers 2nd of 8 modern submarines to Pakistan navy

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Beijing

China has delivered a second new submarine, equipped with state-of-the-art weapons and sensors, to Pakistan as part of its efforts to beef up the navy of its all-weather ally to back its growing presence in the Arabian Sea and India's backyard - the Indian Ocean.

The Hangor-class submarine, which is part of the eight such submarines to Pakistan in a deal with around USD five billion, was launched in Wuhan, China's Hubei Province, official media here reported on Sunday. This is in addition to four modern naval frigates China supplied to Pakistan in the last few years as part of its efforts to boost the naval strength of Pakistan, amid the Chinese navy's steady expansion in the Arabian Sea, where it is developing the Gwadar port in Balochistan, and the Indian Ocean.

A Chinese expert told the state-run Global Times that the new submarine has a strong comprehensive combat capability to become a mainstay for the Pakistan Navy. Under an agreement, Pakistan will acquire eight Hangor-class submarines

from China. Four of them will be built in China, while the remaining will be constructed in Karachi under a transfer of technology program, the Pakistan Navy said in a press release.

The submarines will be fitted with cutting-edge weapons and sensors, enabling them to engage targets at standoff ranges.

Zhang Junshu, a Chinese military affairs expert, told the Global Times that Hangor-class submarines possess strong underwater combat capabilities and are equipped with an air-independent propulsion system that will give the boat strong, sustained stealth capability, manoeuvrability and endurance. Its firepower includes torpedoes, anti-ship missiles and mine-laying capabilities, along with advanced underwater detection systems, he said.

According to a recent report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China has supplied 81 per cent of Pakistan's advanced military systems in the past five years, making Pakistan its biggest arms importer.

Pakistan's military acquisitions amounted to 63 per cent of China's total arms exports, with a total value of USD 5.28 bil-

lion in the last five years. Pakistan bought more advanced and diverse systems from China from 2020 to 2024, such as long-range reconnaissance drones and Type 054A guided-missile frigates, the SIPRI report said. Some of Pakistan's key orders in the past five years include the country's first spy ship, the Rizwan, more than 600 VT-4 battle tanks, and 36 J-10CE 4.5-generation fighters, according to the SIPRI database. China supplied the first delivery of multirole J-10CE fighter jets to Pakistan Air Force in 2022, adding to its JF-17 fighters jointly manufactured by both countries.

The fourth-generation JF-17 was jointly developed by Pakistan Aeronautical Complex and China's Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group, including the Block III version featuring an active electronically scanned array radar, which was inducted by the Pakistan Air Force in 2023.

Song Zhongping, a military commentator and former instructor of the Chinese military, told the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post that China might also export its fifth-generation fighter jet, the J-35 the stealth multirole fighter, "if Pakistan requests it".

16 people killed as ordnance from Syria's 13-year conflict explodes

Damascus (PTI): Ordnance from Syria's 13-year conflict exploded in the coastal city of Lattakia, collapsing a building and killing more than a dozen people, the Syrian Civil Defence said on Sunday.

The paramedic group, known as the White Helmets, said it worked overnight, searching through debris and recovered 16 bodies, including five women and five children, and that 18 others were injured.

The group and residents said the explosion occurred in a metal scrap storage space on the ground floor of the four-story building. The United Nations said in February that about a hundred have been killed from exploding ordnance during the last 13 years, adding that since the ouster of Bashar Assad in December, over 1,400 unexploded devices across Syria have been safely disposed of and 138 minefields and contaminated areas identified in Idleb, Aleppo, Hama, Deir-uz-Zor and Lattakia. Lattakia, a key port city, and Syria's coastal province recently witnessed a surge in violence, after gunmen loyal to Assad ambushed a security patrol.

Pope to miss Angelus delivery at St Peter's Square fifth time

Rome (PTI): Pope Francis continues his recovery from double pneumonia at Rome's Gemelli hospital with the Vatican expected to issue the traditional Sunday Angelus prayer as a written text for the fifth straight week. The pope typically delivers the Angelus from a window overlooking St Peter's Square to the gathered faithful, who have grown more numerous due to the Jubilee year that Francis inaugurated in December.

Along with a stop at St Peter's to seek indulgences by walking through the basilica's Holy Door, pilgrims are now also adding a stop at Gemelli, a 15-minute train ride from the Vatican. Doctors this week said the 88-year-old pontiff was no longer in critical, life-threatening condition, but have continued to emphasize that his con-



dition remained complex due to his age, lack of mobility and the loss of part of a lung as a young man. Still, they are issuing fewer medical bulletins as the pontiff has been on an upward trajectory. An X-ray this week confirmed that the infection

Francis has not been seen publicly since he was admitted to the hospital February 14 after a bout of bronchitis that made it difficult for him to speak

was clearing. Francis has not been seen publicly since he was admitted to the hospital February 14 after a bout of bronchitis that made it difficult for him to speak. Doctors soon added a diagnosis of double pneumonia and a polymicrobial (bac-

terial, viral and fungal) infection.

The first three weeks of his hospitalization were marked by a rollercoaster of setbacks, including respiratory crises, mild kidney failure and a severe coughing fit.

Doctors in the most recent medical update on Saturday said they were working to reduce the pope's nighttime reliance on the non-invasive ventilation mask, which will allow his lungs to work more.

Doctors underlined that while the pope's condition is stable, he still requires hospitalization for both physical and respiratory therapy, which are "showing further gradual improvements", the Vatican said Saturday in the first medical update in three days. The next update won't be issued until the middle of next week, the Vatican said.

Facts, not fear: Inside Mexico's pioneering drug harm reduction programmes

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Mexico City

Under warm strobe lights and pulsing house beats, a recent festival in Mexico City offered more than music, food and booze. Amidst the usual festival fare, a booth provided free, anonymous drug testing. The initiative, known as "Checa tu Sustancia" (Check Your Substance), is one of several recent efforts by Mexican civil society to reduce risk among people taking drugs.

Spearheaded by the Instituto RIA, a Mexico-based drug policy research and advocacy organisation, it aims to address drug use from a public health and social justice perspective, rather than a security one. In a well-lit corner of the festival, members of the Instituto RIA used reagents and laboratory porcelain plates to test substances that some of the partygoers planned to use and recorded the data.

Their analysis uses colour changes to indicate what's in the drug: It can reveal the presence of adulterants but not their

exact proportion. They also offered test strips that can detect the presence of fentanyl and nasal sprays of naloxone, a medication designed to rapidly reverse opioid overdose. Also available were informational flyers detailing the effects of various psychoactive substances and what to do to reduce the risks associated with using them, including simple but critical measures like staying hydrated and eating well.

While some partygoers seemed wary of the initiative, others approached it with curiosity. "There is amazement, but also a little bit of fear, because there is a whole context of criminalisation," said social psychology student Jessica Reyes Moreno, 27, a volunteer with Checa tu Sustancia.

When unexpected substances are detected, users receive detailed information on what they are, about their risks, potential interactions with other substances and dosage adjustments, empowering them to make informed choices.

Harm reduction vs. abstinence: When people understand that the focus is not on

prohibiting but on offering information and safe, non-judgmental spaces where they can be heard, trust is built, said Reyes Moreno. "I think it's information we should have. Because (drug use) is taboo, and if we're uninformed, we can overdose," said a 34-year-old Mexican partygoer, who requested anonymity due to his use of illicit substances.

