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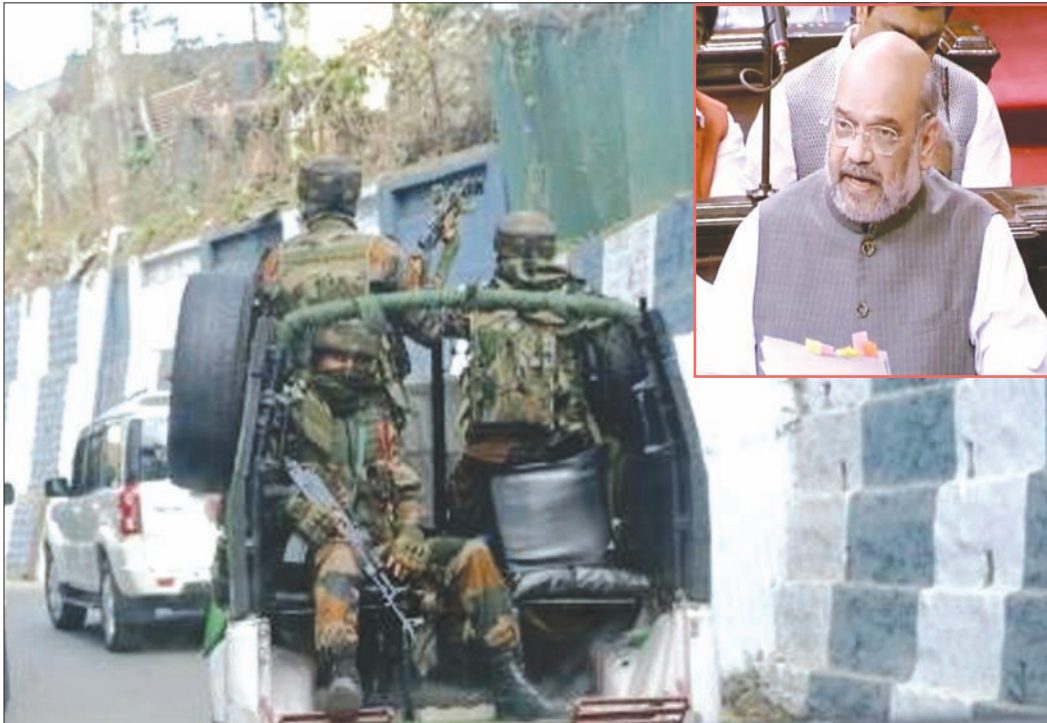
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DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG, FRIDAY, APRIL 01, 2022

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Centre announces AFSPA curtailment in 3 NE states

CMs hail move, civil society seeks more



NEW DELHI/GUWAHATI, March 31 (PTD): In a major outreach to the Northeast, Union Home minister Amit Shah on Thursday announced reduction of the disturbed areas under the contentious AFSPA in Assam, Nagaland and Manipur from April 1, a decision wholeheartedly welcomed by the political leadership of the three states but greeted with cautious optimism by others who wanted the 'draconian' law repealed in entirety.

The move to curtail the areas under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act came three months after the central government constituted a high-level committee to examine the possibility of lifting the AFSPA in Nagaland, where the killing of 14 civilians in an army operation in December 2021 in a case of 'mistaken identity' triggered massive protests.

In a series of tweets, Shah said: "In a significant step, GoI (Government of India) under the decisive leadership of PM Shri @NarendraModi Ji has decided to reduce disturbed areas under Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in the states of Nagaland, Assam and Manipur after decades."

The home minister said the reduction in areas

under AFSPA is the result of the improved security situation and fast-tracked development due to consistent efforts of the Modi government. He said several agreements were signed with militant groups to end insurgency and bring lasting peace to the Northeast.

"Thanks to PM @NarendraModi Ji's unwavering commitment, our North-Eastern region, which was neglected for decades, is now witnessing a new era of peace, prosperity and unprecedented development. I congratulate the people of North East on this momentous occasion," he said.

The AFSPA has been in force for decades in the three Northeastern states to assist the armed forces operating there to tackle insurgency.

The AFSPA empowers security forces to conduct operations and arrest anyone without a warrant besides giving immunity from arrest and prosecution to the security forces even if they shoot someone dead.

There have been innumerable protests for complete withdrawal of the law from the Northeast as well as Jammu and Kashmir for its alleged 'draconian' provisions.

Manipur's human rights activist Irom Chanu Sharmila waged the most remarkable fight

against the law with her hunger strike that lasted 16 years, before she gave up her peaceful resistance on August 9 in 2016.

The disturbed area notification under AFSPA was completely removed from Tripura in 2015 and Meghalaya in 2018.

The disturbed area declaration is in force in the entire Manipur (except for Imphal municipality area) since 2004. With Thursday's decision, 15 police station areas of 6 districts of Manipur will be excluded from the disturbed area notification.

"This historic decision is a result of the robust development and improved security situation under various initiatives taken up by Hon'ble PM Shri @NarendraModi Ji in the North East. "This decision will lead to a new era of peace, prosperity and development in Manipur yet again," said Manipur chief minister N Biren Singh in a series of tweets. "Grateful to GoI under the leadership of @PMOIndia Shri @Narendramodi ji & @AmitShah ji for reducing disturbed areas under AFSPA in the states of Nagaland, Assam & Manipur. This is a significant development towards bringing stability, security & prosperity to the North East region," Nagaland chief minister Neiphiu Rio, (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Upendranath Brahma remembered



HT Correspondent

HOWRAGHAT, March 31: Karbi Anglong, All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and ABSU, Howraghat Regional Committee celebrated the 99th birth anniversary of Bodofa Upendranath Brahma at Dumukhi Jaljuri Village on the premises of Iradei Bodo Medium High School in Karbi Anglong.

The day-long programme was observed by unfurling the flag in the morning by ABSU's Karbi Anglong district president, Jonas Basumatary. Lamps were lit in front of the photo of Bodofa Upendranath Brahma which was led by ABSU vice president, Kalyan Rabha. Afterwards, an Open Session was held. On the occasion, president of Karbi Anglong district Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Shantiram Basumatary, advisor, Suresh Basumatary, local leaders, students, teachers and locals were present.

Withdrawal of AFSPA, 'precious Bihu gift' for Assam: CM

GUWAHATI, March 31 (PTD): Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday welcomed the Centre's decision to withdraw the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 completely from 23 districts and partially from one district of the state, saying Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home minister Amit Shah have given a precious 'Rongali Bihu' gift to the people by withdrawing it from 60 per cent of the state's territory.

It has been removed from those areas where it is not required any longer and is in force in areas "where the situation is yet to improve to the satisfaction of the government," the chief minister told a press conference here.

The AFSPA empowers security forces to conduct operations and arrest anyone without any prior warrant besides giving immunity from arrest and prosecution to the security forces if they shoot someone dead.

NDRF sensitises IWTD staff on safety measures

JORHAT, March 31: With the objective to prevent boat mishaps like the one that happened off Nimatighat here on September 8 last year, the Jorhat district administration and the District Disaster Management Authority organised a two-day sensitisation programme on March 30-31 for employees and staff of Inland Water Transport Directorate at the Jorhat Circuit House.

A district administration official informed that in the two-day programme the participants were told about safety measures to be adopted while plying of vessels in the Brahmaputra.

The official stated that a team from Guwahati-based 1st Battalion of NDRF led by Commandant



The Act will continue to remain in force in nine districts of Upper Assam and the Hill districts along with the Lakhimpur sub-division of Cachar district, Sarma said.

The nine districts are Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sibsagar, and Charaideo, he said.

"This is a historic and bold step

taken by the Prime Minister and Home Minister as the Act was in force since 1990 and it was extended 62 times since then by the state government," he said.

The situation in the areas from where the AFSPA has not been withdrawn is in a "transit state and a call will be taken to withdraw it from these areas in due time", Sarma said. (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Organisations join hands to strengthen ASDC

DIPHU, March 31: Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), Diphu District Committee, Karbi Nimso Chingthur Asong (KNCA), Diphu Regional Committee and Karbi Students Association, Diphu District Committee held a joint extended meeting at the ASDC Central Committee office here on Thursday, to discuss measures for strengthening the ASDC party and its allied organisations KNCA and KSA in Singhason, Dhansiri and Lumbajong Member of Autonomous Council (MAC) constituencies ahead of the upcoming Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council election. The meeting was presided by a presidium of ASDC, DDC president, Bidyasingh Kro, KNCA, DRC president, Promila Bepri and KSA, DDC leader Moniram Teron. President of ASDC, Chandra Kanta Terang and secretary, Daniel Teron urged party workers and leaders of KSA and KNCA to devote their time for the party activities to strengthen it at the village level. The leaders also asked party workers to prepare to face the upcoming KAAC election.

activities." DFO, Forest, East Division, Jaganath Rongpi informed that the vehicles were given to the Forest Department for the purpose of plantation supervision, forest protection, conservation and intensive patrolling. The CEM who also holds the charge of the Environment and Forest Department has done it for a very noble cause so that the Forest Department in Karbi Anglong can carry out efficient protection and conservation of forest.

The programme was attended by the deputy chairman of KAAC, Ritesh Engh and executive members (EMs), Ratan Teron, Amarsing Tisso, Mangalsing Timung, Lusing Teron, Pradeep Rongpi, Madhurya Dhekiak Phukan, Pradip Diphusa, Khansing Rongpi, Kache Rongpipi and others.

GMC polls postponed to April 22 after pleas from pol parties

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 31: The State Election Commission, Assam on Thursday rescheduled the polling date of Guwahati Municipal Corporation Election 2022 from April 19 to April 22.

Immediately after announcement of the schedule of the election, political parties and social organisations submitted representations and memorandums to the commission praying for postponement of the date of poll as the same falls within the seven days period of forthcoming Bohag Bihu festival in the state.

"In view of the developments, a meeting was convened with the political parties on March 31 in the office of the Assam State Election Commission to discuss representations, memorandums of the political parties in detail regarding postponement of the date of poll

and counting. There was consensus amongst the participants to postpone the poll by a few days to honour and celebrate the Bohag Bihu," State Election Commission officials said. "The State Election Commission, Assam having considered the Bohag Bihu being the main cultural festival of Assam and the date of poll falls within the 7 (seven) days period of Bohag Bihu Festival, revises the date of poll and counting of GMC Election, 2022," it added.

As per the new revised dates, now voting will be held on April 22 and counting to be done on April 24, 2022. The polling will be held for 60 seats, out of which 50% seats will be reserved for women. For the first time, Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) will be used in place of paper ballots for the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) polls.

Russian Foreign minister Lavrov arrives in India

NEW DELHI, March 31 (PTD): Russian Foreign minister Sergey Lavrov arrived in India on Thursday on a two-day official visit, his first trip to the country since Moscow launched its invasion of Ukraine last month.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Lavrov will meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Foreign minister S Jaishankar on Friday. A media advisory on Lavrov's visit issued by the Ministry of External Affairs has not mentioned any meeting between the Russian foreign minister and the Prime Minister.

People familiar with the preparations for the talks said India is also likely to press for ensuring timely delivery of various military hardware as well as components of the S-400 missile systems by Russia. The Russian foreign minister arrived in India after concluding a two-day visit to China. His visit to India coincides with that of US deputy (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Diphu to experience power cuts on April 3

HT Bureau
DIPHU, March 31: The APDCL in a communiqué to the District Information & Public Relation officer mentioned that parts of Diphu town will have power cuts for 7 hours. APDCL said Lorulango, Pirbi Market, Mentila, ITI Road and 4kilo on Diphu-Lumding Road in Diphu town will remain cut off from power from 9 am in the morning till 4 pm in the evening of April 3. The APDCL said this is due to the assigned jungle clearing and maintenance task. The areas that will experience power cuts on April 3 are supplied by 33KV Lumding Feeder and 11KV Diphu-1 Feeder.

'The move will augment the capability of the department in combating poaching and other illegal activities'

CEM Tuliram Ronghang hands over vehicles to government department

HT Bureau
DIPHU, March 31: Chief executive member (CEM) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Tuliram Ronghang handed over five Mahindra Bolero SUVs to the Forest & Environment Department at Longnit for use in forest and wildlife protection.

The CEM formally handed over the vehicles and flagged them off at Kajir Ronghangpi Memorial Inspection Bungalow, Longnit.

Member of Autonomous Council (MAC) and chairman of Forest Development Board, KAAC, Richard Tokbi in a Facebook post said, "The inauguration of 5 nos of brand new Mahindra Bolero for Forest & Environment Department of KAAC, will augment the capability of the department in combating poaching and other illegal ac-



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Sensex, Nifty decline due to profit taking, close FY22 with over 18 pc gains

MUMBAI, March 31 (PTI): Benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty pared their early gains to settle lower in choppy trade on the last day of the 2021-22 fiscal on Thursday mainly due to profit-taking in Reliance Industries, Infosys and HDFC Bank after a three-day rally.

Ending its three-day winning run, the 30-share BSE Sensex declined by 115.48 points or 0.20 per cent to settle at 58,568.51 amid the expiry of monthly derivatives contracts. During the day, it touched a high of 58,890.92 and a low of 58,485.79.

The broader NSE Nifty declined by 33.50 points or 0.19 per cent to settle at 17,464.75 with 30 of its stocks ending with losses.

For 2021-22 fiscal, the BSE Sensex jumped 9,059.36 points or 18.29 per cent while the Nifty rallied 2,774.05 points or 18.88 per cent.

"Even as markets ended the last day of the financial year in a rather quiet mood, it has delivered a 19



per cent return this year on the Nifty with two sectoral indices - metals and media returning over 50 per cent this year.

"On the broader market as well, both the midcap-100 and smallcap-100 delivered over 25 per cent return this year. Such returns in a year when FPIs have pulled out big money highlights the confidence of the Indian investor amidst a slew of headwinds," according to

S Ranganathan, head of Research at LKP Securities.

Among the 30-share pack, Reliance Industries fell the most by 1.46 per cent. Wipro declined by 1.44 per cent, Dr Reddy's by 1.04 per cent and Sun Pharma by 0.60 per cent. HDFC Bank, UltraTech Cement and Infosys also ended down. On the other hand, HUL rose the most by 1.66 per cent, followed by Mahindra & Mahindra

by 1.59 per cent, IndusInd Bank by 0.93 per cent, Bharti Airtel by 0.80 per cent, ITC by 0.66 per cent and Titan by 0.5 per cent.

Axis Bank, which announced the acquisition of the India retail business of US-based Citi, spurred by 1.39 per cent.

In the previous trade, the 30-share BSE barometer index surged 740.34 points or 1.28 per cent to settle at 58,683.99. Similarly, the NSE Nifty climbed 172.95 points or 1 per cent to settle at 17,498.25.

In the broader market, the BSE smallcap index gained 0.31 per cent and the midcap jumped 0.29 per cent.

"Investors followed global market cues, which were mostly weak as most of them had rallied in the last few sessions on fall in crude oil prices and expectations of some solution to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. After seeing sharp gyrations during the week, investors exercised caution with a negative bias on the expiry day," said Shrikant Chouhan, head of Equity

Research (Retail), Kotak Securities Ltd. Harsh Parekh, technical analyst, Bonanza Portfolio, said "Indian equity indices opened today on a positive note on the back of a weak US dollar and FPI turning buyers. But indices turned volatile in afternoon trade and ended the three-day winning run."

In Asia, equity exchanges in Shanghai, Tokyo and Hong Kong ended lower, while Seoul settled with gains. Markets in Europe were mostly trading lower.

Stock exchanges in the US ended on a negative note in the overnight session.

Meanwhile, international oil benchmark Brent crude tumbled 5.09 per cent to USD 107.68 per barrel on reports that the US was considering releasing a record 180 million barrels of oil from strategic reserves.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were buyers as they bought shares worth ₹ 1,357.47 crore on a net basis on Wednesday, according to stock exchange data.

Toyota Kirloskar Motor announces price of Hilux at ₹ 33.99 lakh

HT Bureau GUWAHATI, March 31: Toyota Kirloskar Motor (TKM) announced the 'One Nation One Price' of Hilux at ₹ 33.99 lakh (ex-showroom) on Thursday. Launched earlier this year, the Hilux is aimed to fulfill the needs of the customers seeking an incredible lifestyle utility vehicle that is best suited for off-roading adventure drives on tough terrains, and everyday city use.

Commenting on the announcement of the price of the Toyota Hilux, Tadashi Asazuma, executive vice-president of Toyota Kirloskar Motor, said, "Today, we are happy to announce the price of the Hilux. Ever since its launch, the sophisticated Hilux has managed to win the admiration and hearts of the customers with good responses. With our 'customer first' approach, drawing inspiration from the lifestyles of the people, our offering in the whole new lifestyle segment with Hilux is a step ahead to deliver mass happiness to all. We are grateful to our valued customers

for placing their confidence in our brand. The Toyota Hilux is the epitome of world-class engineering, unparalleled safety, and best-in-class comfort, all perfectly channelled to create the incredible lifestyle utility vehicle for those who enjoy adventure, thrill, and creating enduring memories with friends and family."

Hilux's global reputation as a powerful performer is attributed to its rigid Innovative Multi-purpose Vehicle (IMV) platform and a powerful powertrain system with a 2.8 L Four Cylinder Turbo-Diesel Engine & available in an option of 6-Speed Automatic or 6-Speed Manual Transmission. In addition to a variety of remarkable features coupled with a robust engine, the Hilux also offers exceptional endurance, low maintenance cost, and great practicality for a variety of useful purposes. Furthermore, the Hilux's water wading capability of 700mm makes it suitable for driving through Indian trails, setting new standards in its off-road capability.

Jaguar Land rover announces 2030 sustainability targets

HT Bureau GUWAHATI, March 31: Jaguar Land Rover has committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions across its operations by 46 per cent by 2030. In addition, the company will cut average vehicle emissions across its value chains by 54 per cent, including a 60 per cent reduction throughout the use phase of its vehicles. The goals, which are approved by the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi), confirm the company's pathway to a 1.5°C emissions reduction in line with the Paris Agreement. The commitment by Jaguar Land Rover meets the most ambitious goal set in Paris.

By the end of the decade, Jaguar Land Rover will reduce its direct greenhouse gas emissions across vehicle manufacture and operations by 46 per cent in absolute value compared to a 2019 baseline. The company has also committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions per vehicle by an average of 54 per cent across the entire value

chain, including a reduction of 60 per cent in the vehicle use phase. These targets represent Jaguar Land Rover's commitment to 2030, followed by a second-decade ambition for net-zero emissions across the supply chain, product, and operations by 2039, as part of its Reimagine strategy. To achieve this, the company will decarbonise across design and materials, manufacturing operations, supply chain, electrification, battery strategy, circular economy processes, and up to end-of-life treatment.