He said he feels there isn't enough information about illegal drugs in Mexico, and when there is, it's either confusing or all stigma. "It's just Don't do it, but there's no such thing as If you do it, take this precaution." The "don't do it" approach sees abstinence as the solution. In contrast, harm reduction, as defined by Harm Reduction International, aims to minimize the negative health, social and legal effects of substance use by working with people without judgment or requiring them to stop using drugs.

The approach focuses more on people — and their communities — than on the substance. "We never say, you shouldn't

consume this," said Zara Snapp, a political scientist and director of the Instituto RIA. "The best way to reduce your risks is not to consume at all. But if you have made the decision to consume, we want you to have as much information as possible so you can take care of yourself."

Choose to be happy: The prohibitionist, headline approach of the war on drugs in Mexico has led to the perception of the user as someone who is necessarily associated with drug trafficking or criminal activities. Earlier this year, Mexico President Claudia Sheinbaum unveiled her government's latest anti-drug campaign, "Stay away from drugs. Fentanyl kills", which centres on the synthetic opioid responsible in its deadliest year for more than 70,000 overdose deaths each year in the US — now down to an estimated 52,000 deaths a year.

Aimed at young Mexicans, the campaign frames drug use as a public health issue, but some of the videos and glowing neon

billboards show scenarios in which death and loneliness (drug use) are contrasted with life and family (not using drugs). They read, "Choose to be happy".

"It's not that if I use drugs I won't be happy, or if I stop using drugs I'll be happy," said Lilia Pacheco, operational director of PrevenCasa AC, a Tijuana-based organisation that runs harm-reduction initiatives for opioid users, mostly deportees from the United States who report that they started using in that country.

"How can we say that to someone who is using because they are cold, hungry or in withdrawal?" she said.

Mexico's health department did not immediately respond to inquiries regarding concerns that its latest campaign stigmatizes drug use. Dr Carlos Magis, a professor at Mexico's National Autonomous University's medical school and member of a working group on opioids, said that stigma poses serious challenges. He cited examples of health workers refusing treatment without abstinence, limited access to

naloxone or the scarcity of public methadone clinics.

Breaking down fear and social isolation: A recent report by the Mexican Observatory of Mental Health and Drug Use, found that between 2013 and 2024, 5,901 people in Mexico were treated for emergencies related to opioid use, with it trending up.

PrevenCasa reduces harm not by asking users to stop using, but by showing that their lives matter by providing them with safe injection equipment, showers, toiletries and social events like Friday movie nights. "These interventions improve quality of life, unlike a sign that says fentanyl kills you," said Pacheco. "The right to health should be universal."

Both Pacheco and Snapp emphasized that collective care is at the heart of harm reduction efforts. Whether practised in the facilities of organisations working on the border or at electronic music festivals, the goal is to break down social isolation and fear in concrete ways.

Chhattisgarh plans to double state GDP

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Raipur

Chhattisgarh plans to double the state's gross domestic product (GSDP) to ₹10 Lakh Crore in five years, combining the state's rich resources with progressive policies to bolster economic growth and development, its Finance Minister OP Choudhary said. The state's new industrial policy that incentivised employment creation has already drawn investment commitments of more than ₹1 Lakh crore in the last 15 months, he said.

Semiconductors manufacturing, data centres, IT services, pharmaceuticals as well as medical tourism are the focus areas, he said. The power surplus state is also eyeing renewable energy, particularly solar, as it has abundant sunlight through the year, the minister said, adding that a few opportunities in hydel power are also being explored. "We have a focus on clean energy. We have a focus on sustainability. Sustainable development will sustain in the long term," he said. While it looks at boosting manufacturing, the state is tapping other areas such as ayurveda and medical tourism as well as using its vast natural resources as a draw for tourism.

"We want to develop Raipur as a wedding destination. Our secondary sector is already very strong. We are focusing on the tertiary sector and the labour-intensive sector so that we can give employment to our youth." The state is focusing on infrastruc-

ture development, urban transport modernisation, digital connectivity and education and skill development to pivot a path to economic progress.

Aligned with the vision of making India a developed nation by 2047, no state should lag behind in the race for development, he said. "As a state government, we have to worry about this. And it is our duty to contribute to the development of the country. And when the country becomes a developed nation, Chhattisgarh should not lag behind. The 3 crore people of this state should not lag behind," he said.

Q We have a focus on clean energy. We have a focus on sustainability. Sustainable development will sustain in the long term

— OP CHOUDHARY, CHHATTISGARH FINANCE MINISTER

Chhattisgarh has prepared a vision document to become a developed state by 2047. In the medium term, "We have set a very important goal of doubling the GDP of Chhattisgarh to ₹10 Lakh crore within 5 years," he said. "For that, including inflation, we need a growth rate of 14 per cent. This is a very important goal. But I am confident that we will be able to do this. It is a very ambitious target." The state government led by Chief Minister Vishnudeo Sai feels creating a skilled human resource base is important and is linking education with

vocational skills and training to equip students with employable skills.

This month, P Choudhary presented the Chhattisgarh government's Budget for the fiscal year 2025-26, totalling ₹1.65 Lakh crore, with a focus on economic revival, infrastructure development, and social welfare. While last year's Budget focused on theme GYAN (Gareeb, Yuva, Annadata & Nari), this year's Budget aims to drive progress in the state under the theme of GYAN ke liye 'GATI' to build on the progress made so far, he said discussing the focus of this year's budget.

"In GATI, G stands for good governance, A for accelerating infrastructure, T for technology and I for industrial growth," he said. Last year's Budget centred around inclusive development. But for inclusive growth, economic development is equally important, he said. With enhanced allocations, the budget aims to boost infrastructure, industrial development, and regional connectivity, creating an environment that attracts both public and private investments.

The bureaucrat-turned-politician said improving tax through governance is his government's first strategy.

"Secondly, I have talked about speed in this budget. We will focus on infrastructure and industrial growth and ensure rapid economic growth. When there is economic growth, the revenue collection will increase automatically," he said. "So, governance and economic growth, these

two pillars are our focus." At the same time, the state government is working aggressively on social welfare schemes, targeted at women, tribals and the underprivileged.

"Alongside, to ensure rapid economic growth, we are focusing on infrastructure and industrial growth," he said, adding that his budget is targeting a 18 per cent growth in infrastructure spending on roads, irrigation projects and such other areas with a multiplier effect.

"We want to develop 1 lakh hectare of agricultural land," he said, pointing out that the state has also introduced a new industrial policy. "We have increased the industry subsidy by 3 times." Choudhary said the state government is targeting to complete a survey on Chhattisgarh's first metro rail project this year. Besides, it is looking to boost air connectivity with airports and aerodromes at major cities of the state.

On its rich mineral resources, he said the state government stands for sustainable and environment-friendly exploitation of resources while ensuring proper rehabilitation of those affected by the mining activities. Besides coal and iron ore, the state is blessed with critical minerals like lithium which is very important for EVs, he said. "We are also focusing on diversification. We are focusing on labour-intensive manufacturing such as textiles, semiconductors, data processing, data centres, pharmaceuticals and medical facilities. We have a clear vision for industrial development," he said.