Alberto Carrillo Pineda, managing director, Science-Based Targets at CDP, one of the Science-Based Targets initiative partners, said, "We congratulate Jaguar Land Rover on setting science-based targets consistent with limiting warming to 1.5C, the most ambitious goal of the Paris Agreement. By setting ambitious science-based targets grounded in climate science, Jaguar Land Rover is taking action to prevent the most damaging effects of climate change."

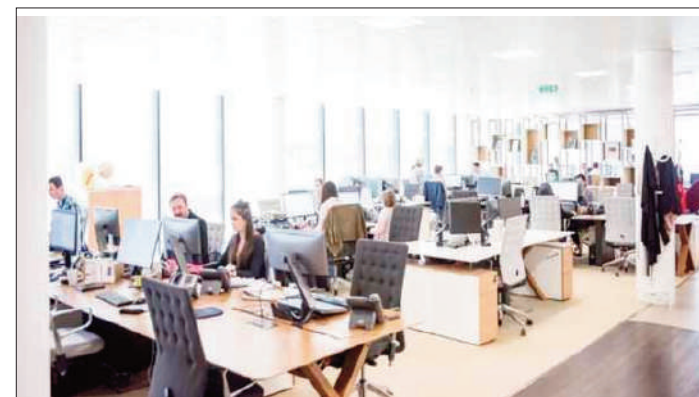
More workers return to offices in Delhi-NCR, Mumbai & Pune: Report

NEW DELHI, March 31 (IANS): As India reopens after a hiatus of two years, cities like Delhi-NCR, Mumbai and Pune have seen employees returning to workplaces at a relatively faster rate, a new report showed on Thursday.

Domestic companies have been at the forefront of bringing employees back to offices in a phased manner.

Service-oriented markets such as Bengaluru and Hyderabad, which have a strong technology base, have also seen a steady return of employees to their workplaces, according to the report by global real estate consultancy firm Colliers.

"We are seeing companies opening offices with greater fervour only now. Q2 2022 will be a crucial period as we expect more companies to open up workplaces



to their employees through a hybrid model," said Ramesh Nair, CEO, India and managing director, Market Development, Asia, Colliers.

"We have already started seeing companies encouraging in-person team meetings, team huddles and brainstorming meets that were

done virtually over the last two years," he added.

The overall market is seeing a surge in workplaces opening in the last few months after the diminishing impact of the third wave of Covid-19, and good vaccination coverage among the eligible population.

Bajaj Finserv launches 3rd edition of 'Savdhaan Rahein, Safe Rahein' campaign

HT Bureau GUWAHATI, March 31: Bajaj Finserv Limited launched its 'Savdhaan Rahein, Safe Rahein' digital campaign that aims to educate consumers and the general public about the various kinds of frauds in the financial services space. The campaign's third edition comes live across all the social media platforms of Bajaj Finserv Limited and Bajaj Allianz General Insurance Company Limited (BAGIC). The campaign highlights critical points for consumers such as verifying the policy information from official websites only; verifying the caller and never forgoing your insurance policy for attractive offers, never paying insurance premiums in cash directly to the agency/agent; among others. For the policyholders of Bajaj Allianz General Insurance Company Limited, the company also highlighted the importance of visiting BAGIC's nearest branches or its official website to verify policy-related information and even check the do's and don'ts of engaging with unofficial/unknown intermediaries through a carefully select sequence of repositories.

Petrol, diesel prices raised again



NEW DELHI, March 31 (IANS): State-owned oil marketing companies (OMC) on Thursday raised the prices of petrol and diesel for the ninth time in the last 10 days.

These prices were revised for the very first time on March 22, after a gap of more than four months. Notably, the selling price includes state levies, central excise and cess, amongst others. In New Delhi, the prices were increased again by 80 paise per litre.

As per pump prices, petrol now costs ₹ 101.81 per litre and diesel ₹ 93.07 per litre in the national capital. In the financial capital Mumbai, prices were hiked to ₹ 116.72 per litre for petrol and diesel to ₹ 100.94 per litre. Till March 22, fuel prices were steady since November 2021 when the Centre reduced excise duty on petrol and diesel by ₹

5 and ₹ 10 per litre, respectively. The OMCs revise the transportation fuel cost based on various factors such as rupee to US dollar exchange rate, cost of crude oil and demand of fuel amongst others.

Resultantly, the final price includes excise duty, value added tax and dealer's commission. It was widely expected that the OMCs will revise the current prices due to high crude oil cost. Lately, crude oil prices have been volatile on fears of tight supplies due to sanctions against Russia in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine. The crude oil price range is a cause of concern for India as it may ultimately add ₹ 10-15 in petrol and diesel selling prices. At present, India imports nearly 85 per cent of its crude oil requirements.

Samsung launches ultra-portable projector for on-the-go generation

HT Bureau GUWAHATI, March 31: Samsung announced the launch of its all-new projector, smart speaker and ambient lighting device all rolled into one lightweight, portable device - The Freestyle, on Thursday. Targeted toward on-the-go Gen Z and millennial consumers, The Freestyle delivers first-of-its-kind technology and flexibility to deliver optimal viewing and entertainment for consumers looking to bring video and audio content, wherever they go.

The Freestyle, an ultraportable projector, will be available on Samsung's official online store Samsung Shop, and Amazon at a special price of Rs 84,990. Consumers can also avail of an instant cashback of Rs 5000. The Freestyle comes equipped with auto keystone, auto-leveling, and autofocus features, offering breath-taking picture quality. Auto keystone allows the device to automatically adjust its screen to any flat surface at any angle, providing a perfectly proportional image every time.

"With The Freestyle, we want to present a user experience that meets diverse preferences and lifestyle needs anywhere, anytime, by going beyond the limitations of space. The Freestyle is an ultra-portable projector that offers unlimited possibilities for instant entertainment be it indoors or outdoors, content viewing or ambient lighting, gaming or music - all you need to do is just tilt and go. Its unique form factor will change the way you play. We are confident that The Freestyle will bring a new level of entertainment to our consumers," said Mohandeep Singh, senior vice-president, Consumer Electronics Business, Samsung India.

India to import 100 tonne of uranium to power nuclear power plants in FY23

CHENNAI, March 31 (IANS): India will be importing 100 tonne of natural uranium and 133 units of fuel assemblies next fiscal, the government said. Replying to a question in the Lok Sabha on Wednesday, Jitendra Singh, minister of state for Personnel, Public Grievances & Pensions and Prime Minister's Office said 100 tonne of natural uranium in the form of uranium ore concentrate is scheduled to be imported during 2022-23. He also said 133 numbers of fuel assemblies are scheduled to be imported next fiscal. Singh said the Indian government has entered into an agreement with the government of Russian Federation for supply of fuel for Russian reactors at Kudankulam, throughout the operation of power units. India also entered into a uranium Purchase Agreement with Canada, Kazakhstan, Russia and Uzbekistan, Singh said. As on date, an adequate stockpile of imported Natural uranium is available at the Nuclear Fuel Complex (NFC), for supply of fuel to various reactor sites under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, he added. During the fiscal 2021-22, no nuclear fuel was imported by India. On the other hand, during FY21, 999.82 tonne natural uranium ore concentrate was imported from Kazakhstan for ₹ 572.44 crore and 1,000.479 tonne was imported from Canada for ₹ 618.95 crore, Singh said.

Centre's fiscal deficit touched 82.7 pc of full year target at end of February

NEW DELHI, March 31 (PTI): The Centre's fiscal deficit at the end of February stood at 82.7 per cent of the full year budget target, mainly on account of higher expenditure, according to government data released on Thursday. In the last financial year, the fiscal deficit or gap between the expenditure and revenue was 76 per cent of the Revised Estimate (RE) of 2020-21. In actual terms, the deficit stood at ₹ 13,16,595 crore at the end of February this year, as per the data released by the Controller General of Accounts (CGA). The central government's total receipts stood at ₹ 18.27 lakh crore or 83.9 per cent of the RE of Budget 2021-22. It was 88.2 per cent of the RE of 2020-21 in the corresponding period.

Interest rates on small savings schemes unchanged for first quarter of FY23

NEW DELHI, March 31 (PTI): The government on Thursday kept interest rates on small savings schemes, including NSC and PPF, unchanged for the first quarter of 2022-23 due to an elevated level of inflation. The interest rate has not been revised since the first quarter of 2020-21. Public Provident Fund (PPF) and National Savings Certificate (NSC) will continue to carry an annual interest rate of 7.1 per cent and 6.8 per cent, respectively, in the first quarter. "The rate of interest on various small savings schemes for the first quarter of the financial year 2022-23, starting from April 1, 2022, and ending on June 30, 2022, shall remain unchanged from the current rates applicable for the fourth quarter (January 1, 2022, to March 31, 2022) for FY 2021-22," the Finance ministry

said in a notification.

Interest rates for small savings schemes are notified on a quarterly basis. The one-year term deposit scheme will continue to earn an interest rate of 5.5 per cent in the first quarter of the next fiscal, while the girl child savings scheme Sukanya Samridhi Yojana account will earn 7.6 per cent. The interest rate on the five-year senior citizens' savings scheme will be retained at 7.4 per cent. The interest on the senior citizens' scheme is paid quarterly. The interest rate on savings deposits will continue to be 4 per cent per annum. Term deposits of one to five years will fetch an interest rate in the range of 5.5-6.7 per cent, to be paid quarterly, while the interest rate on five-year recurring deposits will earn a higher interest of 5.8 per cent.

Jal Shakti Ministry bestows ITC Limited with 'Best Industry for CSR Activities' award for water conservation

NEW DELHI, March 31 (IANS): Diversified Indian conglomerate ITC Limited accomplished yet another distinguished feat in its continuous pursuit of transforming lives and landscapes by receiving the first prize for 'Water Management and Conservation' at the third edition of the National Water Awards by the Jal Shakti ministry, government of India.

The company was ranked first in the category of 'Best Industry for CSR Activities'. The award recognising ITC's sustained efforts in water stewardship was presented by President Ram Nath Kovind in the presence of Union Water Resources and Development minister, Gajendra Singh Shekhawat along with other dignitaries.

For several decades, ITC has been running a large-scale Inte-



grated Water Stewardship programme that aims to provide access to water to support livelihoods and create a positive water balance through supply side augmentation and demand side management. This is being enabled through community-based participation in planning and execution of intervention based on

scientific water balance assessments.

The programmes are also aligned to the "Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana".

The esteemed award is a recognition of ITC's unwavering commitment to augmenting environmental and societal resources in line with chairman San-

jiv Puri's Sustainability 2.0 Vision that calls for inclusive strategies that can support even more livelihoods and pursue newer pathways to fight climate change.

The company's Integrated Water Stewardship programme has cumulatively covered more than 1.2 million acre of water-stressed area across 38 districts in 14 states, benefiting more than 3,75,000 households. The initiative has supported 7.3 million person days of livelihood.

"This is a proud moment for Team ITC, which has been pursuing an integrated and holistic approach towards ensuring water security for stakeholders over the last two decades. Today's award is a recognition of our large-scale efforts, including water harvesting through the restoration of existing structures, and construction of new structures as well as aligning to the

Indian government's vision of 'More crop per drop' through efficient water management and conservation," said Prabhakar Lingareddy, executive vice-president and head -- Social Investments, ITC Limited.

"It was indeed a privilege and honour to receive the prestigious award from the President in the presence of Union Jal Shakti minister and other dignitaries. This award will indeed inspire us to strengthen our endeavours in water stewardship with more vigour and enthusiasm," he added.

ITC has put in place a three-pronged strategy for effective implementation of its water stewardship programme which includes a large-scale watershed development initiative that strengthens availability of water across 14 states through water harvesting structures.

Jothumma-Tribal Youth Conclave concludes



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, March 31: The three-day confluence of people and ideas in the Jothumma-Tribal Youth Conclave concluded on Thursday with the three-day programme which was held at Bodofa Cultural Complex in Kokrajhar. The event was organised by the government of Bodoland Territorial Region where delegates and representatives participated from different autonomous councils across the country including Ladakh District Hills Council, Leh.

Speaking during the concluding session, Bodoland Territorial Region executive member and chairman of the organising committee, Daobaisa Boro said that the Jothumma concluded successfully witnessing a deep and thorough discussion on the welfare and development aspects of the tribal people across the country.

"I am happy that we were able to host delegates from several autonomous councils in the Jothumma 2.0. The three-day event comprised plenaries covering topics, such as: constitutional safeguards of tribals in India, customary laws, gender justice, social entrepreneurship, climate change, and Sustainable Development Goals 2030," Boro said. Attending the concluding session as the chief guest, Dr Berlao Kharjee, political advisor to CEM, BTR said, "The colourful Jothumma 2.0 has pleasantly brought forth the onset of Bwisagu celebrations. It is good that interactions & discussions were held and relationships have been established amongst us as a result of this youth conclave." "The Jothumma 2.0 has brought in a large number of delegates from various autonomous councils. It was wonderful to have resource persons from all over the country and also participation from diverse tribal communities from India," said JD Herembeswar Basumatary, the chief convener of Jothumma 2.0. Delivering the vote of thanks, he said, "Let us move ahead by sharing our experiences and learnings from one another and respecting all of our very rich cultures, traditions and knowledge systems." The event ended with a proud rendition of the National Anthem by all the guests and participants.

Scientific Advisory Committee meeting held at KVK Sonitpur

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, March 31: The Scientific Advisory Committee Meeting of Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Sonitpur was held on Thursday at KVK Sonitpur, Tezpur-Napam campus under the chairmanship of Dr Prasad Chandra Deka, principal CEO. Project implementation unit-CBBO, Horticultural Research Station, Assam Agricultural University, Deputy commissioner Bhupesh Chandra Das in his address advised KVK, Sonitpur to work on medicinal and aromatic plants so that the raw materials requirement of Dabur and Patanjali can be fulfilled. He also emphasised the area expansion of litchi and advised KVK, Sonitpur to work in convergence mode.

Dr. Rajesh Kumar, director ATARI, Zone VI; Dr Prasanna Pathak, director of Extension Education, Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat and Dr Prabal Saikia, chief scientist, RARS, North Lakhimpur attended the meeting virtually and expressed their views for the upliftment of the farmers. Director of Research (Veterinary), AAU, Khanapara suggested including an animal science component in the action plan for 2022-23. Director of FMTTI, Kailash Nagle detailed the facilities offered by their institute.

Officials from line departments like DICC, DFDO, ASRLM, AIR, DAO, NERIWALM, Agriculture irrigation, executive engineer (Agri), officials from NGOs, BODs and members of FPCs, progressive farmers and farm women, entrepreneurs were also present in the meeting and shared their views. The action taken report of the last SAC meeting was presented by Angana Sarmah, SMS (Horticulture). The progress report (2021-22) and action plan (2022-23) were presented by Dr Arifa Momtaz Begum, in-charge of KVK, Sonitpur while a vote of thanks was offered by Dr Namita Dutta, SMS (Soil Science).

Agitated over murder, mob burns down police vehicle

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, March 31: An agitated mob burnt down a police vehicle parked at Kharsang police station on Wednesday in Arunachal Pradesh's Changlang district over the alleged murder of a 25-year-old woman. The protests demanding justice for the woman wanted the accused to be handed over to them. Over 100 people assembled in front of the police station in protest when it took an ugly turn as the protestors resorted to the torching of a police vehicle parked inside the police station premises.

According to reports, on March 7, a young woman went missing from Injan village. Later, her decomposed body was recovered following which police arrested two-person for their alleged involvement in the murder. Changlang SP Mihin Gumbo informed, "The situation is now under control in Kharsang. The locals are demanding capital punishment for both the accused. The woman failed to return to her home on March 7, and on March 11 a missing complaint was filed at Kharsang police station. As the investigation took its course, the decomposed body of the woman was recovered on March 30. We have successfully arrested both the accused and as the law shall take action against them," SP said.

Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma remembered in Kokrajhar

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, March 31: Peoples from the Bodo community remembered the contribution and dedication of Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma, former ABSU president on his 66th birth anniversary which was observed on Thursday at Thulungapuri Dotma Samadhi in Kokrajhar.

The anniversary was observed as Students' Day and was organised by ABSU central committee in association with Upendra Nath Brahma Trust (UNBT).

ABSU president Dipen Boro hoisted the union flag followed by a floral tribute to Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma on his tomb.

BTR executive member Daobaisa Boro and several leaders were present and offered floral tributes to the Bodofa.

ABSU president Dipen Boro said that Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma sacrificed his whole life for the welfare of the downtrodden communities including Bodo in the state of Assam and worked for their upliftment.

He said that the union has been observ-



ing the birth anniversary of Bodofa as Students' Day every year on March 31 to keep alive the ideology and philosophy of Bodofa.

An open discussion on the contribution

NTPC Bongaigaon generates sustainable power with involvement of stakeholders

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, March 31: The National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) Bongaigaon Salakati generating 750 MW has been generating sustainable power with inclusive involvement of all its stakeholders in entire Bodoland Territorial Region districts.

In a media interaction held on Thursday at NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati in Kokrajhar, senior management headed by Subrata Mandal, executive director, NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati spoke on the various operational and plant performance highlights of the station.

Mandal said that 2021 has been a year of stupendous achievement in all areas and the station has achieved more than 100% daily PLF for the first time by generating 18.25 MU (101.39 % PLF) on March 18, 2021 since its inception of all 3 units (previous best was 17.79 MU on March 17, 2021). The station also achieved its highest ever monthly PLF score of 75.86% in April 2021.

"The station has achieved lowest ever monthly specific oil consumption of 0.12 mi/kwh in July 2021. In the area of ash utilisation, the station achieved its highest ever daily ash utilisation of 2297.04 MT on March 29, 2022 and highest ever monthly ash util-



isation of 52,591 MT in March 2022. The safety parameters have been recognised at the apex level by the Union minister of Power at Shram Shakti Awards 2020-21 on November 7, 2021," he added.

Mandal also spoke of the FGD Technology coming up in the plant as a step to mitigate pollution. He added that NTPC Bongaigaon in the last Financial Year planted 40,000 saplings in and around the station and 900 kWp roof top solar plant has also been installed in the

plant. NTPC has also planted 20,000 saplings as a part of green initiative. "As a part of societal commitment and girl empowerment, NTPC Bongaigaon will also be starting a flagship program called Girls Empowerment Mission (GEM) this year in which 40 girls will be trained during the month of July," he added.

On Covid front, Mandal added that around 3,200 people including all employees, associates and people from nearby villages have been

vaccinated and an oxygen boosting and bottling plant has been inaugurated on October 7, 2021 to meet any kind of exigency.

He added that NTPC Bongaigaon will take necessary steps to vaccinate the younger ones who fall under the age group of 15-18 years in the coming days.

Mandal highlighted the spirit of 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav' and showcased how NTPC Bongaigaon has been celebrating the 75 years of Indian Independence.

Jorhat district agriculture officer passes away



HT Correspondent

JORHAT, March 31: In a sad turn of events, Gajendra Nath Sarmah, agriculture officer, Jorhat passed away at GMCH on Wednesday. Sarmah, who was a resident of Jagrita Nagar, Sarbaibandha, suffered a stroke at his office on Monday. He was 57. Sarmah leaves behind his wife, a son, a daughter, and many relatives. His demise has been widely mourned by the residents of Jorhat.

Online faculty development programme concludes at Gargaon College

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, March 31: A weeklong online faculty development programme with the theme 'Common Denominators: Reading and Writing Across Disciplines' was organised by IQAC, Gargaon College in collaboration with Centre for Writing and Pedagogy, Krea University, Andhra Pradesh from March 23 to 28.

Taking into consideration the challenges and stumbling blocks faced in the area of academic research, the faculty development programme (FDP) coordinated by Shyamolima Saikia, assistant professor in English, Gargaon College and Sayantan Datta, faculty associate at the Centre for Writing and Pedagogy, Krea University aimed at encouraging and facilitating teachers, researchers and students across disciplines to gain advance knowledge and skills on academic reading and writing.

In his inaugural address, Dr Sabyasachi Mahanta, principal, Gargaon College underscored the

importance of organising such programmes on the threshold of the adoption of the New Education Policy 2020 in the country, which is slated to bring about tremendous change in the role of teachers. He hoped that programmes such as this FDP will definitely benefit the teaching fraternity by enhancing their skills in keeping with the changing educational scenario.

Commenting on the changing scenario, Dr Anannya Dasgupta, director, Centre for Writing and Pedagogy, Krea University expressed hope that these kinds of programmes for working together with people across the country will yield positive results. She said the centre is engaged in developing pedagogic tools and methods where they pay attention to reading and writing not only in one specific area but across different disciplines. She added that workshops of this kind in fact help them in developing their tool kit.

Dr Anannya Dasgupta, Sayantan Datta, Sameer Abraham Thomas

and Pritha Chakrabarti from CWP, Krea University deliberated upon some essential skills and practices of reading and writing common to researchers across disciplines of humanities, social sciences and the sciences. Some of the areas covered in the programme were questions that drive research, how writing builds on close reading, importance of evidence to support argument, connecting texts to develop ideas, writing up field-notes, etc.

Dr Surajit Saikia, IQAC coordinator of the college said that programmes of this kind will hugely benefit participants and expressed a wish to collaborate again with Krea University for such initiatives in the future. The vote of thanks was offered by Dr Mrinal Ghosh, assistant professor in Commerce, Gargaon College.

The programme was able to garner response from more than 180 participants from several colleges and eminent institutions of the country.

NFR undertakes measures for safe running of trains

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 31: The health railway track is a vital aspect for safe running of trains. As a result of train movement, wear and tear of railway track is bound to occur and renewal of track components is indispensable. Hence, proper upkeep of railway track is of paramount importance. The Northeast Frontier Railway strives to ensure that railway track gets the required attention by undertaking various planned track renewal works. Rehabilitation of bridges with renewal of sleepers, rail and track contributes towards ensuring safe train movement along with various other parameters.

In this regard, track renewal of 406.86 CTR units has been carried out during the current financial year upto February, 2022. During the last financial year of 2020-21 upto February, 257.34 CTR units were carried out. This is an improvement of 58.10% in comparison to last year.



During the current year upto February 2022, railway sleepers of 109.62 km were renewed by replacing old ones. This is

86.52% more than the corresponding period of the 2020-21 financial year. Similarly, during the current 2021-22 fi-

ancial year upto February; rails of 297.24 kms were renewed against 198.57 kms done during the corresponding period of last year. This marks an improvement of 49.69% in comparison to last year.

For monitoring the health of railway tracks and to prevent rail fracture, USFD (Ultrasonic Flaw Detection) testing is vigorously carried out in railway tracks. NF Railway has also undertaken Flash Butt welding (which is a superior method of welding) of rail to make the rail joints in track more secure.

It can be mentioned that NFR is using various types of track machines for screening of ballast, changing of track sleeper and tamping of track, etc., to achieve safer and smoother running of trains over its jurisdiction.

The increased emphasis given on safety measures for railway track has led to safer running of trains with increased speed and better riding experience.

Pre-vocational training held under SSA concludes in Sonitpur

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, March 31: Eight Brothers Social Welfare Society, a non-governmental organisation operational in Sonitpur district successfully completed the pre-vocational training programme held under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Mission on Wednesday. The objective of the programme was to provide pre-vocational training to the learners of Special Training Centers that fall under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Mission, Assam. It was conducted in 7 lower primary schools in two blocks of Sonitpur district namely Balipara and Naduwar block during the period from March 1 to 30. The training included activities like toy making, craft work and various fine arts. For effective deliberation of the programme, Eight Brothers Social Welfare Society provided required resources and materials including hiring of professionals. Among others, Shyamalima Baruah, coordinator of Specialised Adoption Agency, Rakesh Das, social worker of Specialised Adoption Agency, Sonitpur, Biman Nath, counsellor, Family Counseling Centre, and Chandana Kashyap, project director of Ujjawala Scheme effectively cooperated to make the programme successful.



QUOTE OF THE DAY

A positive attitude causes a chain reaction of positive thoughts, events and outcomes. It is a catalyst and it sparks extraordinary results. - Wade Boggs

TMC's clarion call falls on deaf ears

Major opposition parties including the Congress and the Left, have responded negatively to Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee's call to put up a broad anti-BJP alliance. State Congress and CPI(M) leaders strongly question the TMC's true intent and especially the timing of its latest appeal, seeking a stronger Opposition consolidation against the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party at the Center. Contrarily, they have cited several instances to media persons, explaining how the TMC's tactics and decisions, whether in Parliament or the larger national political arena, had effectively divided the anti-BJP forces. West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee is presently in North Bengal attending a series of local programs and keeping track of developments. In most gatherings - whether addressing poor widows in urgent need of financial help or schoolgirls - she has strongly attacked the BJP's 'anti-people and anti-Constitutional policies,' from the 2002 Gujarat riots onwards.

Meanwhile, state Congress president Adhir Choudhury has questioned the TMC's credibility. "The party must clarify what it wanted in the name of achieving opposition unity," he said. Referring to the TMC's participation in the state Assembly elections in Goa and Tripura, he said, "Its candidates had succeeded in dividing the anti-BJP votes, which only helped instead of hindering the saffron party. The outcome of the elections and even a causal analysis of the poll stats made this amply clear." However, senior TMC leaders did not attach much importance to Choudhury's comments. They contended that major decisions at the national level among opposition parties were taken after discussions among top party leaders only. They felt Choudhury's stand might not necessarily be endorsed by central Congress leaders. Moreover, all through Choudhury's tenure as the state party president, Congress has become even weaker than before.

For the CPI(M), new party secretary Mohammad Salim not only endorsed the reservations within the Congress about the TMC but went further. He questioned the political antecedents of the TMC and what he saw as the strong links that existed between the party and the extreme right-wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which many regarded as the BJP's mother organisation. He cited instances of leaders of both organisations publicly praising /supporting each other on various issues earlier. There have been questions raised on the timing of the TMC's latest appeal as well. The CPI(M) leadership in Kerala for instance, says that the reasons for the TMC's latest appeal now must be understood. Much space in the letter written by Banerjee to non-BJP chief ministers has been used up by copious references to an autonomous official investigating agencies. Their current activities, the TMC alleged, threatened the very federal political structure of India, violating its Constitution, during the BJP's tenure. Mostly these were being conducted to harass and humiliate leading figures within the opposition, the party alleged. However, it remained unexplained why top TMC leaders like Abhishek Banerjee and Anubrata Mondal, repeatedly sought to dodge official summons from these agencies in connection with multiple cases of major financial corruption in recent days. No wonder Opposition leaders of all hues have referred to this and asked whether the TMC has issued its latest call for stronger anti-BJP unity now because the official agencies are knocking hard on the doors of its prominent leaders.

Inequality in access to learning has become greatest divider

By: Dr. Gyan Pathak

Inequality in access to learning, either physical or online classes, in the last two years of the Covid-19 crisis, which is now entering the third year, has now become the greatest divider of the society. Millions of students worldwide are yet to return in the classrooms while millions others just unable to access online classes, making them even unable to interact with their teachers and their peers, thus running risks of dropping out and permanent learning loss. The new report by UNICEF titled "Are Children Really Learning?" has found evidence of the number of children dropping out of school and permanent learning losses are poised to increase. The pandemic has hold back some 405 million school children from a full return to the classrooms, and 23 countries of the world are yet to fully reopen schools. The learning loss estimation included in the report mentions 34 countries including India. It said that 92 per cent of students lost at least one specific language ability, and 82 per cent lost at least one specific mathematical ability in India from the previous pre-pandemic year. On the basis of these early findings and simulations, it is reasonable to assume that prolonged school closures and other disruptions to education system brought on by the pandemic have led to substantial learning loss.

Learning loss is a decline in student knowledge and skills, which occurs when educational progress fails to occur at the same rate it has in previous years. The report has found evidence that younger students are more vulnerable than older ones to learning loss as a result of pandemic because young children are less likely to seek learning on their own because of their less advanced developmental and cognitive abilities. Learning losses, it says, can be very difficult to regain, especially for young children who fall behind, because of challenges to reintegrating them into education systems, especially when these systems don't pay sufficient attention to those most at risk. While examining readiness to learn outside the classroom, the report mentions lack of internet connection at home. The fact remains that 1.3 billion children in the world currently lack internet connectivity. The crisis has thus brought some urgency to the need to address the digital divide. The report also warns that even after the pandemic ends and all schools are able to fully reopen, there is likely to be a permanent shift to more digitized and other forms of remote learning. Its solution involves a range of issues from poverty, culture, illiteracy, technological progress and other functional difficulties to be resolved. With each passing day, the devastating impact of the pandemic on children's learning becomes more apparent. Widespread school closures and other barriers have amplified and compounded a pre-existing global learning crisis that already threatened the futures of millions of children around the world. As this report shows, even in the pre-pandemic days, the majority of children in countries analysed had not mastered foundational skills in either reading or numeracy by the time they reached Grade 3. Only 30 per cent of these children had foundational reading skills and just 18 per cent had foundational numeracy skills. Even one quarter of Grade 8 students did not have the skills to understand even Grade 2 textbooks. Now the pandemic has widened disparities and deepened inequity. Children from the poorest households, those involved in child labour, children with disabilities, and other marginalized groups are falling even further behind their peers in their learning. The report has estimated a loss of 2 trillion hours for school children. The study has also pointed out that 147 million children missed more than half of their in-class instruction over the past two years. In the countries analysed, the current pace of learning is so slow that it would take seven years for most schoolchildren to learn foundational reading skills that should have been grasped in two years, and 11 years to learn foundational numeracy skills. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that school children have learned the basics at all, in many cases.

In addition to data on learning loss, the report points to emerging evidence that shows many children did not return to school when their classroom reopened. When the world fails to educate its children, we all suffers, says UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell. "We cannot keep failing an entire generation of students. Only urgent action and investment by governments and other partners can stem the tide of learning loss. It is not enough simply to reopen schools. We need a concerted global effort to make education a top priority." As the pandemic enters its third year, we can't afford to go back to "normal". We need a new normal, she said, "getting children into classrooms, assessing where they are in their learning, providing them with the intensive support they need to recover what they've missed, and ensuring that teachers have the training and learning resources they need. ... The stakes are too high to do anything less." (IPA Service)

Mafia induced violence in West Bengal has a long political history



The Hon'ble Calcutta High Court's decision to entrust the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) with the power to probe the ghastly Birbhumi village massacre instead of leaving the job to the Bengal police, is commendable: it makes any cover-up job planned by the Trinamool Congress (TMC) more difficult. Also unexceptionable is the Court's insistence that the peoples' faith in due legal process must be restored - especially in a woefully misgoverned State!

Positive as such intent is, it is not yet certain that the depraved, politically-backed murderous mobs of Bengal will eventually be punished, going by past experience. The sad truth is that such horrendous political killings recur more frequently in Bengal than elsewhere in India, regardless of the administration in charge. A culture of bombs, guns and knives, punctuated by shocking massacres, prevails. Instances are too many: Sainbari murders, mass killings at Suchpur, Angria, Jharmachgram, Netaitala, Baranagar, Nandigram,....

For the record at Bogtui, the death toll is at least 8 (10 according to other estimates), including six women and two children. The disturbances began at around 8.30 p.m. on March 21, culminating in the most horrific violence. Most bodies remained unidentified, charred beyond recognition. Several houses had been attacked with bombs, the terrified inmates chopped alive by knives or sickles before being set on fire, their killers locking all exit points.

The police station was 10 minutes away. However despite repeated calls made on mobile phones no policeman came. Local TMC Bloc leader Anarul Hossain forbade their entry. Eye-witnesses say he also stopped Fire brigade personnel from intervening as they tried to put out the fires that broke out in 7/8 houses!

However it remained incomprehensible why the police or Firemen had to seek any permission from a TMC bloc President in the first during an outbreak of mob violence.

Locals accused Anarul of organizing the killings to revenge the death of his elder colleague Bhadu Sheikh, also of the TMC. Bhadu had been shot dead a few days ago. Most locals appeared mortally scared to talk about either Bhadu or Anarul (now under arrest). The latter incidentally claimed to be innocent and accused Anubrata Mondal of letting him down, without elaborating.

Bhadu by all accounts was no angel himself. A follower of Anubrata Mondal, he had risen from being a rickshaw puller to a local entrepreneur of considerable eminence, owning several houses, cars and other assets in a few years, with strong support from the TMC. Unconfirmed reports suggested his sudden affluence was the outcome of his ac-

tive involvement with local illegal sand mining, coal smuggling and sundry other rackets - all part of the TMC's infamous 'cutmoney culture' of illegal bribes and commissions from various social welfare schemes and any local economic activity.

The question is how people like Bhadu and Anarul move up the social ladder and achieve local eminence in parties like the TMC, which is led by a dynamic leader like Ms Banerjee and includes respectable public figures like Dr Amit Mitra, Saugata Ray or Bratya Basu?

The broad answer is, as a growing party the TMC needs and uses its 'Bahubalis' like Anubrata or Anarulas much as any other party. With special reference to the unwritten dominance of the gun and bombs culture, such men are considered 'assets' who keep troublemakers in line, demoralise hostile voters and fight it out for the TMC in pitched street battles.

It needs stressing it is not just the TMC that commits such sins. The more respectable Left parties and even the Congress often behaved no better during their heyday, only not so brazenly - say most observers.

This explains why political parties of all shades in this State find it easy to organize spectacular explosions of mass anger to achieve their short term ends - like demoralising opposition parties, rigging elections, etc. They lead armed groups of unemployed youths used in running various illegal rackets, and also as political cannon fodder. They make bombs; carry 'messages' and contraband across the international border. The police are told to keep their eyes closed, for a fee!

Again, it has been a fashion with many Bengali political leaders to preach violence openly. Their political affiliation does not matter. Their bark is every bit as toxic as

their bite.

The late Harekrishna Konar had proudly hailed the frenzied left activists involved in the Sainbari massacre. Much later Anubrata Mondal, President of the TMC's Birbhumi unit, appealed to his supporters to attack the police with bombs! For dealing with dissidents not toeing the party line in elections, his solution was 'Set their houses on fire'!

Days ago, supporters of opposition parties have quaked in their boots as Mondal thundered, after the TMC won the 2021 Assembly polls, 'Now a highly enjoyable dangerous new game will begin in Bengal'!

Even state Chief minister Mamata Banerjee took up the menacing 'Khela hobey' slogan. At least 50 opposition workers/relatives were killed or driven out of Bengal, leaving their shops and property/houses. The police refused to accept FIRs from the victims from May 2, 2021. Eventually the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) had to step in. Of late some action has followed in a few cases of post-poll violence involving murder and rape.

Neither the late Konar nor Mondal was/had been pulled up by their respective leaderships the CPI(M) and the TMC, for their public endorsement of mob violence.

Further, it has been standard practice among Bengal political parties to deal leniently even with the most hardened of criminals. The new slogan is, POLITICALLY-BACKED CRIME PAYS.

For instance in the name of releasing political workers harassed by the administration, most parties winning the polls order the immediate release of prisoners held in jails on various charges as a 'goodwill' gesture. In 1978, when the Left came to power, this benefit went to the notorious Sain killers involved in the Sainbari massacre of 1975, as they went scot free.

Again, the first thing Mamata Banerjee did as a Chief Minister in 2011 was to secure the release from the lock-up of Bhowanipore thana of local rowdies the police had arrested, going to the thana herself! In other words, whether the Left ruled or non-Left parties came to power, crime paid in Bengal and the victims had better fend for themselves.

Is it any surprise that incidents of mindless mob violence recur in Bengal?

Analysing the slaughter of innocent Muslim women and children at village Bogtui, Birbhumi district in West Bengal on the night of March 21, one begins to appreciate why it is more important to understand the socio-economic background to the crime: a point made by seasoned AIMIM leader Asaduddin Owaisi.

As Mr Owaisi explained, it was common knowledge that the mafia rule in Bengal run by criminal syndicates running illegal sand mining, coal smuggling and other acts of major corruption, had drawn in most political parties into such crimes. As for the Muslims of Bengal, regardless of tall made by ruling TMC leaders suggesting they were 'safest under the TMC's tutelage,' the community was the poorest and most backward in India as a whole.

Significantly, Bengal-based social observer Qazi Masoom Akhtar concurs. "Under the TMC rule, you see Muslims fighting others, Muslims fighting Muslims and Muslims committing crimes, being arrested and thrown into jails in ever larger numbers... how does such trends and policies used by the TMC help Muslims in Bengal in any way? It keeps them ever more backward, poorer, illiterate and helpless than ever. Where is the new local Muslim leadership coming up? I do not see any signs," he said during a recent TV interview.

Nor should one under estimate the ubiquitous power and extent of the TMC-backed Syndicate/Mafia black money system operating in Bengal, dominating virtually every aspect of life - from getting admitted to a hospital, securing entry for a child in a local school, selling tea in the local market, or repairing one's own house. A study carried out by an academic working with the eminent Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) at Baranagar revealed two years ago that annually black money transactions carried out by illegal syndicates/local gangs involved more than Rs 34,000 crore annually!

In the process, the central and state governments not to mention the common people of Bengal have chosen to remain big time losers, while a team of well-organised criminal elements seem to be comfortably in charge of things. The Calcutta HC's observation about the urgent need to restore the faith of people in the law comes not a moment too soon. (IPA Service)

Simultaneous elections will be two steps back for democracy in India

By: Akhileendra Pratap Singh

The frequency of elections has lately gained centre stage, with voices rising against the prevailing practice of holding continuous elections in one or other part of the country. In that context, the idea of simultaneous elections - holding elections for all three tiers of government together - is being pushed as a comparatively efficient practice.