India, New Zealand announce resumption of FTA talks



Union Minister Piyush Goyal and New Zealand's Todd McClay during a meeting

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

After a gap of about ten years, India and New Zealand on Sunday announced resumption of negotiations for a proposed free trade agreement to boost economic ties.

India and New Zealand began negotiating the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) in April 2010 to boost trade in goods, services, and investment. However, after nine rounds of discussions, the talks stalled in 2015. "The two nations are pleased to announce the launch of negotiations for a comprehensive and mutually beneficial India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations," the commerce ministry said.

The announcement was made after the meeting of Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal and Todd McClay, New Zealand's Minister for Trade and Investment.

Prime Minister of New Zealand Christopher Luxon is here on a four-day visit from March 16.

"The India-New Zealand FTA negotiations aim to achieve balanced outcomes that enhance supply chain integration and improve market access," it said.

"With bilateral trade continuing to grow steadily, surpassing \$1 billion during April-January 2025, the FTA negotiations aim to unlock new avenues for businesses and consumers, fostering mutual growth and prosperity of our nations," Goyal said in a post on X.

Artificial Intelligence driving force in modern markets, says CCI chief

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Artificial intelligence is a driving force in modern markets that also has the potential to enable collusion, including algorithmic discrimination under the garb of dynamic pricing, Competition Commission of India (CCI) chief Ravneet Kaur said on Sunday.

She also emphasised the need to adopt a forward-looking approach as well as trust-based regulations.

Delivering the special address at the 10th National Conference on Economics of Competition Law in the national capital, Kaur said Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a driving force in modern markets. AI shapes pricing strategies, decision-making, and operational efficiencies across industries but also presents risks, she noted. CCI Chairperson said, AI can enable new forms of collusion such as "cartels without human communication, price coordination without explicit agreements, and algorithmic discrimination under the garb of dynamic pricing."

The fair trade regulator is already conducting a study on AI and competition.

While mentioning that traditional enforcement models, built on adversarial approaches, are no longer sufficient in addressing evolving market complexities, Kaur said the future demands a more collaborative regulatory strategy.

"Today's competitive landscape is defined by platform economies, network effects, and algorithm-driven decision-making," the CCI chief said and added that market power today is about



Competition Commission of India (CCI) Chairperson Ravneet Kaur speaks at CCI's 10th National Conference on Economics of Competition Law in New Delhi

data control, network effects, and platform reach. The goal is to balance innovation with competition, ensuring fair and open markets, she noted. At the conference, organised by the CCI, Union Minister of State for Corporate Affairs Harsh Malhotra pitched for real time monitoring of markets to ensure fair competition. Since the enforcement of the Competition Act, 2002, CCI has received over 1,300 antitrust cases and out of them, 1,180 cases have been disposed of.

Last year, the regulator received 42 antitrust cases and prima facie violations were found in 8 cases, leading to detailed investigations.

As many as 19 cases were closed at the prima facie stage due to no violation, and 15 cases are pending at various stages of inquiry. In 2024, the watchdog received 128 combination notices and 126 cases were disposed of, Kaur said, adding that in 2 cases, approvals were granted with remedies to safeguard competition.

India should seek reciprocal concessions from EU: GTRI

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

India should seek reciprocal concessions from the European Union (EU) under the proposed free trade agreement (FTA) in the medical devices sector to promote its exports, economic think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said on Sunday.

India charges zero to 10 per cent tariffs on most medical devices and a duty cut by India on medical devices without addressing EU's regulatory challenges will result in low exports but large scale imports from EU.

"To achieve a fair trade deal, India must demand reciprocity. India should cut tariff on medical devices only if the EU reduces its non-tariff barriers," the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said.

The ongoing India-EU FTA negotiations on medical devices are asymmetrical. While the EU demands zero tariffs on medical devices from India, it maintains high regulatory barriers that hinder Indian exports difficult in the EU markets, it added.

GTRI Founder Ajay Srivastava said the EU customs duty rates are zero, but market entry costs are substantial because of the stringent regulatory framework.

"Exporting to EU has become more difficult as it replaced the Medical Device Directives (EU-MDD) with the more stringent Medical Device Rules (EU-MDR)," he said.

Citing an example, he said the new certification and regulatory expenses amount to 60,000-300,000 euro annu-

ally for market access of 100,000-3.75 million euro.

"Certification approval time increased from the earlier 4-8 months to 2-3 years now. Shortage of notified bodies and auditors in the EU is leading to high certification costs," Srivastava said.

On account of this, Indian exporters are withdrawing from the EU market or limiting product offerings as high entry and certification costs make market participation financially unsustainable, he noted.

Moreover, he said the lack of Indian participation in the Medical Device Single Audit Program (MDSAP) limits the acceptance of Indian devices in key regulated markets.

MDSAP allows medical device manufacturers to be audited only once for compliance with regulatory requirements in multiple markets, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Japan, and the United States.

To facilitate exports in EU and other major markets, India needs to undertake the reforms like seeking MRAs (mutual recognition agreements) with the EU, USA, and other regulated markets based on ISO (International Organization for Standardization) harmonised standards.

Indian medical devices sector is steadily growing and helping India cut its reliance on imports.

In 2024, India's global exports were \$2.3 Billion while imports were \$4.7 Billion.

EU remains an important market with exports of \$580 Million and imports of \$1.15 billion.

Digital competition law after due process, says Union Minister Harsh Malhotra

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

The digital competition law will be brought out after following the due process, Union Minister Harsh Malhotra said on Sunday. More than 100 suggestions have been received on the draft Digital Competition Bill (DCB), which was put out for public consultations by the corporate affairs ministry last year.

Malhotra, the Minister of State for Corporate Affairs, said the report from the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) on the bill is awaited. "We are not in a hurry (on bringing the digital competition law) (we will follow) due process," the minister said.

Speaking at the National Conference on Economics of Competition Law in the national capital, he also said the best practices with respect to digital markets in other jurisdictions like Japan, Australia, and Europe can be looked at and how they can fit into the Indian market. He also called for real-time monitoring and analysing of markets for fair competition.

The DCB has proposed certain ex-ante provisions to ensure proactive monitoring of the behaviour of large digital enterprises and curb possible practices. Currently, the Competition Act primarily envisages an "ex-post" framework of intervention, wherein the CCI intervenes after the occurrence of anti-competitive conduct.

Mcap of five of top-10 most valued firms declines ₹93k crore

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

The combined market capitalisation of five of the top-10 most valued firms declined by ₹93,357.52 Crore, with IT giants Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services taking the biggest hit, in line with a weak trend in domestic equities. Last week, the BSE Sensex benchmark declined 503.67 points or 0.68 per cent, and the NSE Nifty fell 155.3 points or 0.69 per cent. The stock markets were closed on Friday on the occasion of Holi festival.

Meanwhile, Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Hindustan Unilever, State Bank of India and Reliance Industries saw a decline in their market valuations.

In contrast, ICICI Bank, HDFC Bank, ITC, Bajaj Finance and Bharti Airtel posted gains. The five firms together added ₹49,833.62 Crore in their market capitalisation. The market capitalisation (mcap) of Infosys dropped by ₹44,226.62 Crore to ₹6,55,820.48 Crore.

The Mumbai-based TCS' valuation tumbled by ₹35,800.98 Crore to ₹12,70,798.97 Crore and slipped to the third place among the country's 10-most valuable companies chart.