It advocates flag the adverse impacts of continuous elections on developmental schemes and policies, the prolonged engagement of armed forces, the massive expenditure in holding continuous elections, and the historical prevalence of simultaneous election (from 1951-52 to 1967) to justify and strengthen their stand. In contrast, detractors invoke the constitutional and practical concerns that would follow from its implementation. For instance, can the terms of the Parliament and state legislative assemblies be synchronized? If yes, would that be constitutionally permissible?

Calls for the re-introduction of simultaneous elections started gaining traction towards the early 1990s, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s rising electoral gains. However, they have resurfaced with unparalleled vigour since 2014 alongside Prime Minister Narendra Modi's mounting stature in the national political arena.

That synchronicity is neither accidental nor surprising. Evidence from other countries, particularly the U.S.A., suggests that simultaneous elections may result in a 'coattail effect': the ability of a strong and popular candidate to attract votes for other candidates of the same party in an election. Considering that Modi has been the star campaigner spearheading BJP's electoral victories since 2014, calls for 'One Nation, One Election' are unsurprising. This is affirmed by a 2019 study by Professor Sanjay Kumar of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi which indicated that 32 per cent of BJP voters chose to vote for the party only because of Modi.

From the perspective of other national political parties, such a scenario would spell doom as their leadership cannot match Modi's charismatic influence on voters across India. Their leadership has largely failed to translate their influence into electoral support for their respective parties, particularly in Lok Sabha elections. Thus, they prefer continuous rather than simultaneous elections.

On the face of it, the proposal for simultaneous elections appears attractive. Nonetheless, it would be naïve to back it without weighing in the opportunity cost. Beyond the constitutional and practical anxieties, there are several democratic concerns that deserve attention.

First, given the 'coattail effect', the ruling political party particularly, and national political parties generally, have an edge over their competitors in simultaneous elections. That itself runs counter to the democratic ethos by denying a level-playing field to all. But the gravity of the threat increases at the regional level, where it may have far-reaching consequences for democracy.

Considering that national political parties will be in a dominating position in case of simultaneous elections, the regional parties will either be less successful or will be compelled to join hands with their national counterparts. Whatever be the case, it would have a negative impact on regional aspirations and demands as it is the regional po-

litical parties that primarily raise them at different democratic forums.

Furthermore, as the 'coattail effect' gives an upper hand to the ruling party/coalition, there is always a risk that they will be incentivized to hold on to political power, irrespective of the costs. This will be fatal for democracy, as Indian as well as world history is replete with examples, such as Hugo Chávez's Fifth Republic Movement in Venezuela and Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary, where single party dominance has culminated in converting a democratic setup into a dictatorial one.

Second, one of the basic tenets of parliamentary democracy is that a government which enjoys popular support has the right to govern unless it chooses to dissolve itself or loses popular support. The idea of simultaneous elections does not necessarily adhere to this tenet. There will be cases where governments elected through simultaneous elections might either lose popular support or are dissolved mid-term. If a state government loses majority mid-term, then the Governor, acting on behalf of the President of India, will be compelled to ask other parties/coalitions to form a government as the option of re-election is unavailable. If the attempt to form a government fails, then the state will have to be governed via President's rule under Article 356 of the Indian Constitution, until the next elections. That is, on the face of it, anti-democratic.

This scenario would apply at the Union level too. If a union government loses its majority mid-term, the only available course of action would be the President inviting other parties/coalition to form government. If that fails, the country will have to be governed by President's rule with the aid and advice of a Council of Ministers, who would be part of a defunct Lok Sabha and a functional Rajya Sabha, until the next elections. Such a government would be far from being democratic, and closer to a constitutional oligarchy.

No wonder, then, that even the draft report of the Law Commission of India on Simultaneous Election from 2018 notes that the existing framework of the Constitution does not permit simultaneous elections, and stated that conducting elections in such a manner would require substantial amendments to the Constitution, the Representation of the People Act, and the Rules of Procedure of Lok Sabha and state legislatures.

Finally, elections are an important tool of ensuring democratic accountability. Continuous elections help keep the elected representatives and governments on their toes for they are required to go amongst the public frequently. This puts them under continued scrutiny to deliver upon their promises. With simultaneous elections, that accountability would be diluted as elected representatives will no longer be accountable through mid-term elections.

India's democratic roots have strengthened over time and the role of continuous elections in that context has been crucial. They have allowed regional political parties to prosper and regional aspirations to matter at the national democratic stage. In short, continuous elections have strengthened the roots of democracy in India.

A step forward towards the re-implementation of the practice of simultaneous elections would effectively be two steps back for democracy in India. (IPA Service)

BJP opts for continuity, stability and youth in CMs choice

By: Kalyani Shankar

The BJP has reposed faith in the incumbent chief ministers in all the four states where it won in the recently concluded Assembly elections. Whether it was a coincidence or by design, the big picture is clear: the party high command did not want to disturb the winning formula in these states. The earlier practice has been to nominate a new face. The decisions indicate that the party preferred continuity, stability, and youth. The party had projected Yogi Adityanath (Uttar Pradesh), Pushkar Singh Dhami (Uttarakhand), N Biren Singh (Manipur), and Pramod Sawant (Goa) as its chief ministerial candidates. All four had delivered defeating anti-incumbency. The BJP high command is already looking at the 2024 elections. The party expects these four chief ministers to focus on delivering their respective states for Modi's win in 2024. The challenge for them would be to retain the present strength and achieve a more significant electoral victory in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. Also, by that time, Modi would have been in power for ten years.

Dhami lost his own Khatima seat, which he had won twice before, but it did not prevent the party top brass from clearing the 46-year-old for another term. He is the state's youngest chief minister, and his choice is an attempt to check the factional fights in the state unit. It was also a stability card as Uttarakhand had seen three chief ministers last year. Dhami is perceived to be close to RSS. "In six months, Dhami left his imprint on Uttarakhand, which manifested in the election results," Defence Minister Rajnath Singh told reporters after announcing Dhami's election as the legislature party leader. The opposition cannot criticise the decision because that was similar to what West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee did after losing her seat in the Assembly polls last year. Like Mamata, Dhami will also have to win a seat in the next six months.

Uttarakhand is not the only state where the BJP followed this stability card. In Goa, the party chose Pramod Sawant, in preference to the former state Health minister Viswajit Rane, a front runner for the top job. The simple reason could be that Sawant led the party to victory despite resignations from some key figures, including the son of late former chief minister Manohar Parrikar as well as six former chief ministers and some imported from Congress. He managed to overcome the infighting.

The Goa Assembly polls had an added challenge from Trinamool Congress and Aam Admi Party besides a stiff battle from Congress. Moreover, Sawant delivered Goa, ensuring BJP's second-best performance ever, winning 20 of the 40 seats needing only one more for the majority. Sawant, still in his 40s, became Goa's chief minister in 2019, following the demise of the charismatic mass leader Manohar Parrikar. He is a sober and soft-spoken leader but not a natural leader. UP Chief Minister Yogi has proved to be a vote catcher and charismatic leader. So, the BJP high command could not deny him the prize. He is also a good communicator. Added to all these was the Modi magic, and the top BJP leadership, including the Prime Minister, campaigned in the state heavily.

However, Yogi had no hand in finalizing his cabinet, as cabinet formation was done with consultations with the party high command. It was visible when the OBC leader Keshav Prasad Maurya, who lost his seat, was imposed on Yogi, retaining him as deputy chief minister. Another deputy was an import from the BSP, Brajesh Pathak. On the day of sweating-in, held in a big stadium, one can see the prominent slogan "Shapath, Shapath, Shapath: Rashtravadi, Sushashanki, Surakshaki, Vikaski" (Promise, promise, promise for Nationalism, Good Governance, Security and Development). It may be Modi's slogan for the 2024 polls. The BJP has to ensure two important things. The first is the Modi magic and the second implementation of welfare schemes. They have another two and half years to prepare for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. There is no surprise in this shift in strategy, as the focus is to build strong chief ministers in states to implement his schemes. Secondly, Prime Minister has also been encouraging younger faces as the delivery of their provinces is the most critical criterion. It is likely to send a positive signal to the other poll-bound states like Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh. (IPA Service)



By: Sippi Azarbaijani Moghaddam

Afghan children and teenagers have not had much to look forward to since the Taliban took power in August last year. They have endured six months of uncertainty, anxiety and fear as they waited to see what Taliban rule would bring for them.

Women could not help but dread the return of draconian measures and the trampling of rights they had witnessed 20 years earlier. In the past week, those nagging doubts appear to have been validated.

A glimmer of hope had appeared for some when the date for reopening secondary girls' schools was set for March 23. But this optimism was quashed when girls were turned back from schools. The dashing of so many young hopes caused emotional scenes outside schools, which were widely shared on social media and news outlets as proof that the Taliban had not really changed.

But this is a battle of priorities. Much has been written about the disagreements within the Taliban between religious hardliners based in Kandahar and the more pragmatic contingent, usually military commanders hailing from other provinces. This latest decision on girls' education is seen as a victory for hardline elements pushing their conservative agenda. But it is worth addressing some of the assumptions in this story from analysts and commentators.

Secondary education
The first assumption is that girls' secondary education is as important for most Afghans as it is for the international community. The issue of girls' education has become a rallying point for those, especially women, who wanted to emphasise progress after the fall of the Taliban in 2001.

For many of those who oppose the Taliban, especially those who left the country after August 2021, it is emblematic of what they see as the oppressive ideology

What do the Taliban hope to achieve by holding girls' education hostage in Afghanistan?

of the Taliban. But there is more to it than that.

Girls' education has taken up an extraordinary amount of global media attention since the Taliban prevented girls from attending school in the 1990s – part of a raft of repressive measures which also included a temporary ban on women working or leaving home without a male chaperone. In addition, women were banned from being involved in politics or speaking publicly, as they had been under the previous Mujahideen regime.

It was expected that after the Taliban's first period of power ended in 2001 there would be a massive surge of girls going to school and women flocking to become teachers. But after billions of dollars of investment and much trumpeting on gains, the figures tell a puzzling story.

Education statistics in Afghanistan are notoriously unreliable. But all reports agree that girls have historically lagged far behind boys in access to education. There is evidence this was beginning to gradually shift but despite the strong desire of many Afghan women and girls to access education, the figures do not reflect a mad rush by Afghan society to provide it.

In a 20-year review released in 2021, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization stated that: "The number of girls in higher education increased from around 5,000 in 2001 to around 90,000 in 2018." Some 16% of

schools took girls only – but there was a lack of women to teach in them, especially in rural areas, and many families wanted their girls to study with female teachers.

In 2018, only 36% of secondary school teachers were female and these tended to be concentrated in urban areas. School drop-out rates for girls were also high (62% in girls between 13 and 15) as a result of conservative attitudes in the population at large and a range of other issues. Additionally, sexual harassment – of boys and girls – by teachers, social workers and other students, has been an enduring and serious problem. Covid-19 put a further strain both on people's budgets and the struggling education sector as a whole.

Economic disaster
Since the Taliban took control, there have been forecasts of the imminent collapse of the Afghan economy, with more than 90% of the population driven to poverty and starvation. The financial collapse was brought on in part by the actions of the international community, which froze Afghanistan's overseas assets and halted development assistance, among other sanctions. It came against a backdrop of an already struggling economy and the worst drought in living memory.

Many families now face acute food shortages and no prospects for work. It is unclear, therefore, what percentage of

families, especially low-income families and those in rural areas, would have been able to send their daughters to school regardless of the Taliban's actions. They will be those families who can actually access girls' high schools and those who can afford to do so in the current harsh economic climate.

Taliban thinking
The second assumption is that the Taliban are constantly waiting for an opportunity to make life difficult for Afghan women and girls. This was certainly the case during their first period in power. The Taliban remain deeply conservative and consider themselves the guardians of morality whose brand emphasises anti-corruption. The minister of higher education – part of an all-male government – has stated publicly that Islam is more important than qualifications so for some, education is of no value to boys or girls. Secular education is certainly not viewed as a human right.

The Taliban have also expressed concern around morality: men teaching female students, as well as girls' dress code and keeping students segregated in university. But they have allowed primary and tertiary level female students to return to educational establishments with segregation and modifications to buildings and dress.

Is the March 22 turnaround yet another outcome of a face-off between conservative and pragmatic elements within

the Taliban movement? Here, it may be useful to address a third assumption: that the Taliban operate in an archaic, internationally isolated bubble of religiosity and keeping girls' secondary schools closed is in line with its oppressive attitude towards women in general. With no female secondary school pupils there will soon be no young women to take up their places at university.

But it is important to remember that the Taliban have survived the past two decades by negotiating and making deals. And they understand, based on numerous media campaigns and social media commentary over the past two decades, that improving girls' education in Afghanistan is a priority for the international community.

It is not impossible to imagine that, having seen the United Kingdom pay a longstanding debt to Iran based on the pressure of wanting to secure the release of Briton Nazamin-Zaghari Radcliffe, the Taliban may link a gradual easing of restrictions on female education with concessions from the international community around financial sanctions.

Thus far, keeping girls' secondary schools closed appears to have had the opposite effect as Washington has rowed back on plans to progress to US diplomatic representation for the Taliban government. One suspects these are all moves and stratagems on a bigger chessboard. (Courtesy: Scroll.in)

Wang visit: Beijing is not reassessing its India policy

By: Harsh V. Pant

Some two years into the military stand-off along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi paid a short visit to India last week. The India leg of his trip was shrouded in secrecy even as other parts of the itinerary – Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nepal – were well publicised. In diplomacy, secret visits are sometimes intended to break long-standing logjams and demonstrate a commitment to the resolution of conflicts. But this was no such visit. It was primarily aimed at testing India's resolve and to assess if changing global geopolitics made New Delhi more amenable to giving in to China, much like in the past.

There used to be a time when railing against western imperialism with "like-minded" powers such as China and Russia used to be the high-watermark of India's global footprint. The Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral emerged in the context of the American bipolar moment in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War. This RIC then morphed into Brazil, Russia, India, China (BRIC) and then added South Africa (BRICS) as the global economic order underwent a transformation with the emergence of China and India as key economic powers. As part of these platforms, India tried to forge a partnership with China based on shared global outlooks. It was argued that this global convergence would eventually lead to a bilateral convergence as the two nations with divergent interests would be able to reconcile them by focusing on international challenges. It was another matter that China's global interests were far more expansive than India's and that there was hardly any hope beyond some tactical coordination at the global level. In the process, not only did Sino-Indian bilateral ties continue to suffer but India's global footprint was also weighed down by the contradictions in the Sino-Indian global en-



agement. But myths, once forged, attain a life of their own. And, Indian foreign policy continued to perpetuate this mythology till it was once and, hopefully, forever shattered by the bloody clashes of June 2020 in the Galwan Valley, leading to the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers. Since then, New Delhi has been steadfast that normalisation of ties with China won't be possible without peace and tranquility along the LAC. As external affairs minister S Jaishankar suggested: "Our [India's] relationship (with China) is not normal, given the presence of a large number of troops in contravention of the 1993-96 agreements." This message was also reiterated by national security adviser Ajit Doval who was invited by Wang Yi to visit China to take forward the Special Representatives talks on border issues only to be told that this would be possible only after disengagement and eventual de-escalation at the LAC.

Wang Yi was fully aware of Indian de-

mands. He was in regular touch with Indian interlocutors over the last two years. Beijing is fully aware of the sensitivities of India on this issue. But being sensitive to Indian concerns is not a priority for the Chinese. Just before he landed in India, he weighed in on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir at the meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Pakistan, knowing full well how this would be received in India. When Wang Yi said Beijing "heard the call of many Islamic friends" over the Kashmir issue, adding that it "shared the same aspiration", the Indian reaction was swift and pointed. It named the Chinese foreign minister in rejecting his reference to India, reminding him that not only does China have no locus standi on the matter but also that India refrains from public judgment of its internal issues.

Still, Wang Yi landed in New Delhi. The atmospherics were all wrong, the optics terrible and the underlying factors that make

for a successful diplomatic trip absent. He came for a specific reason. Beijing has no interest in normalisation of ties. Its unprecedented military mobilisation along the LAC is a sign that China is not likely to relent in its long-term goal of trying to make India bend to its will. But it has a short-term problem with the BRICS summit meeting approaching and it views the Russia-Ukraine crisis as an opportunity to lure India into making some grandiose assertions about Russia, China and India standing up to the West.

China is worried about the trajectory of the Ukraine crisis. After having embraced Putin during the Winter Olympics with a "no limits" partnership, it can't afford to ignore him now. At a time when Xi Jinping's focus should have been on the economic revival of China post-pandemic, there is a Covid resurgence and a global conflict. China is far more exposed to the global economy than Russia ever was and the vulnerabilities for China are readily apparent. The West has not given any indication that it is willing to shift its focus away from the Indo-Pacific any time soon even as it has been more understanding of the Indian position on the Ukraine crisis. As the Chinese position gets ever more precarious, wooing India to seek a common ground remains an option for Beijing which it is trying hard to operationalise.

But New Delhi only has to look at this visit to see that there is no fundamental reassessment in Beijing about its India policy. It's still about targeting India's vulnerabilities – be it making common cause with Pakistan on Kashmir or with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Wang Yi's visit would seem curious only to those who have no understanding of how China operates. There was a method in this madness. Only this time, Indian policymakers seem to have kept their own sanity. Hopefully, there won't be any going back. (Courtesy: ORF)

Prabhakaran's Ghost

By: Jehan Perera

The government is under siege as it is not delivering results to the people. This is especially true of the economy where the situation is deteriorating by the day and the country is borrowing endless billions from foreign countries that have a stake in Sri Lanka. There is a seemingly endless drop in the value of the Sri Lankan currency, sharply rising costs that are beyond belief, and the worst may be to come.

The increases in prices of basic commodities, accompanied by shortages, have severely impacted upon the standard of living of the general population and even prompted the government to call out the army to maintain social peace where queues have formed, as at petrol stations. The fear and deference that people once gave to the government leadership, both on account of war-time victories and ruthless governance, has given way to jests and insults.

This is the way in advanced democracies, and it is time that Sri Lanka should be this way, to give no room to political leaders to act inappropriately.

It is in this time of adversity that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa is giving leadership to, what appears to be, a serious effort at finding a solution. This would be the meaning of the All Party Conference he has summoned. Even though this dialogue could have taken place in parliament, unfortunately the 225 members are so bitterly divided across the well of the house that it would be impossible to have a meaningful dialogue among them.

The boycott of the APC by the main opposition parties and even by a section within the government highlights the sharp political divisions and lack of trust within the polity. The president recognized this reality when he stated that the conference was not called to gain a political advantage. He added that he would once again invite the parties that did not attend the conference. The president also said that he would prepare a plan to carry out the recommendations made by the political party leaders.