Hindustan Unilever's market valuation depreciated by ₹6,567.11 Crore to ₹5,11,235.81 Crore. State Bank of India's mcap decreased by ₹4,462.31 Crore to ₹6,49,489.22 Crore, and that of Reliance Industries' went lower by ₹2,300.50 Crore, taking its market capitalisation to ₹16,88,028.20 Crore. However, ICICI Bank's valuation surged by ₹25,459.16 Crore to ₹8,83,202.19 Crore.

Sugar production declines 16 per cent to 23.71 Million tonnes

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

India's sugar production has declined by 16.13 per cent to 23.71 Million tonnes so far in the ongoing 2024-25 season, creating challenges for government policies which were formulated based on higher initial projections, cooperative body NFCSF said on Sunday.

The National Federation of Cooperative Sugar Factories (NFCSF) expressed concern over the "ambiguity" in sugar production numbers as the 2024-25 sugarcane crushing season (October-September) nears its end with significantly lower output than initially projected.

Sugar production estimates have been repeatedly revised downward since the season began, creating challenges for government policies which were formulated based on an initial projection of 33.3 Million tonnes, the industry body said in a statement.

Q The entire sugar industry in Maharashtra has found itself in huge financial trouble this year. It is very difficult to correlate expenses of 365 days

— HARSHVARDHAN PATIL, NFCSF PRESIDENT

"One section of the industry submitted an estimate of 33.3 million tonnes of sugar production to the central government. Based on that, the central government started formulating its policies," NFCSF said. The central government had permitted exports of 1 million tonnes of sugar in January 2025 based on the initial production estimate, but now faces a supply-demand mismatch as actual production figures trend lower.

According to NFCSF data, production in Maharashtra, India's largest sugar producer, fell to 7.86 Million tonnes till March 15 of the current season, from

10.04 Million tonnes a year ago.

Output in Uttar Pradesh, the country's second largest producer, decreased to 8.09 million tonnes from 8.85 Million tonnes, while Karnataka's production declined to 3.91 Million tonnes from 4.95 Million tonnes in the same period.

NFCSF President Harshvardhan Patil said the crushing season across most states would conclude by March-end, while Uttar Pradesh mills would operate until mid-April. Patil expressed concern over the shortened crushing period, particularly in Maharashtra where the season lasted only 83 days against the economically viable duration of 140-150 days. "The entire sugar industry in Maharashtra has found itself in huge financial trouble this year. It is very difficult to correlate expenses of 365 days and load it on an 83-day season," Patil said.

Major sugarcane growing states faced multiple challenges this season. The Co-0238 variety in Uttar Pradesh suffered heavy infestation of "Red Rot" disease and "Top Shoot Borer" pests, while standing cane in Maharashtra and Karnataka experienced premature flowering, resulting in stunted growth and reduced sugar yields. NFCSF has projected the country's total sugar output to be lower at 25.9 million tonnes in the ongoing 2024-25 season, compared to 31.9 million tonnes in the previous season. Despite current challenges, NFCSF Managing Director Prakash Naiknaware expressed optimism about the 2025-26 season, citing increased plantings due to satisfactory rainfall in 2024 and favorable weather predictions.

"If that happens, the availability of sugarcane and sugar production will be much better not only in the ensuing 2025-26 season but may also extend into 2026-27," Naiknaware said.

Indian corporate houses remain positive for hiring persons with disabilities

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Kolkata

Indian companies are ramping up hiring of persons with disabilities (PwDs), seeing it as both a "social imperative" and a "strategic business advantage" amid growing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) commitments, stakeholders said. Onboarding such people in Indian corporate houses has seen a steady rise, with a 30-40 per cent increase in job postings for inclusive roles over the past three years, they said.

Indian companies, ranging from the steel and mining sectors to the insurance segment are focusing on workplace accessibility to onboard PwDs in their job rolls. Future Generali India Insurance Company MD and CEO Anup Rau said the insurer has achieved the milestone of one per cent of its workforce comprising of PwDs.

"The commitment to ensuring at least one per cent PwDs of our workforce is rooted in our belief that inclusion is not just a box to tick or a policy to implement it's a responsibility to create a meaningful change," Rau said. In the last one year, the insurer's PwD workforce has increased from 16 to 41 employees across 16 regional branches, and nearly 22 per cent of the PwD hires are women, he said.

"In FY'23 it was stated that only seven of the Nifty 50 companies had over one per cent PwD employees, with four out of them being in the public sector space. This stark reality underscores the urgent need for corporate leadership in championing inclusion," Rau said.

Vedanta Chief Human Resource Officer Madhu Srivastava said the group has taken a slew of steps to enhance workplace accessibility such as ramps and dedicated walkways for easy mobility, braille-enabled elevators to support visually

impaired employees and text-to-speech software for better digital accessibility, and ensure a seamless experience for individuals with disabilities.

"Currently, we employ over 50 individuals from the PwD community in front-end roles and continue to expand our efforts in this space. Additionally, we have onboarded interns with disabilities to provide them with hands-on exposure to the dynamic environment of a global natural resources conglomerate like ours," Srivastava said.

Q Currently, we employ over 50 individuals from the PwD community in front-end roles and continue to expand our efforts in this space

— MADHU SRIVASTAVA, VEDANTA CHIEF HUMAN RESOURCE OFFICER

While the group's core operations in mining and smelting present certain challenges in integrating PwDs into technical roles, it remains "committed to identifying opportunities that provide them with meaningful exposure and upskilling," the Vedanta official said. "Embracing workplace diversity, including hiring persons with disabilities, is not just a social imperative it is a strategic business advantage," she said.

Tata Steel spokesperson said the company employs 100+ PwD employees across functions. In an emailed response, the spokesperson said, "Over the past 2-3 years, the number of PwD employees at Tata Steel has steadily increased. We have made significant strides in our hiring practices and have actively sought to create a more inclusive environment."

The steelmaker's official also said including people with disabilities in the workforce strengthens businesses by fos-

tering diverse perspectives and boosting creativity and innovation. With environmental, social and governance-focused hiring and government incentives like tax benefits for PwD employment, the share of such employees in the formal workforce is expected to double by 2030, human resources investment platform First Meridian Global Services and Innovosource CEO Manmeet Singh said.

Large corporations and startups alike are "prioritising diversity, especially in sectors like IT, retail, and BFSI, where remote and hybrid work models enable greater participation," Singh said.

"Despite reports that India has over 7 Crore persons with disabilities (PwDs), and their employability rate remains at just 0.4 per cent, hiring of PwDs in India has seen a steady rise, with a 30-40 per cent increase in job postings for inclusive roles over the past three years," he said.