President Rajapaksa's apology to former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe after a government member tried to score political points against the former government was in keeping with his stated commitment to make this an occasion for non-partisan problem solving. The former prime minister's grasp of both the national and international crises, and their meeting points, is an indication of the value of a national government to face the crisis of the present time.

The president's meeting with the TNA that represents the majority of Tamil voters in the North and East of the country soon after the APC, has the potential to break new ground in the area of national reconciliation that will help to strengthen the unity and promote economic investment and aid flows to the country. This approach of finding solutions through discussions and consultations needs to be supported.

Shortly after the President's meeting with the TNA, Foreign Minister Prof GL Peiris took it upon himself to brief a civil society group (the Sri Lankan Collective for Consensus) on the

outcome of the meeting. Since his appointment as foreign minister, Prof Peiris has made a special effort to make the government accessible to civil society. His contribution in that respect has been considerable.

One of his first acts as foreign minister was to heed the voice of civil society organisations that were under the purview of the Ministry of Defence. The CSOs objected to being considered to be primarily threats to national security rather than being a part and parcel of the democratic system and its checks and balances.

After the CSOs were brought upon the standard of the foreign ministry they have been able to engage more positively and constructively with government mechanisms. The minister has stated that he would ensure the smooth functioning of the NGO sector and remove the obstacles to their functioning as necessary.

According to Prof Peiris, as reported variously in the media, the President and TNA reached broad agreement in seven areas that had significance to the Tamil people. The first was to release those held in state custody under the Prevention of Terrorism Act for more than ten years without charges, unless there were compelling reasons to continue to keep them in detention. With regard to the PTA itself, which has been under international scrutiny since the end of the war, he said that its present amendments were only a start. The government, he said, was considering the Law Commission's report and the draft Counter Terrorism Act of the previous government to take forward the process of amendment.

However, it may yet be prudent to consider removing the PTA from the statute books as this would give a clear message to the local and international community that the government means business. Second, Prof Peiris said that there would be no changes made to the territorial boundaries of districts and sub-district units to change their demographic composition or for any other purpose by the government acting alone.

Third, issues relating to forest land, coast conservation and archaeological sites would not be arbitrarily decided on by the government without due regard being paid to the interests of the people of those areas and where found to be unjustified would be reconsidered appropriately for reversion. Fourth, the interests of the people in the north and east would be further secured by the devolution of power, which would be discussed further once the Committee of Experts appointed to propose a new constitution finalized their report which would be done within the next two months.

Fifth, Prof Peiris said that the Office of Missing Persons would investigate into the circumstances of disappearances and families of the missing would be provided with ₹ 100,000 as an initial measure. The formulation of a truth commission also would be considered and a government delegation would visit South Africa to study the iconic Truth and Reconciliation Commission that has proved to be inspirational in facing other situations of war and human rights violations. (Courtesy: The Citizen)

Will Smith-Chris rock row: Can India stand up for comedy?

By: Madhavan Narayanan

In recent years, stand-up comedians have become so popular in India that the shorter form, 'stand-up', is enough to trigger chuckles and funny memories. But it is now time to invoke another, more serious way to use the English phrase to support them: stand up and be counted!

Comedy made serious headlines this week as actor Will Smith strode onto the stage to slap host Chris Rock because he had made a joke about the appearance of Smith's wife. And an hour later on the same stage, Smith won the Oscar for best acting. Given the state of cynicism (justified) about publicity-grabbing reality shows, this looked stage-managed, but it was not. The actor, in this case, was not acting.

Our presumptive Kangaroo courts

It takes an Academy awards function in the US to tell Indians now to stand up and be counted for their own compatriot comedians who have steadily witnessed assaults on their freedom, safety and the fundamental right to practise a profession. Attacks on them have risen in direct proportion to the popularity of comedy acts and have ranged in style and seriousness: from abuse on social media

to police complaints to court cases to denial of permission to perform on the order of authorities, hit jobs have been growing.

More often than not, the comedians have been accused of hurting the sentiments of a community, religion or nation, even as they have, in turn, been abused using gender, religion or class as targets.

You get the picture: pot, kettle, black etc. I started writing a sentence saying that comedians should leave sacred cows alone for their own safety, before realising that even this literal example may lead to misinterpretation. Yes, some have been targeted not for what they said or did but because of somebody sweepingly assuming that some harm was intended. This is not even bias or prejudice. It is simply a case of presumptive kangaroo court behaviour.

Munawar Faruqi was not allowed to perform in Indore purely on the presumption that he would hurt sentiments and subjected to an arrest without evidence.

A long list of comedians can be listed in a dubious hall of unwarranted infamy: Sahil Shah, Rohan Joshi, Agrima Joshua, Adar Malik, Azeem Banatwala, Vir Das...and so on.

Comedians, not being politi-

cians or thugs, have meekly apologised to save their creative souls or gone silent or discreet. Others have used what they know best – humour – to explain, mock or defend themselves. Perhaps the best way to deal with those who attack a satire without getting it is to try some sarcasm that they won't understand.

Ironic expression beats stupid suppression. Anyday.

Is comedy doing the job of journalism?

With propaganda machines churning out fake news, false contexts, rumours, loud slogans, unverified claims or sheer noise, truth matters less in making people understand. Strangely, comedy that relies on absurdity and exaggeration seems to work better. In post-truth politics, comedy has often replaced fact as a counter to propaganda. That hits some people where it hurts, and they strike back with what they know best: authority, abuse, threat and intimidation.

Now, here is the key issue: bad taste is not illegal, but violence is, whether it is in India or the United States, the world's topmost democracies. You can question and hoot down bad taste (of the kind Chris Rock seems to have exhibited) but you cannot hit, ban or jail somebody for it.



In India, I understand that religious sentiments are best respected for reasons of pragmatism and sensitivity. But it is equally true that comedy (through satire, sarcasm, irony and humour) can send messages of political and social reform by provoking thought. Strange as it might seem, comedy has, of late, been performing the role that journalism was supposed to: that of speaking truth to power. No wonder the powers-that-be are not amused.

Will Smith's illegal slap in the land once famous for freedom of speech and now for the "Cancel Culture" of social media kangaroo courts, and Munawar Faruqi's pre-emptive arrest in the country where the judiciary presumes innocence before trial, are both extreme cases that show freedom of speech enjoys constitutional freedoms but not social liberty.

My friend, the comedian Papa CJ, put out a social media post in

which he said the Smith-Rock case "sends a signal to audiences all over the world that you can assault a comedian for telling a joke you did not like and get away with it" – if there are no consequences. Mercifully, Smith has since apologised and the American Academy that awards the Oscars is mulling what to do about the slap.

A democracy should know how to take jokes

As for India, it is now a democracy getting messier and noisier by the day. What hides beneath all that are sentiments linked to gender, religion, caste and ideology that reveal fissures in the social fabric. We have to draw some enforceable rules of engagement so that the baby of truth is not thrown out along with the bathwater of insensitivity.

A democracy that cannot take jokes may end up as a laughing stock. (Courtesy: The Quint)

Talks between Ukraine & Russia were set to resume today by video, according to the head of the Ukrainian delegation

Ukrainian President says defence is at a 'turning point'

Kyiv, March 31 (AP): The Ukrainian president said his country's defence against the Russian invasion is at a "turning point" and again pressed the United States for more help in the hours after the Kremlin's forces reneged on a pledge to scale back some of their operations.

Russian forces bombarded areas around Kyiv and the northern city of Chernihiv and intensified attacks in other parts of the country Wednesday, adding to already deep doubts about any progress toward ending the punishing war. Talks between Ukraine and Russia were set to resume Friday by video, according to the head of the Ukrainian delegation, David Arakhama.

Meanwhile, a delegation of lawmakers from Ukraine's parliament visited Washington to push the U.S. for increased assistance, saying their nation needs more military equipment, more financial help and tougher sanc-

tions against Russia.

"We need to kick Russian soldiers off our land, and for that we need all, all possible weapons," Ukrainian parliament member Anastasia Radina said at a news conference at the Ukrainian Embassy.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made the case directly to U.S. President Joe Biden.

"If we really are fighting for freedom and in defense of democracy together, then we have a right to demand help in this difficult turning point. Tanks, aircraft, artillery systems. Freedom should be armed no worse than tyranny," Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address to the nation, which he delivered standing in the dark outside the dimly lit presidential offices in Kyiv. He thanked the U.S. for an additional \$500 million in aid that was announced Wednesday.

There seemed to be little faith that a resolution would emerge



anytime soon between Russia and Ukraine, particularly after the Russian military's about-face and its most recent attacks.

Russia said Tuesday that it would de-escalate operations near Kyiv and Chernihiv in order to "increase mutual trust and create conditions for further negotiations." The announcement was met with suspicion from Zelenskyy and the West. And soon after, Ukrainian officials reported that Russian shelling hit homes, stores, libraries and other civilian sites in or near those areas.

Russian troops also stepped up their attacks on the Donbas region in the east and around the city of Izyum, which lies on a key route to the Donbas, after redeploying units from other areas, the Ukrainian side said.

Alexander Lomako, secretary of the Chernihiv city council, said the Russian announcement turned out to be "a complete lie."

"At night they didn't decrease, but vice versa increased the intensity of military action," Lomako said.

Five weeks into the invasion that has left thousands dead on both sides, the number of Ukrainians fleeing the country topped a staggering 4 million, half of them children, according to the United Nations.

"I do not know if we can still believe the Russians," Nikolay Nazarov, a refugee from Ukraine, said as he pushed his father's wheelchair at a border crossing

into Poland. "I think more escalation will occur in eastern Ukraine. That is why we cannot go back to Kharkiv."

Zelenskyy said the continuing negotiations with Russia were only "words without specifics."

"We know that this is not a withdrawal but the consequences of being driven out," Zelenskyy said of Russia's pledge. "But we also are seeing that Russia is now concentrating its forces for new strikes on Donbas, and we are preparing for this."

Zelenskyy also said he had recalled Ukraine's ambassadors to Georgia and Morocco, suggesting they had not done enough to persuade those countries to support Ukraine and punish Russia for the invasion.

"With all due respect, if there won't be weapons, won't be sanctions, won't be restrictions for Russian business, then please look for other work," he said.

China, Solomons ink draft of controversial security pact

BEIJING, March 31 (AP): China and the Solomon Islands have signed a draft version of a security pact that could see Chinese police and other forces take up duties in the Pacific Island nation, drawing concerns from traditional partners New Zealand, Australia and the United States.

The Solomon Islands government on Thursday said the draft agreement had been initiated by representatives of the two sides and will now "be cleaned up and await signatures of the two countries' foreign ministers."

The agreement aims to "respond to Solomon Islands' soft and hard domestic threats."

Solomon Islands will continue to roll out the implementation of its national security strategy and uphold its foreign policy of Friends to all and enemies to none," a government news release said.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare on Tuesday rejected concerns that regional safety would be jeopardized by the treaty.

Sogavare called such concerns "utter nonsense," adding that "I find it very insulting ... to be branded as unfit to manage our sovereign affairs."

China has likewise dismissed questions about the agreement.

In its statement, the Solomon Islands said it would continue to "work with all partners in providing a safe and secure nation where all people are able to co-exist peacefully." It thanked Australia, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and Fiji for committing personnel to safeguard security on the islands.

Under the terms of the draft agreement, China could send police, military personnel and other armed forces to the Solomon Islands "to assist in maintaining social order" and for a variety of other reasons. It could also send warships to the islands for stopovers and to replenish supplies, leading to speculation about the possibility of China establishing a naval base on the islands.

Deepening concerns, the draft agreement stipulates that China would need to sign off on any information that is released about joint security arrangements, including at media briefings.

Pak Parl session adjourned till Sunday without debate on no-trust motion against PM Khan



ISLAMABAD, March 31 (PTI): Pakistan's National Assembly session was on Thursday adjourned abruptly till Sunday after opposition lawmakers demanded an immediate vote on a no-confidence motion against embattled Prime Minister Imran Khan who has effectively lost majority in the lower house.

As soon as the National Assembly session began at the Parliament House, Deputy Speaker Qasim Suri asked lawmakers to discuss items listed on the agenda.

However, opposition lawmakers demanded an immediate vote on the no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Khan.

Deputy Speaker Suri then adjourned the House till 11 am on Sunday, amid vociferous protest from opposition lawmakers.

The resolution against the embattled premier was tabled by the Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Shehbaz Sharif on March 28 and it was approved for debate the very same day.

The assembly secretariat had earlier issued a 24-point agenda for Thursday's session and the no-confidence motion was fourth on the agenda.

Opposition Leader in National Assembly Shehbaz Sharif had tabled the motion under Article A-95 of the Constitution, and it had 161 members as signatories.

While tabling the motion, Sharif had said he was presenting the no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Khan.

The voting is expected on April 3 and before the crucial day, the two sides would use the assembly forum to debate the matter.

The position of the opposition parties has strengthened after two

main allies of the government, including Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), joined the front against the government.

The government lost its majority after the allies ditched it and pressure is mounting on the cricketeer-turned-politician.

His ministers, however, have said that Khan would fight until "the last ball of the last over".

Khan needs 172 votes in the lower house of 342 to foil the Opposition's bid to topple him. However, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, chief of Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam Fazl (JUI-F), said that the Opposition has the support of 175 lawmakers and the prime minister should resign.

No Pakistani prime minister has ever completed a full five-year term in office. Also, no prime minister in Pakistan's history has ever been ousted through a no-confidence motion, and Khan is the third premier to face the challenge.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Khan strictly directed his party lawmakers to either abstain or not attend the National Assembly session on the day of voting on the no-confidence motion against him, which is likely to be held in the first week of April.

Khan came to power in 2018 with promises to create a 'Naya Pakistan' but miserably failed to address the basic problem of keeping the prices of commodities in control, giving air to the sails of opposition ships to make war on his government. His chances of survival are getting slimmer and the easiest way to end the uncertainty is to get back the support of all allies and win back dissidents within his own party.

Search finds 49,000 pieces of plane in China Eastern crash

BEIJING, March 31 (AP): Chinese officials said on Thursday that the search for wreckage in last week's crash of a China Eastern Boeing 737-800 is basically done and that more than 49,000 pieces of debris had been found.

Flight MU5735 plunged from 29,000 feet (8,800 meters) into a mountainside in southern China's Guangxi region, killing all 132 people on board.

The impact created a 20-meter- (65-foot-) deep crater, set off a fire in the surrounding forest and smashed the plane into small parts scattered over a wide area, some of them buried underground.

Zhu Tao, the director of aviation safety for the Civil Aviation Administration of China, said at a news conference in the nearby city of Wuzhou that important parts including the horizontal stabilizer, engine and remains of the right wing tip had been recovered after nearly 10 days of searching, according to the official Xinhua News Agency.

The investigation into the cause of the crash faces several challenges including that the plane plunged without warning; air traffic controllers got no reply from the pilots after it started falling and the pieces of debris are so small.

More than 22,000 cubic meters (800,000 cubic feet) of soil were excavated and 49,117 pieces of the plane found, said Zhang Zhiwen, an official



with the Guangxi government. The search was made more difficult by rain and muddy conditions in the remote and steep location.

The two "black boxes" — the flight data recorder and the cockpit voice recorder — have been found and sent to Beijing for examination and analysis. Zhu said a preliminary investigation report would be completed within 30 days of the March 21 crash.

A team of US investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board and advisors from Boeing and the Federal Aviation Administration have been granted visas to travel to China to take

part in the investigation, under longstanding international agreements.

Engine manufacturer CFM will support the investigation but not send anyone to China, the NTSB said, correcting an earlier announcement that company representatives would be part of the travelling team.

The China Eastern flight, with 123 passengers and nine crew members, was headed from the southwestern city of Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, to Guangzhou, a major city and export manufacturing hub near Hong Kong in southeastern China.

Prosecutor seeks end to Khashoggi murder trial in Turkey

ANKARA, March 31 (AP): The prosecutor in the case against 26 Saudi nationals charged in the slaying of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi made a surprise request Thursday that their trial in absentia be suspended and the case be transferred to Saudi Arabia.

The panel of judges made no ruling on the prosecutor's request but decided that a letter should be sent to Turkey's Justice Ministry seeking its opinion on the possible transfer of the file to the Saudi judicial authorities, the state-run Anadolu Agency reported. Trial was adjourned until April 7.

The private DHA news agency reported that the prosecutor told the court that in a letter dated March 13, the Saudi chief public prosecutor's office requested that the proceedings in Turkey be transferred to the Kingdom and that international warrants issued by Ankara against the defendants be lifted.

Arguing for the transfer, the prosecutor said that because the arrest warrants cannot be executed and defense statements cannot be taken, the case would remain inconclusive in Turkey.



The development, comes as Turkey has been trying to normalise its relationship with Saudi Arabia, which reached an all-time low following Khashoggi's grisly killing.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said in an interview on Thursday that Saudi authorities were more cooperative on judicial issues with Turkey, but did not elaborate.

Khashoggi disappeared on October 2, 2018, after entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, seeking documents that would allow him to marry Hatice Cengiz, a Turkish national who was waiting outside the building. He never emerged.

Turkish officials allege that the Saudi national who was a United States resident was killed and then

dismembered with a bone saw inside the consulate. His body has not been found. Prior to his killing, Khashoggi had written critically of Saudi Arabia's crown prince in columns for the Washington Post.

Turkish authorities said he was killed by a team of Saudi agents. Those on trial in absentia include two former aides of the prince.

Saudi officials initially offered conflicting accounts concerning the killing, including claims that Khashoggi had left the consulate building unharmed. But amid mounting international pressure, they stated that Khashoggi's death was a tragic accident, with the meeting unexpectedly turning violent. Turkey decided to try the defendants in absentia after Saudi Arabia rejected Turkish demands for their extradition.

The slaying had sparked international condemnation and cast a cloud of suspicion over Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Western intelligence agencies, as well as the US Congress, have said that an operation of this magnitude could not have happened without his knowledge.

3 killed in attacks in Indonesia's restive Papua province

JAYAPURA, March 31 (AP): A government soldier, his wife and an independence fighter were killed in two separate attacks in Indonesia's restive Papua province, security officers and a rebel spokesperson said Thursday.

Clashes have escalated in eastern Indonesia's Papua province since last year, when rebels set fire to several schools and killed two teachers in a village in Puncak district.

Attackers from the West Papua Liberation Army, the military wing of the Free Papua Organisation, fatally shot a soldier, killed his wife by slashing her neck, and injured their two children in an assault at a house Thursday morning in Elelim village in Yalimo district, said Papua deputy military chief Lt. Col. Candra Kurniawan.

The soldier's wife, a midwife who helped indigenous Papuan women give birth, died on the way to a clinic. Kurniawan said, adding that police and military forces were searching for the attackers, who fled into the jungle.

Rebel spokesperson Sebby Sambom confirmed that the group's fighters carried out the attack, saying it was part of their struggle for

independence from Indonesia, which they accuse of conducting a genocidal campaign against Papuans.

Separately, Indonesian security forces on Wednesday fatally shot a local rebel commander, Toni Tabuni, who was resisting arrest in a raid in Nabire district, and arrested another rebel who was with him, Papua police spokesperson Ahmad Musthofa Kamal said.

He said Tabuni was allegedly involved in at least nine deadly attacks on security forces and civilians, including an Indonesian brigadier general, two teachers and a health worker who worked for a COVID-19 task force.

Shortly after Tabuni died, rebels set fire to nine classrooms in a school in Intan Jaya district and badly injured two teachers. Sambom said the attack was in retaliation for Tabuni's death.

"We don't need schools and development organised by Indonesia which is just an image to cover up the killings and genocide in Papua," he said in a recorded message sent to The Associated Press. "We can do it ourselves if Papua is independent."

Over 60 per cent of unintended pregnancies end in abortion, safe or unsafe, legal or illegal

Almost half of all pregnancies unintended: UN

UNITED NATIONS, March 31 (IANS): Nearly half of all pregnancies around the world, 121 million each year between 2015 and 2019, were unintended, a report of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) has revealed.

The number of unintended pregnancies represents a global failure to uphold a basic human right for women and girls. And that failure is expected to grow, warns the "State of World Population 2022" report.

While recent data show that the unintended pregnancy rate worldwide fell between 1990 and 2019, continued global population growth means that the absolute number of unintended pregnancies will keep rising without decisive action. Delivering sexual and reproductive health services will only become more difficult in the face of tectonic shifts like climate change, conflicts, public health emergencies and mass migration, Xinhua news agency quoted the report as saying.

The report finds that social and economic development and higher

levels of gender equality strongly correlate with lower rates of unintended pregnancy.

The incidence of unintended pregnancy varies widely by region. In 2015-2019, there were about 35 unintended pregnancies annually per 1,000 women aged 15-49 years in Europe and North America, compared with 64 in Central and Southern Asia and 91 in sub-Saharan Africa.

Many factors linked to reducing unintended pregnancy are themselves core development goals, from poverty reduction to improved maternal health, says the report.

One clear illustration of these intersecting forces is the extraordinary cost — to individuals, health systems and whole societies — of unsafe abortion, an issue that undercuts both rights and development.

Over 60 per cent of unintended pregnancies end in abortion, safe or unsafe, legal or illegal. Given that an estimated 45 per cent of all abortions remain unsafe, this is a public health emergency, it says.



Unsafe abortion hospitalized about 7 million women a year in developing countries, costing an estimated 553 million US dollars per year in post-abortion treatment costs alone, and resulting in an estimated 193,000 maternal deaths between 2003 and 2009, it says.

The report also finds that the erosion of female agency leads to unintended pregnancy.

The most recent data that look at partnered women of reproductive age in 64 countries show that 23 per cent of women are unable to say no to sex, 24 per cent are unable to make decisions about their own healthcare and 8 per cent are unable to make decisions specifi-

cally about contraception. Together, this means that only 57 per cent of women are able to make their own decisions over their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Violence, particularly sexual violence, and coercion against women and girls also contribute to unintended pregnancy, says the report. Contraception is one of the most obvious areas for investment in reproductive health and rights. Globally, an estimated 257 million women who want to avoid pregnancy are not using safe, modern methods of contraception, and of them, 172 million women are using no method at all, says the report.

However, research shows that lack of awareness about and lack of access to, contraception are no longer leading causes for non-use. Instead, these barriers are now overshadowed by concerns over side effects, myths, stigma and opposition from others. Addressing these reasons for unmet needs will require a much broader range of responses, says the report.

BEIJING, March 31 (AP): Chinese Australian journalist Cheng Lei went on trial in Beijing on Thursday on espionage charges, with diplomats denied permission to attend the proceedings.

Australian Ambassador Graham Fletcher told reporters outside the court that he was told he could not be present on the grounds that the trial involved state secrets.

"This is deeply concerning, unsatisfactory and very regrettable," Fletcher said.

"We can have no confidence in the validity of the process which is conducted in secret." Australia will continue to advocate for Cheng's rights and interests in accordance with the consular agreement between China and Australia, Fletcher said.

Trials in China are typically completed in one day. A verdict will be announced at a later date, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said.

Cheng's family said they had been informed of the trial and thanked Australia's diplomats for their support.

"Her two children and elderly parents miss her immensely and sincerely hope to reunite with her as soon as possible," they said in a statement that was forwarded by Australia's Foreign Ministry.

A former presenter for state-owned China Global Television Network, Cheng has been held for 19 months on suspicion of relaying state secrets abroad.

China has not provided any specifics about what offenses Cheng is accused of committing.

"We have no information about the charges or allegations against Ms. Cheng," Fletcher said.



"That is part of the reason we are so concerned." China's state security statutes are notoriously vague and the ruling Communist Party is frequently accused of using them to silence political enemies or other critics.

Her trial comes amid prolonged tensions between China and Australia over trade, Chinese foreign policy moves, accusations of Chinese meddling in Australian politics and Australia's call for a thorough investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic that began in China.

Australian diplomats last visited Cheng in detention on March 21 and Fletcher said she appeared to be "doing OK."

Cheng has been unable to speak with her two sons in Australia, although she has been able to choose her own lawyers and Australian diplomats were "satisfied" regarding her welfare, Fletcher said.

Phangnon Konyak is Nagaland's first woman Rajya Sabha MP



KOHIMA, March 31 (PTI): S Phangnon Konyak was on Thursday elected unopposed as the Rajya Sabha member from Nagaland.

With the tenure of incumbent Rajya Sabha MP from Nagaland K G Kenye ending on April 2, the election was scheduled to be held on Thursday.

Returning officer, Biennial Election to the Council of States, Khruohitounuo Rio informed that as there was only one candidate till the last date for filing nominations, no poll was conducted.

Therefore, Konyak has been declared duly elected unopposed to fill up the vacancy in the Rajya Sabha for the state of Nagaland, she said.

She is the first woman from the state to get a berth in Parliament's Upper House.

Konyak, the president of BJP Nagaland Mahila Morcha, who stood as the consensus candidate of the ruling United Democratic Alliance (UDA), is also the first Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) member from Nagaland to be sent to Parliament.

"S Phangnon Konyak sponsored by the BJP has been declared duly elected unopposed to fill the seat in the Council of States [Rajya Sabha] from Nagaland State, the term of which is due to expire on 2nd April 2022," chief electoral officer V Shashank Shekhar said in a press release.

In the 60-member assembly, NDPP has 21 MLAs, NPF 25, BJP 12 and two Independent MLAs, all of whom joined hands in September 2021 to form UDA for facilitating an early solution to the vexed Naga political dialogue.

Congratulating Phangnon Konyak on being elected unopposed, chief minister Neiphiu Rio expressed confidence that she will represent Nagaland state exceptionally well.

Rio also wished her the best for a successful tenure.

"It's a great journey for any woman of Nagaland... it's historical" said BJP Nagaland president and cabinet minister Temjen Imna Along.

Konyak is in Delhi and could not be reached for comments.

NPF revokes suspension order of K G Kenye



DIMAPUR, March 31 (NNN): Naga People's Front (NPF) has revoked the suspension order of K G Kenye, who is a Rajya Sabha MP from Nagaland, from the party.

It can be mentioned here that K G Kenye was suspended from NPF on January 8, 2020.

Revoking the suspension order, NPF president Dr Shurhozelie said, "Now, I, Dr Shurhozelie Liezietsu, president of the Naga People's Front in exercise of the powers conferred on me vide Clause 9 of the Article V read with Article XIV of the party constitution, the suspension of K G Kenye, MP Rajya Sabha from the NPF is hereby revoked with immediate effect in the interest of the party".

Three held with drugs worth over ₹ 4 crore in Manipur

IMPHAL, March 31 (NNN): Three alleged drug peddlers were arrested with drugs worth over ₹ 4 crore in an intensified drive against illicit drug trafficking in Manipur. The three persons were arrested in two separate operations in Tengnoupal district in the last 24 hours, police said on Wednesday.

In one of the incidents, police said that a combined team of Tengnoupal police and Assam Rifles arrested an alleged drug peddler along with WY tablets worth over ₹ 2 crore in the international market. The arrested person has been identified as Jangkholun from Churachandpur district. He was arrested after a huge quantity of WY tablets packed in 10 bags was recovered from a Bolero that he was driving which was checked at Tengnoupal police check post along Imphal-Moreh section of NH-102 on Wednesday morning, around 8 am, police said. The Imphal-bound vehicle was coming from Moreh side.

Earlier, a team of Tengnoupal police arrested two alleged drug peddlers with a huge quantity of brown sugar and WY tablets during its routine frisking and checking at the same Tengnoupal police check post along NH-102 on Tuesday, around 4pm. The arrested persons have been identified as Lamkhohao Haokip and Luthengin alias Lun Nehemiah Haokip of Churachandpur district.

The police arrested them after 55 soap cases containing suspected brown sugar and three bundles wrapped in black plastic packets containing suspected WY tablets were recovered from the Chevrolet Sail car they came with from Moreh side. They carried the drugs concealed in a well-schemed compartment at the back of the rear seat of the car, the police further said. The approximate value of the seized brown sugar and WY tablets would be ₹ 1,57,40,000 and ₹ 42,42,000 respectively, the police added.

First-ever international film festival in Manipur starts on April 2

IMPHAL, March 31 (IANS): The first-ever international film festival, supported by the Union Information and Broadcasting ministry, will begin here on April 2, officials said on Wednesday.

Manipur Film Development Society (MSFDS) secretary Sunzu Bachaspatimayum said that in the 5-day long international film festival -- 'Eikhoigi Imphal International Film Festival' -- 11 feature films, 8 non-feature films and one short film would be screened.

Films including those from Iran, Germany, Korea, Philippines and Norway would be screened.

The official said that two Manipuri films -- Romi Meitei's 'Eigi



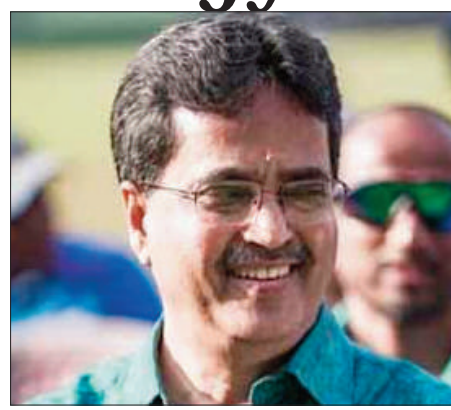
Yum' and Haobam Pabankumar's

Tripura BJP president Manik Saha wins Rajya Sabha poll

AGARTALA, March 31 (PTI): Tripura BJP president Dr Manik Saha was elected to the states' lone Rajya Sabha seat on Thursday, Chief Electoral Officer Gite Kirankumar Dinkarrao said. Manik Saha polled 40 votes while his rival candidate, CPI(M) nominee Bhanu Lal Saha, bagged 15. An MLA of the Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura (IPFT), a constituent of the ruling BJP-led coalition, did not vote.

Four seats of the 60-member Tripura assembly are now vacant. MLAs take part in the Rajya Sabha poll as members of the Upper House of Parliament are elected by legislators in state assemblies. It is an election through proportional representation. "The Rajya Sabha election was held in a peaceful manner. The result was declared after getting permission from the Election Commission. Dr Manik Saha won 40-15," Dinkarrao said.

As expected, BJP-IPFT nominee Manik Saha won the election. Assembly Speaker Ratan Chakraborty said, "Barring one MLA of the IPFT, all 40 legislators of BJP-IPFT alliance supported him. There was no cross-voting," he said. Chief



Minister Biplab Kumar Deb congratulated Manik Saha for being elected as the first BJP Rajya Sabha MP from Tripura.

"I believe you will work sincerely in the Upper House of Parliament for the welfare of the people of Tripura under the guidance of Honourable PM Shri Narendra Modi Ji," Deb said in a social media post. Mainak Saha, who quit the Congress

and joined the BJP in 2016, was made the party's state president in 2020.

He had replaced Biplab Kumar Deb who had led the saffron party to a phenomenal victory in the 2018 Assembly elections ending a 25-year-old Communist rule. CPI(M) candidate Bhanu Lal Saha is an MLA and a former finance minister of the state. The Left Front currently has 15 MLAs in the Tripura assembly, while the ruling BJP has a strength of 33 and its ally IPFT has eight. IPFT legislator Brishaketu Debbarma who did not vote in the Rajya Sabha election reportedly joined the Tripura Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance (TIPRA Motha).

BJP legislators Sudip Roy Barman and Asish Saha resigned from the assembly and gave up their memberships of the party in February. They later joined the Congress. Speaker Ratan Chakraborty in January disqualified BJP MLA Ashish Das who has joined the Trinamool Congress, while CPI(M) legislator Ramendra Chandra Deb Nath died recently. The tenure of incumbent Rajya Sabha MP from Tripura, Jharna Das Baidya, will expire on April 2.

Arunachal reports one new Covid case, tally at 64,485

ITANAGAR, March 31 (PTI): Days after turning into a Covid-free state, Arunachal Pradesh on Thursday reported a fresh case, pushing the tally to 64,485, a senior health department official said.

The new case was detected from Shi Yomi district, he said.

The north-eastern state had become Covid-free on March 27 after the lone infected person in Lohit district recovered.

The death toll remained at 296 as no fatality was reported in the past 24 hours, State Surveillance Officer Lobsang Jampa said.

A total of 64,188 people have recovered from the disease in Arunachal Pradesh so far, Jampa said.

State Immunisation Officer Dimong Padung said 16,62,145 people have been inoculated till Wednesday.

Meghachandra Singh named Manipur Congress president

NEW DELHI/IMPHAL, March 31 (IANS): Two weeks after N Loken Singh resigned as Manipur Congress president taking moral responsibility of the party's defeat in the recent Assembly polls, interim Congress chief Sonia Gandhi on Wednesday appointed new state president, four working presidents, treasurer, five vice-presidents and a 14-member executive committee.

Congress general secretary K C Venugopal communicated the postings with former minister and sitting MLA Keisham Meghachandra Singh as the new state unit chief.

Four working presidents were also appointed to strengthen the party organisation in Manipur, which was governed by the Congress for 15 consecutive years from 2002-2017. They are T Manga Vaiphei, Mohammad Fajur Rahim, Victor Keishing and Kh Devabrata Singh.



While three of them are new faces, Devabrata Singh was the vice-president in the previous committee. Naga leader Victor Keishing is the son of former chief minister and veteran Naga leader Rishang Keishing.

In the 14-member executive committee, former chief minister

Okram Ibobi Singh, former deputy chief minister Gaikhangam, former minister and ex-state president T N Haokip, veteran leader Moirangthem Okendro and former state Congress president N Loken Singh were accommodated.

After the party's debacle in the recently-held Assembly polls in

five states, Manipur is the first state where the Congress state unit has been reconstituted.

The Congress failed to win a reasonable number of seats in any of the states and in a humiliating defeat, lost Punjab to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

Immediately after the poll debacle, Sonia Gandhi had asked the state chiefs of the five states -- Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Manipur and Goa -- to step down from their posts, and appointed observers to study the cause of the party's debacle in these states.

The Congress, which fielded 54 candidates in Manipur, won only five seats in the 60-member Assembly, with many of its sitting MLAs biting the dust.

However, three-time former chief minister Okram Ibobi Singh and his son Surjakumar Okram won from Thoubal and Khangabong constituencies, respectively.

Newly formed Manipur government releases ₹1016 crore

IMPHAL, March 31 (NNN): The Manipur government has released a total amount of Rs 1016 crore through the Finance department since the formation of new government till date. The amount consists largely of Central and state shares of centrally sponsored schemes. The state finances are stable as on date, an official report said on Wednesday.

The sanctions and releases have been made considering the state's resource position, anticipated receipts and revenue, etc., besides the nature of work executed and urgency for payment, amongst others. All sanctions have been made through the e-office without a physical interface between sanctioning authorities in the Finance department and work agencies/suppliers/contractors, it also said.

Work agencies/suppliers/contractors may follow up with the Administrative department concerned regarding status of sanctions and releases, the report added.

"The state government is committed to ensuring cleanliness, transparency and efficiency in public administration. All heads of department/officials are advised not to promote any type of malpractice in clearing of files," the official report further added.

NH-2 blockade against Manipur temporarily lifted

HT Correspondent
DIMAPUR, March 31: The Southern Angami Public Organisation (SAPO) on Thursday decided to temporarily suspend its indefinite NH-2 blockade under its jurisdiction against Manipur. The blockade, spearheaded by the Southern Angami Youth Organisation (SAYO) on the lifeline of Manipur, was called on March 21 demanding withdrawal of Manipur police forces from Kezotlsa area along Nagaland-Manipur border. SAPO president Kevipodi Sophie and general secretary Swelul Pucho, in a release, said the decision to suspend the blockade was unanimously taken following discussion with its governing body and frontal organisations on Thursday.

The SAPO said the decision was based on Tenmipi Peoples' Organisation's (TPO) request to it to lift the blockade and to the Manipur government to withdraw its police forces from the Kezotlsa area. It said the blockade was also temporarily lifted on the request of the Angami Public Organisation to enable it to celebrate its golden jubilee which falls on April 8.

The SAPO, however, said the relaxation and lifting of the indefinite blockade is only a "temporary measure".

The release said if the Manipur government fails to adhere to the ultimatum served by the TPO on March 29, the SAPO will initiate its own course of action for which the former will be held responsible.

The TPO, in its memorandum, urged the Manipur government to withdraw its armed police personnel and stop all activities in the disputed area at the earliest, failing which it and its constituent organisations will initiate their own course of action. The Manipur government insisted that the police post at Kezotlsa is well within its territory. Manipur chief minister N Biren Singh said the blockade was not an inter-state dispute. All Manipur-bound vehicles, including petrol tankers, remained suspended along NH-2 due to the blockade.

The SAYO maintained that the presence of Manipur government machinery in the disputed land violated the arbitration undertaking signed by Tenmipi People's Organisation (TPO), Board of Arbitrators, Mao Council, Maram and SAPO. It said the undertaking firmly resolved that no activity would be allowed in the disputed area pending resolution.

Ninety-nine new cases take Mizoram's Covid tally to 2,24,360

AIZAWL, March 31 (PTI): Mizoram on Thursday reported 99 new Covid-19 cases, 58 less than the previous day, with the tally rising to 2,24,360, a health department official said.

The death toll remained at 684 as no new fatality due to the infection was recorded in the last 24 hours, he said.

At least 152 people recuperated

from the disease during the period, taking the total number of recoveries to 2, 22, 628.

The recovery rate among Covid-19 patients in the state stood at 99.22 per cent, the official said. The daily positivity ratio dipped to 7.76 per cent from 12.40 per cent the previous day, he said.