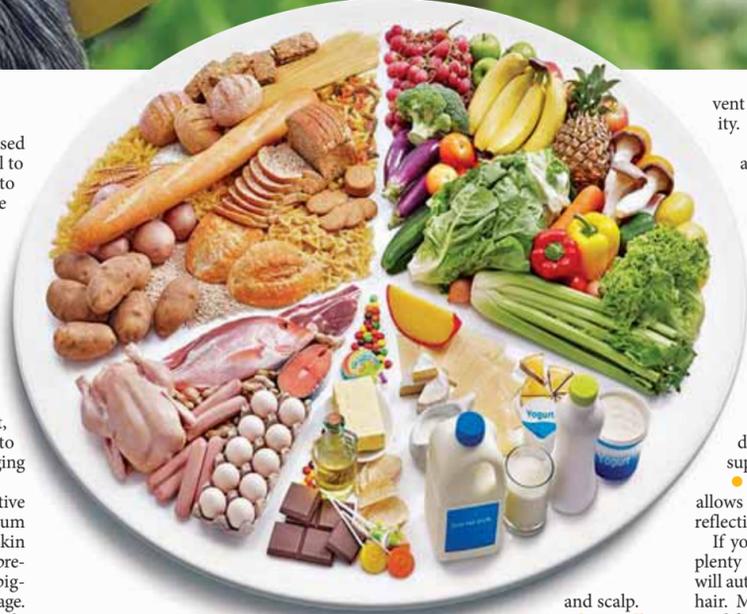
Atlanta-based Global technology & digital talent solutions provider NLB Services CEO Sachin Alug said integrating persons with disability, although a focus area, is gaining momentum slowly in India Inc.

"Today, culture plays a major role in determining the brand identity of a company and how it is perceived by partners, customers, employees and the entire business ecosystem. In order to build a diversity-oriented culture, businesses are striving to employ a diverse workforce," Alug said. However, there is a flip side to the story. Leading HR service provider Randstad India-Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Study: "Embracing All Abilities," revealed that talents with special abilities are employed majorly at junior and middle levels (29.84 per cent and 23.27 per cent, respectively), while their representation is relatively lower at senior and management roles.



Adaptation to Seasonal Changes

Due to changing weather patterns and increased exposure to environmental toxins, our skin and hair confront particular challenges when the seasons change



vent split ends and maintain hair vitality.

Similarly, hair tends to become dry and brittle due to pollutants. Using leave-in conditioners or oils can create a protective barrier for the hair and scalp.

Holistic Care

Beyond topical treatments, overall wellness plays a significant role in skin and hair health.

- **Hydration:** Drinking plenty of water helps maintain skin elasticity and hair strength.
- **Balanced Diet:** Consuming a diet rich in vitamins and minerals supports overall skin and hair health.
- **Adequate Rest:** Proper sleep allows the body to repair and rejuvenate, reflecting positively on skin and hair.

If you eat a well-balanced diet, drink plenty of water, and get plenty of rest, it will automatically show on your skin and hair. Maintaining their health requires modifying your skincare and hair care regimens to coincide with seasonal shifts and celebratory events.

— BY DR KARUNA MALHOTRA, AESTHETIC PHYSICIAN & COSMETOLOGIST

SEASONAL CHANGE

Indian summers (March–June) bring intense heat and humidity, leading to various skin and hair concerns. Excessive sweating and increased oil production can cause acne, clogged pores, and sunburns. Prolonged sun exposure also results in tanning, dehydration, and pigmentation. Skin tends to become dull and sensitive, requiring lightweight, oil-free moisturizers, sunscreen, and regular hydration. Hair also suffers in summer, becoming greasy, frizzy, and prone to dandruff due to sweat and humidity. The scalp may feel itchy, and excessive washing can strip natural oils, leading to dryness and breakage. UV exposure can further weaken hair, causing color fading and split ends. To combat these issues, it is essential to use mild, sulfate-free shampoos, hydrating hair masks, and protective hairstyles. Drinking plenty of water, maintaining a balanced diet, and using cooling skincare ingredients like aloe vera and cucumber help keep skin and hair fresh, healthy, and nourished during summer.



Due to changing weather patterns and increased exposure to environmental toxins, our skin and hair confront particular challenges when the seasons change, especially during this time of the year. To properly handle these changes, we must modify our skincare and hair care regimens. These professional tips and advice can help you keep your skin and hair healthy throughout these periods.

Skincare Adjustments

- **Gentle Cleansing:** With increased exposure to pollutants, it's essential to cleanse your skin thoroughly to remove impurities. Use a gentle cleanser twice daily to prevent clogged pores and breakouts.
- **Antioxidant Protection:** Pollutants can lead to free radical damage, causing premature aging. Incorporate antioxidant-rich serums into your routine to combat this effect.
- **Moisturization:** Despite the humidity, maintaining skin hydration is crucial. Opt for lightweight, non-comedogenic moisturizers to keep your skin supple without clogging pores.
- **Sun Protection:** Even during festive seasons, applying a broad-spectrum sunscreen is vital to shield your skin from harmful UV rays and prevent premature aging, sunburns, hyperpigmentation, and long-term skin damage.
- **Cleansing is crucial:** Use a gentle cleanser twice daily and apply an antioxidant-rich serum to protect your skin from free radical damage. Moisturizing and using a broad-spectrum sunscreen, even indoors, is essential.

Understanding Seasonal Impacts

A change in the weather frequently occurs over the holiday season, increasing humidity and exposing people to toxins from things like fireworks. The health of both skin and hair may be negatively impacted by these variables.

The change in weather, paired with makeup, pollutants, and erratic schedules, can take a toll on your skin, leaving it dull and tired. Excessive sweating and increased oil production can cause acne, clogged pores, and sunburns.



Hair Care Adjustments

- **Protective Measures:** Exposure to pollutants can make hair dry and brittle. Using leave-in conditioners or oils can create a protective barrier for the hair

Avoid excessive heat styling and frequent shampooing during festive periods to prevent further dryness and damage.

- **Regular Trimming:** Keeping hair ends healthy through regular trims can pre-

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Survivors Join Hands to Stop TB

Before 2025 World TB Day, I spent a day accompanying TB-affected street activists (TASA) in Delhi, women who assist homeless women and female migrant workers in finding TB services. It was an intense experience, connecting with women battling gender inequalities and surviving. Homelessness or migrant status significantly increases TB risk and gender-based suffering.

TB and Gender Inequalities Affect Both: Career and the Person Being Cared For

I recall a powerful encounter with a TB-affected woman supporting others through treatment. Her story highlights the importance of advocacy and community support for homeless women, empowering them to act against TB and assert their rights. As Samantha Power said, "All advocacy is, at its core, an exercise in empathy."

Empathy Binds Women to Stop TB

Jyoti's story is one of resilience. Daughter of a vegetable vendor, she graduated from Delhi University and is pursuing further education while working. She experienced TB firsthand when her sister suffered from it in 2019, navigating misdiagnosis and expensive treatment.

"We spent INR 1.5 lakh (about USD 1721) on her treatment with borrowed money. But we could save her life, and she was cured of TB."

Never Say Die Attitude

Jyoti faced immense challenges, particularly after her mother's death in 2022. Despite financial hardship, she began working while continuing her education, determined to fulfill her mother's dream.

"When she was gone, our lives were broken. We are now slowly coming to terms with her loss. Right after completing my class 12, I started working in



THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE SUPPORT

Reena, living in a threatened Delhi slum, was diagnosed with TB in 2010, interrupting her treatment due to neglect. After 14 years, her symptoms returned severely in June 2024. Fortunately, she met Jyoti, a TASA with Humana People to People India, during a "Saheli Support Group" meeting.

Jyoti recognised Reena's symptoms and took her to government clinics. Despite initial negative test results, Jyoti persisted, securing a positive diagnosis and initiating treatment. She also helped Reena access financial support through the "Nikshay Poshan Yojna."

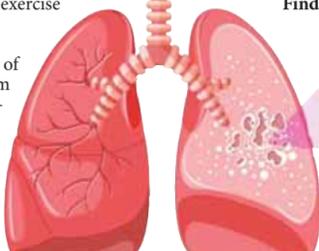
a call centre as our financial condition was not good. My father had said that if I wanted to study, I would have to bear the expenses myself. But come what may, I was determined to fulfil my mother's dream of becoming a teacher. Currently I am the sole bread winner of the family," Jyoti shared with me.

Finding Light in Helping Others

Jyoti became a TASA in August 2024, surveying areas, organising health camps, and assisting with government procedures. She helps people obtain essential documents and encourages them to take control of their lives.

"We TASAs do survey work in our allotted areas, looking for homeless people with TB symptoms and also asking the people about their needs. We hold health camps to mobilise the homeless persons of our area. In these health camps, doctors do free health checkups and provide free medicines. We also help people navigate the hospital system (and other government systems). We help them get their identity cards and other documents made, without which they cannot avail the existing government facilities."

— By Shobha Shukla (The author is the award-winning founding Managing Editor and Executive Director of Citizen News Service)



SAHELII SUPPORT GROUP MEETINGS

Weekly Saheli Support Group meetings educate women on TB and other health issues, fostering empowerment and knowledge sharing. They address challenges like unequal wages and discrimination, encouraging women to advocate for their rights.

"These meetings have yielded good results by way of general empowerment and knowledge sharing among the homeless and migrant women. They are now capable of getting birth certificate,

Aadhar unique identification card, etc, made themselves without any help," she added. Jyoti finds immense satisfaction in helping vulnerable women. Her message is clear: respect and support all lives, regardless of education or economic status.

"I get a lot of gratification by deploying my skills as a social worker with Humana People to People India" said Jyoti. Jyoti's message to all women is: "One must be educated, but we must respect even those who are not educated."



The Need for Early Detection and Prevention

With nearly 2 lakh new cases of kidney failure diagnosed annually in India, Chronic Kidney Disease is a growing health concern, writes ABHI SINGHAL



Nearly 210000 new cases of kidney failure are diagnosed annually in India highlighting the growing burden of Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD). A research paper 'Journey of a Patient with CKD in India' published by Kidney 360, a Nephrology Journal reveals that CKD is often diagnosed late in India. This delay stems from a lack of awareness and the absence of noticeable symptoms particularly with higher incidences of interstitial nephritis and CKD of unknown origin.

Our kidneys the silent workhorses of the body play an important role in filtering waste and maintaining overall health. World Kidney Day observed on March 12th every year, serves as a crucial reminder of their importance and the need to combat the growing prevalence of kidney disease.

Recently marking this significant day medical professionals highlighted the critical need for proactive kidney care. Dr Vikas Agarwal, Director & HOD - Robotic Urology, Kidney Transplant, Uro Oncology, Andrology & Male Infertility Kidney Transplant, Akash Healthcare speaking on the occasion emphasised that kidney health through exercise, hydration, and a vegetarian diet while avoiding junk food and preservatives. Early signs include swelling and fatigue, but routine kidney function and urine tests ensure early detection, especially for diabetics and hypertensives.

Dr Vikas Agarwal said, "If you talk about Indian transplant numbers, it goes around fifteen thousand per year, and most of them are living-related donors. If we talk about kidney health, we need to exercise daily, have a routine walk, and drink a lot of water to stay hydrated. We should decrease the amount of salt and sugar in our diet, consume more vegetarian food, and avoid junk food and preservatives."

Early Signs - If we talk about the early signs of kidney issues, swelling may occur, such as feeling your ring becoming tight or experiencing swelling in your legs, hands, or fingers. Other signs include early tiredness, low energy, and urine-related issues like frothy urine or microscopic abnormalities in a urine test.

Precautions - Diet and hydration play a crucial role in preventing kidney diseases. Proper hydration helps flush out waste and excess salt, reducing the risk of kidney stones and ensuring proper kidney function. A vegetarian diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables helps prevent kidney disease, while junk food, soft drinks like Coca-Cola, and alcohol should be avoided.

Most kidney diseases are diagnosed late due to a lack of awareness. Since we have two kidneys, they continue functioning until more than 50% of their capacity is lost, leading to late symptoms. The best way to detect kidney disease early is through a kidney function test and a urine routine test. Otherwise, symptoms appear only when significant damage has occurred, such as swelling around the eyes or extreme fatigue."

McLaren's Lando Norris wins Australian Grand Prix

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Melbourne

McLaren's Lando Norris has won a chaotic rain-affected Australian Grand Prix, his first at Albert Park, with the Brit just managing to stay ahead of Red Bull's Max Verstappen following a third safety car late in Sunday's race.

Lewis Hamilton had a miserable Ferrari debut. The seven-time champion finished 10th and was annoyed by constant radio messages from his pit team.

Norris started the season-opening race, Melbourne's first wet race since 2010, from pole position. But, while he initially came under increasing pressure from Piastri, who set a series of fastest laps until his papaya team told him to hold position, the Australian spun at the penultimate corner on lap 44 as the rain intensified and dropped down the order.

A late race fightback helped Piastri recover to take ninth place including passing Hamilton on the final lap and two championship points. Verstappen finished 0.895 of a second behind Norris after starting from third on the grid, and took advantage of Piastri's misfortune and the



final safety car and tire stops. Mercedes' George Russell closed out the top-three.

"I knew I had a good pace, but I made one mistake in turn six and he got me in the DRS and the DRS around here is probably like a second or something so that allowed it to keep staying within that second," said Norris, who scored McLaren's 12th win in Australia to steal the outright record from Ferrari.

"I know what I'm capable of, I know what I can do, but obviously it's just round one, so we need to go and do it again next weekend and then continue from there. A long season ahead, we've just got to keep our head down and keep pushing."

Williams endured a mix bag, with Alex Albon securing his best result since Abu Dhabi 2020, and new recruit Carlos Sainz who won here last year driving for Ferrari out at the final turn on the opening lap. Mercedes was thrilled to get two cars in the top five, with Russell onto the podium, his first since winning in Las Vegas last year. Rookie Andrea Kimi Antonelli, who replaced Hamilton at the silver squad, showed his class with a superb fightback drive from 16th on the grid, following his Q1 exit, to finish fifth.

Aston Martin's Lance Stroll also made the best of the chaotic conditions to move up from 13th to sixth, ahead of Sauber's Nico Hulkenberg, bringing home eight points in what has been a difficult weekend for the green team with its car uncompetitive in dry running.

Ferrari is the most successful constructor at the Australian Grand Prix, with 11 wins since its first in 1987, but it will leave Melbourne disappointed with just five points to show after Charles Leclerc finished eighth and Hamilton 10th.

The Scuderia was seen as a potential championship challenger ahead of the season start and has plenty of work to do ahead of the Chinese Grand Prix next week. The Melbourne race had a thrilling start with Racing Bull's Isack Hadjar out on the formation lap, and Alpine's Jack Doohan joined Sainz in crashing out on the opening lap.

There were just 14 finishers, after Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso hit the turn eight barriers on lap 34, while Red Bull's Liam Lawson and Sauber's Gabriel Bortoleto went into the barriers and out of the race 10 laps from home in the treacherously wet conditions.