Mizoram now has 1,048 active

cases.

The north-eastern state has so far conducted more than 18.97 lakh sample tests for Covid-19, including 1,275 on Wednesday.

State immunisation officer Dr Lalmuanawma Jongte said over 8.26 lakh people have been inoculated till March 30 with 6.68 lakh of them having received both doses of vaccines.

MoU signed to set up sports digital experience centre

IMPHAL, March 31 (NNN): The Manipur government has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Samsung Data System India Pvt. Ltd. and Abhitech IT Solutions Pvt. Ltd. on Wednesday, for setting up a world class 'Sports Digital Experience Centre' as a part of Manipur Olympic Park and at Khuman Lampak Sports Complex in Imphal. The state government was represented by special secretary, Youth Affairs and Sports, government of Manipur Namojiam Kheda Varta Singh while the Samsung Data System India Pvt. Ltd. was represented by director of Business Development, India & SAARC Tae Heun Kim and Abhitech IT Solutions Pvt. Ltd. by CEO and director Amit Mohan Srivastava. The MoU was exchanged in the presence of chief minister N Biren Singh at the cabinet hall of chief minister's secretariat in Imphal.

Speaking on the occasion, chief minister N Biren Singh stated that the government is putting an emphasis on construction of Manipur Olympic Park so that younger generations and players could get motivated

with the activities and achievements of the Olympians. He was also hopeful that the construction of Manipur Olympic Park would be completed within 100 days. With the setting up of the Digital Experience Centre, various achievements of Olympians from Manipur will be digitally displayed making the public aware about their achievements. Achievements of other players will also be displayed at Khuman Lampak Sports Complex. Such initiatives will help in improving and enhancing the performance of sporting talents through latest technologies like sports analytics, virtual reality and mixed reality among others. It will also motivate younger generations to opt sports as a career. Manipur Youth Affairs and Sports minister Govindas Konthoujam, chief secretary Dr Rajesh Kumar, additional chief secretary V Vumlungnam, director, Youth Affairs and Sports T Phulen, representatives of Samsung Data System India Pvt. Ltd. and Abhitech IT Solutions Pvt. Ltd., Members of Editors Guild Manipur (EGM) and other officials were present during the MoU signing.

Rajya Sabha bids farewell to 72 retiring MPs

PM urges them to inspire coming generations

NEW DELHI, March 31 (PTI): The Rajya Sabha on Thursday bid farewell to its 72 retiring members with Prime Minister Narendra Modi urging them to take the experience gained in the House to across India in the best interests of the people and help inspire the coming generations.

Members cutting across party lines shared fond memories of their retiring colleagues and hoped they would return to the House. While most MPs were emotional, there were some lighter moments as well.

A total of 72 Rajya Sabha MPs, including seven nominated members, are retiring between March and July this year, which is one-third of the strength of the House. Among them, some may return to the Rajya Sabha.

The retiring members represent 19 states and some of them have experience of five terms.

Those retiring from the Rajya Sabha include A K Antony, Ambika Soni, P Chidambaram, Anand Sharma, Jairam Ramesh, Suresh Prabhu, Praful Patel, Subramanian Swamy, Prasanna Acharya, Sanjay Raut, Naresh Gajral, Satish Chandra Mishra, M C Mary Kom, Swapan Dasgupta and Narendra Jadhav.

In his remarks, Rajya Sabha chairman M Venkaiah Naidu asked lawmakers to be propelled by "passion, performance and procedural



integrity" and desist from disrupting law-making bodies while upholding the honour and privilege bestowed on them by the people.

He called upon them to ensure the expectations and aspirations of people are incorporated in the designing laws and policies.

The Rajya Sabha chairman also voiced concern over the House having lost over 35 per cent of the functional time due to disruptions since 2017.

In his speech, the Prime Minister emphasised that experience has more power than knowledge and the MPs should take it forward in the service of the nation.

"We may be moving out of these four walls (of this House) but we should take this experience from here to all the four directions in the

best interests of the country," Modi said. Giving his best wishes to those retiring, he told them to "come again" to the House. He also told them to pen down their experiences and contributions.

"I would like you to put in words the memories gained here to help serve as a reference point for coming generations," the Prime Minister said.

The House and the nation feel the loss and some sort of shortcomings in decision-making for the coming generations when experienced colleagues retire, he said.

Modi also noted, "When experienced people retire, a lot would be said about them in the House but the responsibility of those remaining increases. The members who remain have to take forward the tales

of experience left behind by those retiring."

Leader of Opposition and Senior Congress MP Mallikarjuna Kharge said that after listening to the Prime Minister and other members "I realised how important the Rajya Sabha is".

"The Upper House is a chamber of ideas and a house of intellectuals from varied fields. There are ex-chief ministers, ex-prime ministers and many ministers are part of this House. We have gained from their experience".

Kharge emphasised that there can be differences of opinion but it is important that everyone works together.

As this is a permanent House, the journey continues, old members will retire and new ones will come, the Congress leader said.

"The numbers in the Opposition benches may be less, but they have strength in their argument. The problem is that arguments are not considered but voices are counted. This is what Atal Ji had said, not me," he recalled.

Rajya Sabha deputy chairman Hariwansh expressed confidence that the retiring members, through their public engagement, would continue to work to increase the confidence of citizens and students in politics and parliamentary democracy.

Kejriwal targets BJP over vandalism at his residence, says can lay down life for nation

NEW DELHI, March 31 (PTI): Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal on Thursday said he can lay down his life for the country, a day after members of the BJP's youth wing vandalised property outside his residence and the AAP alleged that a conspiracy was being hatched to 'assassinate' its national convenor. Without naming the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Kejriwal further said such 'hooliganism' by a party in power at the Centre will not help in the progress of the nation and send out a wrong message to the people.

The BJP's youth wing Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) allegedly damaged property outside Kejriwal's residence in Civil Lines on Wednesday during their protest against the chief minister's remarks on 'The Kashmir Files' film.

"Arvind Kejriwal is not important but the country is. I am a very small person and a common man. I can lay down my life for the nation. India will not progress through such hooliganism," Kejriwal said at an event to flag off e-autos at IP Depot here.

"If the biggest party of the world, which is in power at the Centre, resorts to such hooliganism in the capital, it will spread a bad message among people. People will think this is the right way (to deal with anything)," he said at the event. Kejriwal also said the country



cannot progress in such a scenario. People will have to work with love, then only the nation can prosper, he said.

"We have already wasted 75 years by doing dirty politics, indulging in fighting and hooliganism. Now if we want to take our country forward, make it an India of the 21st century, then we will have to work together with love," Kejriwal said.

Deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia on Wednesday had lashed out at the BJP, alleging it was a "conspiracy to kill" Kejriwal as the saffron party is unable to defeat the Aam Aadmi Party in the elections.

The BJP has been targeting Kejriwal after he took a swipe at the saffron party for promoting the film. It has demanded an apology from the chief minister, saying he has insulted Kashmiri Hindus with his remarks about the movie.

The BJYM protest outside the CM's residence was being led by its national president and MP Tejasvi Surya.

The BJP has accused the AAP of scripting a drama and playing the 'victim card' after the 'public anger' against Kejriwal's remarks 'mocking' displaced Kashmiri Pandits.

Surya had asserted that the "victims in this issue are Kashmiri Hindus and not the Aam Aadmi Party and Kejriwal".

"It is a time-tested tactic of the urban Naxals. Our protest is not against any party and this is not merely regarding 'The Kashmir Files'. This protest is against the inhuman mindset of Kejriwal who denies the Hindu genocide in Kashmir," Surya had said.

The Delhi Police on Thursday also arrested eight people in connection with alleged vandalism at Kejriwal's residence here.

Sonia voices concern over MGNREGA budget cut, Centre hits back

NEW DELHI, March 31 (PTI): Congress president Sonia Gandhi on Thursday voiced concern over the budgetary cut for MGNREGA, contending that several states have negative balance in their accounts to the tune of ₹ 5000 crore which has led to delays in payments to workers.

Raising the issue during the Zero Hour, Gandhi urged the government to make adequate allocations to MGNREGA, a scheme that had helped the government during the Covid-19 pandemic, and ensure payments within 15 days.

Rural Development minister Giriraj Singh and I&B minister Anurag Thakur hit back at Gandhi, accusing her of politicising the issue and claimed that her remarks were "far from truth".

"The issue raised by the honourable member is far from the truth. The budgetary allocation for MGNREGA in 2013-14 (UPA years) was ₹ 33,000 crore, whereas under Prime Minister Narendra Modi it had reached ₹ 1.12 lakh crore. No need to show us the mirror," Singh said.

Gandhi said MGNREGA, which was mocked by some persons, had provided timely help to crores of affected poor families during the pandemic and played a positive role in helping the government.

"Still there is regular reduction in the budgetary allocation for MGNREGA. This year the budget for MGNREGA is 35 per cent less than that of 2020. This comes at a time when unemployment is rising continuously," she said.

Gandhi said the budgetary cuts were weakening the legal guarantee of timely payment and employment. She noted that the Supreme Court had



likened the delay in MGNREGA payments with forced labour.

Gandhi said the states were told that their annual labour budget will not be approved unless they meet conditions related to social audit and appointment of Lokpal.

"Social audit should be made effective but workers can't be punished by stopping the money for this," she said.

"I request the Central government to allocate adequate funds for MGNREGA, ensure payment of workers within 15 days of work, and pay compensation in case of delay in payment of wages," Gandhi said.

Responding to Gandhi, Thakur alleged that the MGNREGA scheme saw massive corruption under the UPA government, which was weeded out by the Modi government.

He said under Prime Minister Modi, geo-tagging of assets created under MGNREGA was introduced and payments were directly made to workers in their Jan Dhan accounts.

Congress members were up on their feet protesting the remarks targeting the UPA made by Singh and Thakur.

As the commotion continued, Thakur said it was ironic for the opposition to criticise when a union minister had responded immediately to an issue raised by Gandhi.

Delhi HC refuses to entertain PIL seeking Bharat Ratna for Ratan Tata



NEW DELHI, March 31 (PTI): The Delhi High Court on Thursday refused to entertain a public interest litigation seeking a direction to the central government to award Bharat Ratna to industrialist Ratan Tata.

A bench headed by Acting Chief Justice Vipin Sanghi stated that it was not for the court to direct the authorities to award the highest civilian honour to a person.

"What kind of a petition is this? Is this for the court to direct (the government to award Bharat

Ratna)," said the bench also comprising Justice Navin Chawla.

The counsel for the petitioner urged the court to "at least request" the government.

"Go make the request. Where is the question of the court stepping in?," said the Acting Chief Justice.

The counsel for the petitioner withdrew the petition after the court said that it would dismiss the same with costs.

The petitioner - Rakesh, who claimed to be a social worker, said in his plea that Ratan Tata deserves Bharat Ratna as he is serving the nation and has an unblemished life.

He has led an exemplary life inspiring millions of career aspirants around the globe and has proved to be an excellent leader and a business owner, the petition said.

India, France begin mega naval wargame in Arabian Sea

NEW DELHI, March 31 (PTI): India and France have begun a five-day mega naval wargame in the Arabian Sea in reflection of growing congruence in their maritime security cooperation.

The Indian Navy said various platforms including ships, submarines, maritime patrol aircraft, fighter aircraft and helicopters of the two navies are participating in the Varuna exercise.

"These units will endeavour to enhance and hone their operational skills in maritime theatre, augment interoperability to undertake maritime security operations and demonstrate their commitment to promote peace, security and stability in the region as an integrated force," it said in a statement.

It is the 20th edition of the Varuna series of exercises and it has become a vital part of strategic ties between the two countries.

"The exercise has been a principal driver for operational-level interactions between the two navies and has underscored the shared commitment of both nations to security, safety and freedom of the global maritime commons," it said.

French Navy Chief Admiral Pierre Vandier visited India this week during which he held talks with his Indian counterpart Admiral R Hari Kumar focusing on mechanisms to ensure peace and stability in the Indian Ocean amid rising Chinese presence in the region.

The visit by the French Navy Chief came over a



month after External Affairs minister S Jaishankar travelled to Paris.

During the visit, Jaishankar said India looks at France as a "trusted" partner in countering myriad security challenges from the seabed to space and from cyber to oceans.

The maritime cooperation between India and France has witnessed a major expansion in the last few years.

The Indian and French navies in April last year too carried out a mega wargame in the Arabian Sea.

The French Navy deployed its nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle, and its entire carrier strike group in that exercise, reflecting growing congruence in naval ties.

NSA Doval holds talks with Dutch counterpart

NEW DELHI, March 31 (PTI): NSA Ajit Doval on Thursday held talks with his Dutch counterpart Geoffrey Van Leeuwen focusing on bilateral defence and security cooperation as well as the crisis in Ukraine.

The visit to India by Leeuwen, the security and foreign policy advisor to the prime minister of the Netherlands, comes ahead of a trip to that country by President Ram Nath Kovind.

Official sources said Doval and Leeuwen had intensive discussion covering a wide range of bilateral issues as well as major regional and global developments.



"Both of them underlined the importance for India and the Netherlands to remain engaged on these issues and intensify their

contacts, including through policy dialogues on issues of mutual interest," said a source.

The sources said Doval and Leeuwen agreed to further strengthen the partnership between the two countries by expanding ongoing defence, security and counter-terrorism cooperation. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral relations between the two sides.

To commemorate this milestone, Kovind is paying a state visit to the Netherlands from April 4 to 7 at the invitation of the King and Queen of the Netherlands.

India voice of developing nations on climate change: Environment minister

NEW DELHI, March 31 (PTI): India has emerged as a 'strong voice' of developing nations on climate change issues that can neither be suppressed nor ignored, Environment minister Bhupendra Yadav asserted on Thursday.

Replying to a discussion on climate change in the Lok Sabha, Yadav said when it comes to the environment, India has always been a solution provider to the world.

He said India, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, was among the few countries that not only set Nationally Determined Contributions in 2015 but achieved them before time, setting an example for others.

Underlining that the Prime Minister has often talked about climate justice, Yadav said developed nations who are chiefly responsible for carbon emission must take responsibility.

The developed countries have acknowledged this earlier and pledged USD 100 billion to developing countries, he noted.

"If the fight against climate change has to be fought by the developed and developing nations together, then developed nations will have to give two facilities to devel-

oping nations - climate finance and technology transfer," Yadav asserted.

During the COP26 meet in Glasgow, the Prime Minister talked about various aspects of India's fight against climate change, including the country's vision to achieve carbon neutrality by 2070, the minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change said.

The share of developed countries, which account for 17 per cent of the world population, in global carbon emission is 60 per cent, while that of India that's home to 17 per cent of the world's population is just 4 per cent, the minister said.

India's lifestyle can teach the world how to live in harmony with the environment, he asserted.

Noting that climate change affects everyone transcending borders, Yadav said the new cyclones hitting India's coastal areas in the last few years show that "we are also vulnerable".

Listing out the achievements of the Modi government in the field of climate change, he said due to the efforts it made in the last seven years, India has become a leader in environment policy and action. Under Modi, India has not only



come up with an environment policy that gives direction to the world but it is the only country that has taken big steps in achieving the goals set at climate summits, Yadav said.

"The time is over when India's voice was not heard on international platforms. Under Prime Minister Modi, India has created a strong identity for itself and the world community can neither suppress its voice nor ignore it," he asserted.

Another achievement of COP26 from India's point of view is that the country has become a 'strong voice' of developing nations demanding equal treatment for them-

selves on climate change issues, the minister said.

He also hailed the government's initiatives like the International Solar Alliance that India started along with France and asserted that such steps enhanced India's prestige on the global stage.

Participating in the discussion, Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi questioned the government on the effects of the PM Gati Shakti scheme, the Centre's big-ticket infrastructure project, on India's commitment to cut emissions to net-zero by 2070.

Gogoi said while he supported the development, the scheme, which is a national master plan for multi-modal connectivity entailing large-scale construction, will raise emissions.

"Lakhs of rupees have been allocated to PM Gati Shakti for infrastructure for railways, airports and highways. This scheme is the greatest challenge for India.

"We would need coal, high-emission producing technology will be required. It will raise emissions. What is the model that will keep emissions low? Will the government make a rule that only lower-emission technology will be used?" he asked.

Gogoi also said while the environment minister had stated in Glasgow during COP26 that India will reduce the use of coal, the transition to alternative fuel has to be planned to ensure that people connected to the sector do not suffer.

BJP MP Jayant Sinha said the net-zero commitment by 2070 is "massively net positive for India". He pushed for a global carbon market and for India to be connected to a worldwide carbon network.

Both Sinha and Gogoi pitched for an institutional arrangement to secure India's climate future, with the Congress MP even proposing that the government consider bringing a legislation to that effect.

BSP's Malook Nagar said the government should encourage electrical vehicles and proposed that neem trees be grown in abundance to curb pollution.

Industries responsible for emissions should be asked to plant trees in proportion to their carbon footprint, he said.

Shiv Sena's Arvind Sawant raised concern over the use of lithium batteries in e-vehicles and wanted to know how the government planned their disposal.

Stalin meets PM; seeks Centre's nod for providing humanitarian aid to Lankan Tamils

NEW DELHI/CHENNAI, March 31 (PTI): Tamil Nadu chief minister M K Stalin on Thursday met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Delhi and sought the Centre's approval for the state government to provide humanitarian aid to Sri Lankan Tamils in the wake of an economic crisis in that country.

Stalin gave a detailed memorandum on various issues, including those related to the economic crisis in the island nation, during his meeting with Modi.

Referring to adversities being faced by Lankan Tamils, he said many of them embarked on a 'perilous journey' to Tamil Nadu due to unaffordable prices of essential commodities there and they are lodged in a transit camp in the state.

The memorandum noted that more people may be arriving in the state due to worsening economic conditions in Sri Lanka.

In this juncture, it added, the Tamil Nadu government is willing to provide essential commodities and life saving medicines to Sri Lankan Tamils living in northern and eastern part of that country as well as those working in plantation sector, who are reeling under severe food crisis, as a life saving measure and help them, especially vulnerable group of women and children.

"It is requested to accord necessary permission to undertake the benevolent activity," it said.

Earlier in the day, he also met Congress president Sonia Gandhi in the Parliament.

Welcoming Stalin to Delhi, Gandhi went to meet him in the



DMK office in Parliament and said she came to say 'Vanakkam' to him and will meet him again during his party office inauguration in the national capital on April 2.

Stalin greeted her with a shawl. The DMK chief is on a three-day visit to the national capital and is scheduled to meet several top leaders.

DMK is inaugurating its party office in the national capital on April 2 and has invited leaders from various parties including the BJP and the Congress, the party MP Kanimozhi said.