New Zealand beat Pakistan by nine wickets

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Christchurch

A new era for Pakistan white ball cricket got off to a rough start on Sunday with a nine wicket loss to New Zealand in the first of five Twenty20 internationals. First time captain Salman Ali Agha-led a new look team into the match which followed Pakistan's poor performance at home in the 50-overs Champions Trophy and began its buildup to the 2026 T20 World Cup.

The Pakistan batting crumbled against the New Zealand pace attack and the tourists were all out for 91 in 18.4 overs, its fifth-lowest total in T20 internationals. New Zealand easily ran down that total, reaching 92-1 from 10.1 overs with Tim Seifert making 44 from 29 balls and Finn Allen 29 from 17.

Tim Robinson was 18 not out and took two runs from the first ball of the 11th over to complete the win. "It was obviously difficult and we weren't up to the mark," Ali Agha said. "They bowled really well. They were bowling in the right

areas and there was swing and seam for them as well. "But out batting wasn't up to the mark. We have won day before the next game and we will try to gather ourselves and be better in the next game."

Pakistan was in trouble from the start with the new opening pair of Mohammad Haris and Hasan Nawaz, stepping in for the veterans Mohammad Rizwan and Babar Azam, both dismissed without scoring in the first eight balls of the match.

They bowled really well. They were bowling in the right areas and there was swing and seam for them as well

—SALMAN ALI AGHA, PAKISTAN CAPTAIN

A fully fit Kyle Jamieson took 3-8 and Jacob Duffy 4-14 as Pakistan stumbled to 14-4 at the end of the six over powerplay. Jamieson and Duffy produced pace, bounce and swing on a brownish pitch at Hagley Oval and the Pakistan batters had no early response.

"It was really nice to be back on home

soil," said Jamieson who bowled 18 dot balls. "We had some pretty favorable conditions which I'm sure me and (Duffy) would take most places around the country. "It was nice to have those and just try to cash in as much as we could."

Salman and Khushdil Shah gave the Pakistan innings some impetus when they took 14 runs from the 10th over bowled by Ish Sodhi and 15 from the 11th bowled by Michael Bracewell to lift Pakistan from 28-4 after nine overs to 57-5 after 11. The Pakistan batters looked more at home against the spinners

But Duffy returned to dismiss Khushdil for 32 and the rest followed quickly with only three batters reaching three figures.

Seifert put New Zealand on course to a comfortable win, taking 12 runs from the third over and 14 runs off the fifth as New Zealand reached 43-1 in the power play. Allen, unusually subdued, scored only nine runs in the first six overs.

New Zealand was 90-1 after 10 overs, needing only 2 runs to win, when the umpires unaccountably called for drinks.

Bayern held to 1-1 draw at Union Berlin

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Munich

A mistake by young goalkeeper Jonas Urbig meant Bayern Munich dropped points for the second Bundesliga game in a row with a 1-1 draw at Union Berlin.

Bayern seemed on course for victory when Leroy Sané scored in the 75th minute after Bayern had struggled to break through Union's deep defensive line, but Urbig's error eight minutes later proved costly.

Urbig came off his line to deal with a deflected cross which looped high into the air, but he could only palm it to Union striker Benedict Hollerbach, who hit it in low to level the score.

Bayern's lead in the Bundesliga over Bayer Leverkusen increased to nine points, but Leverkusen could cut the gap to six with a win Sunday over Stuttgart. Union is 13th.

"We're not happy with the result but it wasn't a bad performance," Bayern coach Vincent Kompany said.

While Bayern has been strong in the

Champions League, beating Leverkusen 5-0 over two legs to reach the quarterfinals, its Bundesliga form has dipped. The draw with Union follows a 3-2 loss last week against Bochum.

The 21-year-old Urbig played both of those games because first-choice goalkeeper Manuel Neuer tore a calf muscle when celebrating a goal in the first leg against Leverkusen last week.

Leipzig punishes wasteful Dortmund Dortmund's disappointing Bundesliga season took another turn for the worse with plenty of missed chances in a 2-0 loss at Leipzig that left the club 11th in the 18-team league.

Three days after beating Lille to reach the Champions League quarterfinals, Dortmund looked a different team in a loss which dealt another blow to its hopes of qualifying for any European competition next year.

Xavi Simons made the difference for Leipzig, scoring on a rebound in the 18th minute and setting up Lois Openda to volley in the second goal in the 48th.

Dortmund came alive after that and

racked up 26 total shots in the game, but a mix of strong goalkeeping by Leipzig's Peter Gulacsi, poor finishing and bad luck three shots hit the crossbar or post prevented a comeback.

It was the fourth loss in six Bundesliga games since coach Niko Kovac took charge last month, and he could face more problems after midfielder Marcel Sabitzer went off with a potentially serious knee injury. Leipzig moved up to fifth after its first Bundesliga win in more than a month and only its third victory in 11 league games since the new year.

Champions League-chasing Mainz clings on Mainz earned a 2-2 draw with Freiburg despite a first-half red card but its efforts to qualify for the Champions League for the first time were still dented. Third-place Mainz twice took the lead with goals from Jonathan Burkardt and Andreas Hanche-Olsen and ended Freiburg's run of not having conceded in six games but Freiburg leveled each in the second half. Mainz had Dominik Kohr sent off just before halftime for a foul as the last defender.

Early wickets of Shafali, Lanning turned match for us: Edwards

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Mumbai

Mumbai Indians head coach Charlotte Edwards said the early wickets of Delhi Capitals' skipper Meg Lanning and opener Shafali Verma helped her team win the Women's Premier League final here.

Lanning (13) and Shafali (4) departed with just 17 runs on the board as DC ended up at 141 for nine while chasing 150. "150, we knew we were a little bit light, but in a final, it's always worth a little bit more. Shafali didn't come out like she normally does, and I knew straightaway that potentially we were in with a chance, because if we could get her wicket," Edwards said in the post-match press conference on Saturday night.

Edwards said the Capitals were a bit cagey in their chase, and it made things easier for her side. "It probably fell in our hands a little bit but that was a bit short, and potentially they went about it a bit slower than they normally do."

"The opening partnership of Lanning and Shafali has been our curse over the last few years, if I'm honest, so I was really pleased to see the back of those two batters early. It was a real team performance," she added.

Edwards lauded MI skipper Harmanpreet Kaur for making an important 66 off 44 balls that led her side to a

competitive total.

"She's been really calm. She's deeply competitive, so clearly she wanted to win another title here, and she did everything in her power to do that with the innings she played. She's great around the group, she brings out the best in our young players, and works brilliantly with all our overseas and experienced players," she said. Edwards also praised all-rounders Nat-Sciver Brunt and Hayley Matthews for making heavy contributions throughout the tournament.

Brunt was the highest run-getter in the WPL 2025 with 523 runs and Hayley shared the top wicket-taker spot with teammate Amelie Kerr, taking 18 wickets apiece.

"I think Hayley's been exceptional, and Nat Sciver-Brunt has been absolutely amazing, and to have that kind of experience around Harman, I think it really frees her up to play the way that she's played," she said.

The former England skipper also patted MI players for maintaining intensity despite playing four matches inside six days.

"To play four games in six days, yeah, I mean, it's been fantastic to see how the players have backed those performances up, and to come out here on the big stage and still give that energy to the performance, you know, I'm truly proud," she said.

Having family around helps player to recover from on-field disappointments, says Kohli

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Bengaluru

Star batter Virat Kohli supported the presence of players' families on tours, saying he would always prefer having personal support around him to deal with tough and intense days on the field, instead of sulking alone in his hotel room. A BCCI directive which was issued after India's 1-3 Test series defeat against Australia had curtailed the family time of players for no longer than 14 days on tours exceeding 45 days.

The wife, children or girlfriends of players could be with them for a maximum of one week on shorter tours.

"The role of family is very difficult to explain to people...how grounding it is to just come back to your family every time you have something which is intense, which happens on the outside," said Kohli during RCB's Innovation Lab summit which concluded here on Saturday.

"I don't think people have an understanding of what value it brings," Kohli said having the family around would help a player to recover from on-field disappointments that much quicker. "I don't want to go to my room and just sit alone and sulk. I want to be able to be normal. Then you can really treat your game as something that is a responsibility. "Not in a vague sense, but in a very real way that



you finish your commitment and then you come back to your house, you're with family, and absolutely normalcy in your house and normal family life goes on.

"So, for me, that is absolutely a day of immense pleasure. I won't miss any opportunities to go out and spend time with my family whenever I can," said Kohli. The 36-year-old was "disappointed" because people with no real connection with such issues have been involved in such discussions.

"I feel quite disappointed about that

because it's like people who have no control over what's going on are brought into conversations and put out at the forefront of that, 'oh, maybe they need to be kept away.' And if you ask any player, do you want your family to be around you all the time? You'll be like, yes," he said.

"Support system from the team's point of view wasn't tough. Convincing my mom what I was doing was way harder. She was very disappointed in the fact that I wasn't eating any parathas and I was looking weak on the field," he said.

Jack Draper knocks off Carlos Alcaraz to reach BNP Paribas open final

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Indian Wells

Jack Draper toppled two-time defending champion Carlos Alcaraz 6-1, 0-6, 6-4 to reach the BNP Paribas Open final. The 13th-seeded Draper will face 12th-seeded Holger Rune on Sunday. Rune beat fifth-seeded Daniil Medvedev 7-6, 6-4 in the first semifinal for his 150th tour-level victory.

In the women's final Sunday, top-seeded Aryna Sabalenka will play 17-year-old Mirra Andreava. They won semi-final matches Friday night in chilly conditions.

Draper ended Alcaraz's 16-match winning streak in the ATP Masters 1000 event in the California desert. The 23-year-old English left-hander set to break into the top 10 in the world for the first time Monday won last year in Vienna and Stuttgart for his lone tour titles. He's 2-3 against Alcaraz. Alcaraz, seeded second, missed a chance to become the youngest player to win three consecutive singles titles at any ATP Tour event and just the third to do it at Indian Wells. The 21-year-old Spanish star won in Rotterdam in February for his 17th ATP Tour title.

The 21-year-old Rune, from Denmark, snapped a seven-match losing streak in semifinals. He's 2-2 against Medvedev.

Real Madrid 2-1 win over Villarreal in Spanish League

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Barcelona

After a slow start to his Real Madrid career, Kylian Mbappe has already surpassed one of the club greats.

Mbappe scored twice in Madrid's 2-1 comeback win over Villarreal on Saturday to take his tally to 31 goals in all competitions this season one more than Brazil striker Ronaldo managed in his first campaign at the club. It also helped Madrid open up a three-point lead atop the Spanish league over Barcelona, which has played two games less.

Long gone are the scoring troubles Mbappé endured in his first months at Madrid. Having surpassed Ronaldo's tally from 2002-03, the former Paris Saint-Germain player is now closing in on the 33 goals that Cristiano Ronaldo scored in his first season with Madrid in 2009-10.

"They are legends who marked eras with the club," Mbappé said about the two Ronaldos. "If I score more goals than Ronaldo and Cristiano it doesn't mean that I am better, just that my first season is better. Scoring goals is important, but it is even more so if we win La Liga, the Champions League and the Copa del Rey."

His double at fifth-placed Villarreal took Mbappé's La Liga tally to 20 goals, only one fewer than Barcelona's Robert



Lewandowski in the domestic competition. Leading the comeback Villarreal made it a pulsating game as it attacked in waves with Alex Baena and Nicolas Pepe helping create a series of chances. Thibaut Courtois made three good stops for Madrid to deny Pepe, Ayoze Pérez, and Pape Gueye in the first half.

But Villarreal paid at the other end

inside the six-yard box after it had ricocheted off players in a packed area.

Mbappé leveled in the 17th after he teed up teammate Brahim Díaz for a shot that was saved by goalkeeper Diego Conde, and the ball fell to the France striker to rifle home. Mbappé was on the scoreboard again in the 23rd when Villarreal's defense lost track of him at the top of the area. He received a pass from Lucas Vázquez and had all the time he needed to place a shot into the right corner.

Halftime substitute Thierno Barry and Foyth both squandered scoring opportunities early in the second half before Madrid tightened its defense to see out the game.

Carlo Ancelotti left Vinícius Júnior and Antonio Rudiger on the bench until the final half hour - with Luka Modric going on shortly after - as the Madrid coach rotated his lineup three days after its grueling Champions League victory over Atletico Madrid that went to a penalty shootout.

"This was an important and difficult game against one of the best teams in the league," Mbappé said. "After the game against Atletico and its added time it was very tough today but we knew we had to win. We showed character and that we wanted this win."

AC Milan beat Como 2-1 in Serie A

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Milan

Christian Pulisic scored again to help AC Milan earn another comeback victory in Serie A with a 2-1 home win over Como. Tijjani Reijnders set up Pulisic's second-half equalizer before netting the winner himself in the 75th minute. It was Pulisic's third goal in two matches, taking the United States international to nine goals in Serie A and 15 in all competitions this campaign equaling his tally from his first season at Milan.

Milan moved up to seventh, five points below fourth-placed Juventus. Como remained seven points above the relegation zone. Pulisic's two goals last weekend helped Milan fight back to win 3-2 at Lecce and end a three-match losing streak.

It again went behind on Saturday, when Lucas Da Cunha drilled into the bottom left corner from the edge of the area in the 33rd minute. The Milan fans jeered loudly at halftime and it almost got worse for them four minutes after the restart but Da Cunha's second goal of the night was ruled out for offside.

Instead it was Milan which leveled four minutes later. Rafael Leão and Alex Jiménez combined on the left before

picking out Reijnders, who delicately dinked the ball over the top for Pulisic to sweep into the far bottom corner from a tight angle.

Reijnders also clipped the top of the crossbar before scoring the winner in the 75th minute, slotting home after being sent through on goal by a backheeled pass by Tammy Abraham. Como substitute Dele Alli's return to soccer lasted just nine minutes as he was shown a straight red card late on for a foul on Ruben Loftus-Cheek, shortly after coming off the bench for his first appearance in two years.

Lengthy goal wait ended Monza captain Armando Izzo scored his first goal in more than two years but it wasn't enough to secure a win as the last-place team drew 1-1 against fellow struggler Parma.

Izzo netted in the 60th minute but Parma substitute Ange-Yoan Bonny leveled six minutes from time with a solo effort.

Monza remained 10 points from safety while 17th-placed Parma inched three points clear of the relegation zone. Hellas Verona moved seven points above the drop after a free kick by Ondrej Duda handed it a 1-0 win at Udinese, ending the host's six-match unbeaten streak.