Raising the issues concerning Tamil Nadu fishermen with Modi, Stalin urged the Centre to arrange for fishermen level talks between India and Sri Lanka, which was not held since 2016, to resolve frequent arrests and detention of the men and seizure of fishing crafts besides asking Lanka to stop arresting the

Tamil Nadu fishermen.

Retrieving Katchatheevu, ceded to Sri Lanka in 1974, and thereby restoring the traditional fishing rights of Indian fishermen in the Palk Bay area alone would ensure a lasting solution to the vexatious problem, he said.

On Karnataka government's Mekedatu project across the Cauvery, Stalin requested the Prime Minister to direct the Ministry of Jal Shakti not to give its nod for the project or for any new reservoir project of that state in the Cauvery basin.

The Cauvery Water Management Authority should be told to disapprove the Mekedatu project and Karnataka asked not to take up any new project construction without Tamil Nadu's prior consent.

Opining that the National Education Policy, 2020, may be revoked, he said in the memorandum that

any attempt to make a third language mandatory or to make a socially unfamiliar language like Sanskrit as a compulsory option as envisaged in the NEP will become an imposition and put the students of Tamil Nadu at a serious disadvantage.

"Tamil Nadu will therefore continue to follow the two language policy (of Tamil and English) which is in practice now," he said.

"An education policy should be in tune with the economic policy of the government," he said in the memorandum and claimed that states concerned should be given complete freedom to take steps in a manner that is based on the socio-cultural moorings of the state.

Allowing Tamil Nadu government to fill all professional seats including MBBS / BDS/ AYUSH courses on basis of Class XII marks alone, ensuring about 2,000 medical students who returned from Ukraine owing to the raging crisis, to pursue their education in the state, providing a preferential allotment to Tamil Nadu Defence Industrial Corridor and allocate the test facilities to the Corridor, establishing two DRDO labs in TN Defence Corridor nodes, providing excess land of Salem Steel Plant for Defence Industrial Park, laying 11 km railway line to Multi Modal Logistic Park (MMLP) at Mappedu were among the numerous demands.

He also sought steps to include Narikoravar / Kuruvikaran communities in the list of Scheduled Tribes of Tamil Nadu as envisaged under Article 342(1) and 342(2) of the Constitution of India at the earliest.

EAM Jaishankar holds talks with British counterpart Liz Truss

NEW DELHI, March 31 (PTI): The crisis in Ukraine figured prominently in talks between External Affairs minister S Jaishankar and his visiting British counterpart Liz Truss on Thursday.

In her opening comments, Truss said it is important to respect the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and international law.

In his remarks, Jaishankar talked about the progress in the implementation of the Roadmap 2030 that was adopted in May last year to further broaden ties.

Ahead of the talks, the British High Commission, in a statement, said Truss will convey to Jaishankar that Russia's invasion of Ukraine underlines the importance of democracies to work together to deter "aggressors" and reduce vulnerability to "coercion".

"Foreign Secretary Liz Truss is in India today as part of a wider diplomatic push following Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine last month," the statement said.

"In a meeting with India's External Affairs Minister Subrahmanya Jaishankar, the foreign secretary will say Russia's invasion of Ukraine underlines the importance of democracies working closer together to deter aggressors, reduce vulnerability to coercion and strengthen global security," it added.

There has been a flurry of visits by foreign dignitaries to India in the last few days. US deputy national security adviser Daleep Singh arrived in the country on Wednesday, while Russian Foreign minister Sergey Lavrov is scheduled to land in New Delhi on Thursday evening.

All pandemic-related restrictions to be lifted in Maharashtra from Apr 2; no mask compulsion



MUMBAI, March 31 (PTI): After more than two years, all pandemic-related restrictions including the mandatory wearing of masks will be lifted in Maharashtra from April 2, the Maharashtra government announced on Thursday.

'Gudhi Padwa', the Marathi New Year, falls on April 2 this year.

The decision to lift all the restrictions was taken at a cabinet meeting chaired by chief minister Uddhav Thackeray. Health minister Rajesh Tope told reporters here.

"From Gudhi Padwa, all Covid-19 related restrictions under the Epi-

demic Diseases Act and Disaster Management Act will be withdrawn," Tope said, adding that wearing masks would be voluntary.

In a separate statement, chief minister Thackeray cautioned that though the restrictions are going to be lifted, it is advisable to maintain social distance, wear masks and take anti-coronavirus vaccines.

Tope told reporters that the US, UK and many countries in Europe have lifted restrictions related to mandatory masks. In Maharashtra, it has been made voluntary, he said.

To a question whether the state

government was taking a risk by lifting the mask mandate, the health minister said, "The chief minister and others (cabinet colleagues) have consulted the State Task Force on Covid-19 and the health department before taking this decision."

Notably, on Wednesday Tope had said that looking at the rise in coronavirus cases in many countries it would not be right to take the risk of doing away with the mask mandate in Maharashtra.

The state government has already eased restrictions on movement and gathering as new cases started declining after the third wave, driven by the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV2, abated by the end of January.

With the lifting of norms, Gudhi Padwa processions can take place without any restrictions this year, Tope said.

According to the health ministry data, India has recorded a total of 4,24,89,004 coronavirus cases so far, of which Maharashtra, a state with a high urban density, saw 77,25,120, the highest in the country.

"The remaining 24 accused in the exam paper leak case were produced before the judicial magistrate here and remanded in 14-day judicial custody," Ballia additional superintendent of police Vijay Tripathi told PTI on Thursday.

Police sources said the DfOS has been shifted to the Azamgarh district jail.

The remaining accused are lodged in the Ballia district jail.

Teams of the Special Task Force and SOG (Special Operation Groups) of the Uttar Pradesh Police investigating the case are presently camping in Ballia, trying to track down the individuals and the mastermind involved in the crime.

Uttar Pradesh Education minister Gulab Devi, meanwhile, visited Ideal Public Inter College, a UP Board exam centre in Lucknow, to oversee arrangements for the board exams.

UP: Nine more arrested in Class 12 English exam paper leak case; 26 held so far

BALLIA (UP), March 31 (PTI): Nine more people, including two local journalists, were arrested on Thursday for their alleged role in the Class 12 board exam paper leak, the Uttar Pradesh Police said.

The English examination was cancelled in 24 districts on Wednesday after the paper was leaked, prompting CM Yogi Adityanath to order invoking the stringent National Security Act in the case.

Till now, 26 people have been arrested in the case.

Three journalists and Ballia's District Inspector of Schools (DfOS) Brajesh Kumar Mishra are among those arrested. One of the journalists was arrested on Wednesday.

The English paper cancelled in 24 districts will now be held on April 13, an official statement said here.

The DfOS and one of the arrested journalists, Ajit Ojha, were on Wednesday produced before the chief judicial magistrate and sent to judicial custody.

Delhi among 31 cities with increased PM10 levels in 2020-21, govt tells RS

NEW DELHI, March 31 (PTI): Delhi is among the 31 cities under the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) which have shown an increase in the level of PM10 pollutant concentration in 2020-21, the government told Parliament on Thursday.

Responding to a query on the number of cities that have reported an improvement or deterioration in air quality index (AQI) in the last two years under NCAP, minister of State for Environment Ashwini Choubey said 96 cities indicated a decrease in PM10 concentration and 31 cities showed an increase in the pollutant level.

"The ambient air quality data of Particulate Matter 10 or PM10 (size less than 10 micrometres) of 132 non-attainment/metropolitan cities indicated a decrease in PM10 concentration in 96 cities, increase in PM10 concentration in 31 cities and no change in concentration in four cities in 2020-2021 as compared to 2019-2020," Choubey said in a



written response.

The data is of the 132 non-attainment cities that have fallen short of the national ambient air quality standards for over five years under the NCAP.

Data of Faridabad was not avail-

able for comparison, he said.

Under the NCAP, launched in 2019 as a national-level strategy to reduce air pollution, Rs 423.21 crore has been sanctioned for non-attainment cities to initiate actions such as the expansion of monitoring

network, construction and demolition waste management facilities, non-motorised transport infrastructure, green buffers zone, use of mechanical street sweepers and composting units, the minister said.

According to the data, Delhi's PM10 level increased from 192 micrograms per cubic metre (ug/m3) of air in 2019-20 to 193 ug/m3 in 2020-21.

Besides the national capital, the other 30 cities which showed an increase in PM10 level include Ahmedabad, Amritsar, Ludhiana, Agra, Visakhapatnam, Guwahati, Jammu, Srinagar, Indore, Thane and Hyderabad.

The 96 cities which showed improvement in air quality or decrease in PM10 concentration in 2020-21, include Noida, Meerut, Lucknow, Kanpur, Dehradun, Rishikesh, Varanasi, Patna, Chandigarh, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Raipur, Surat, Ranchi, Kolkata, Howrah, Bengaluru, Aurangabad, and Navi Mumbai.

TMC leader says he wanted to drop Anarul from all posts but was stopped by minister

KOLKATA, March 31 (PTI):

The massacre in West Bengal's Birbhum last week, which left nine dead, has also laid bare the fault lines in the state's ruling camp as the party's district president Anubrata Mondal on Thursday said that he had wanted to remove Anarul Hossain, arrested in the case, from all organisational posts, but was stopped by local MLA Ashis Banerjee. Last week, eight people were burnt alive, while another succumbed to her injuries later, in Bogtui village near Rampurhat town of the district in the suspected fallout of a TMC panchayat official's murder.

Hossain, the president of Rampurhat block-1, was arrested days after the massacre from Tarapith area in the district.

"I was keen on removing Anarul from all organisational posts he held in the party. I had received several complaints against him. However, local MLA and state minister Ashis Banerjee requested me to retain him at least till the panchayat polls. Banerjee is a senior leader," Mondal told reporters.

Banerjee, on his part, said he did so keeping in mind the "interest of



BIRBHUM CASE

the organisation". "I had made the request only after speaking to local leaders. It was an organisational decision," he said.

TMC state general secretary Kunal Ghosh declined to comment on the matter, stating that he would not be able to make any remark before talking to local leaders.

The BJP, however, said such statements from TMC leaders show that the party was trying to engage in a blame game to divert attention from the issue at hand.

"Everybody knows that Anubrata Mondal is the most pow-

erful person in Birbhum. The kind of statements and counter statements that are coming from the TMC camp only prove that its leaders are trying to save their own skin," state BJP spokesperson Shamik Bhattacharya added.

In a similar vein, CPI(M) state secretary Mohammed Salim said the TMC, instead of fighting within the party, should find out how the incident happened.

"The TMC is now engaged in infighting...it should rather reveal who allowed this carnage to take place," Salim added.

Contd. from Page 1...

Centre announces AFSPA curtailment

whose Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) is a BJP ally, tweeted. Assam and Manipur have BJP governments. However, the reaction of civil society and intellectuals in Nagaland and Manipur varied from being cautiously optimistic to outright angry. In Nagaland where the disturbed area notification is in force since 1995, Naga Hoho general secretary K Elu Ndong welcomed the development but said, "Our demand is complete revocation of AFSPA from all Naga inhabited areas in particular and the North East region in general." Naga Hoho is the apex organisation of Nagas in four NE States - Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.

Naga People's Front (NPF) secretary general Achumbemo Kikon said, "The Act (AFSPA) has acted only against democracy," and urged the Centre to consider its repeal.

Naga Mothers Association (NMA) advisor Rosemary Dzuivichu termed the decision "very unfair" as the public demand was to repeal the Act which "violates every kind of human rights". "Such small favours are unacceptable," Dzuivichu said. NMA is an influential civil society organisation in the state that has been plagued by insurgency for over six decades. In Manipur, director Human Rights Alert Babloo Loitongbam said, "We welcome it. It is a step in the right direction but our movement for the repeal of AFSPA will continue."

Executive editor of The Frontier Manipur Paojel Chaoba, who was detained under the anti-terror law - Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) in 2021 for an article published on the news web-portal, said, "We too welcome it for it is overdue. However, AFSPA should be revoked by the State...from the entire valley area of Manipur." Manipur has a long history of civilian protests against the AFSPA. In November 2000, 10 civilians were gunned down by Assam Rifles troops at Malom Makha Leikai, near Imphal airport. The incident provoked a young from Sharmila to start her legendary hunger strike against the AFSPA.

In 2015, AFSPA was in force in 3 districts of Arunachal Pradesh, 20 km belt of Arunachal Pradesh along the Assam border and in 16 police station areas in 9 other districts of the state. It has been gradually reduced and the disturbed areas notification is currently in force in only 3 districts and in 2 police station areas in another district. The disturbed area notification, while hitherto applied to the entire state of Nagaland, is being withdrawn from 15 police stations in 7 districts. A home ministry spokesperson said in comparison to 2014, there has been a reduction of 74 per cent in militancy related incidents in 2021 in the Northeast. Similarly, the deaths of security personnel and civilians have also come down by 60 per cent and 84 per cent respectively during this period. To realise the Prime Minister's vision of a peaceful and prosperous Northeast, the home minister has held talks with all the states of the region on a regular basis.

As a result, most of the extremist groups have laid down their arms, and expressed faith in the Constitution and the policies of the Modi government, the spokesperson said, adding about 7,000 militants have surrendered in the last few years.

Russian Foreign minister Lavrov

national security adviser Daleep Singh and British foreign secretary Liz Truss. Last week, Chinese Foreign minister Wang Yi visited India. EU special envoy for the Indo-Pacific Gabriele Visentin visited New Delhi this week. Unlike many other leading powers, India has not yet criticised Russia for its invasion of Ukraine and it abstained from the votes at the UN platforms in condemning the Russian aggression.

However, last Thursday, India abstained on a resolution pushed by Russia on the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, which was seen as reflective of its neutral position on the conflict. India has been pressing for the resolution of the crisis through diplomacy and dialogue.

Modi has held phone conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin on February 24, March 2 and March 7.

Modi had spoken to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy twice. Last week, Jaishankar said in Parliament that India's position on the Ukraine conflict has been "steadfast and consistent" and that it has been seeking immediate cessation of violence.

Clear status of residents in and

can be protected and poaching of rhino and wild animals can be stopped. But in doing so villagers who are living permanently for several generations will be affected."

The KSA wants clarification as to what will happen to the villagers. The KSA president also pointed out that there are big tea gardens, resorts and hotels near the KNP, if they are not affected, the creation of Eco-Sensitive Zone should not be a plan to grab Karbi Anglong's land and take away the land rights of the indigenous people living there. The villagers residing there have land pattas.

He also urged the chief executive member (CEM) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Tuliram Ronghang to discuss the issue with the State government.

Withdrawal of AFSPA, 'precious

In Karbi Anglong district, peace accords have been signed with militant outfits and the situation is peaceful but its proximity to other disturbed areas has made it necessary to keep the Act in force, Sarma said.

In Dima Hasao district, talks with the militant outfits are in an advanced stage and once an accord is signed, the withdrawal of the Act can be considered while in Upper Assam districts the ULFA is still active "but we are hopeful of a breakthrough though as of now we are taking a cautious but decisive step," he said.

It was important to conclude negotiations with the pro-talk faction of the ULFA and "it is being fast-tracked with active efforts being made in that direction," the chief minister said.

Highlighting that the decision to withdraw the Act was not taken "overnight and neither was it taken due to the demand of any group or organisation", Sarma said, it was taken as there has been a "marked improvement" in the law and order situation in the state.

Noting that it was a "collective decision taken by both the central and state governments", he said the Assam government was consulted at every step as indicated by his frequent visits to the national capital.

"The state Cabinet authorised it, we will issue the notification today and at midnight, the Act will be withdrawn from 23 districts," he said.

The Union Home minister had set a target of achieving this bold step by Bihu, and "we can say it is a Rongali Bihu gift for the people of Assam," the chief minister said.

This is, however, just a "symbolic step" and it has been possible due to people's desire for peace and development, Sarma said.

The withdrawal of AFSPA will also send a strong signal to investors and people who want to work in Assam that the law and order situation was a thing of the past while growth, industrialisation, and economic development are the way ahead, he said.

Referring to the Unified Command strategy in force in the state, the chief minister said that its role will be confined to the nine districts with the 'disturbed area' tag while the army will move out from the other districts from where the Act has been withdrawn.

The army will be primarily involved in intelligence gathering and will be ready for deployment if required, the chief minister said.

"During the last one year, the army is not there in most of the districts from where the Act has been withdrawn and the deployment of central forces in the state is also at its lowest level of deployment," he said.

Earlier in the day, Sarma had tweeted, "I wholeheartedly welcome Adarniya PM Shri @narendramodi ji's decision to withdraw AFSPA from all areas of Assam barring nine districts and one subdivision."

He had also conveyed his gratitude to Union Home minister Amit Shah "for this great move. Around 60 per cent of the state's area will now be free from AFSPA's purview."

The state was declared a 'disturbed area' under AFSPA during the intervening night of November 27-28 1990 and the Act was extended every six months since then after a review by the state government.

It was last extended for six months on February 28, this year.

Out of Assam's total geographical area of 78,438 sq km, 31,724.94 sq km will continue to have the 'disturbed area' tag under AFSPA even after its complete withdrawal from 23 districts.



ABHISHEK BACHCHAN ON THE ENDURING POWER OF THE BIG SCREEN

MUMBAI, March 31 (IANS): Abhishek Bachchan is an actor with an impeccable sense of humour and wit. While he may be known for serious or intense roles, the actor is set to bring in a new flavour with his soon to be released social comedy 'Dasvi', which also stars Yami Gautam and Nimrat Kaur.

In a recent conversation with IANS, Abhishek spoke about collaborating with a first-time director for the film, the changing space of content industry courtesy OTT and his liking

towards the genre of comedy.

For him, the script of 'Dasvi' is what did the trick, something that he would love to watch on screen as a part of the audience. "I think it's predominantly the script and the story was very unique. It was so new and fresh and it was all about how you were saying that and it is a film which I really wanted to watch. That is the reason I signed up for it." The film has been helmed by debutant director Tushar Jalota. The actor opines that it's always great to

work with first-time directors as they bring a whole different energy to the table.

Abhishek says, "They have a very unique voice and a very unique outlook on life. I feel they don't come with any preconceived notions and that's exciting because it gives you a fresh perspective."

Ask him how would he define his character in the film or if there's someone in the history of cinema that he has modelled this character on and pat comes the reply, "I don't think there is anybody like him."

Rahul Dev turns edgier, darker in 'Abhay 3'



MUMBAI, March 31 (IANS): Actor Rahul Dev will be seen taking the grey shade a notch higher in the third instalment of the upcoming crime thriller series 'Abhay' starring Kunal Kemmu.

The makers of the show recently dropped a promo sharing glimpses of Rahul's character and it is truly killer mode on. This is the first time the makers have dropped individual promos. It also stars Tanuj Virwani and Divya Agarwal.

Talking about the same, Rahul says, "There is so much the viewers will get to explore in the show ... Abhay 3 is a layered story and will leave everyone quite intrigued. Filming for 'Avtar' (my character) in the show was interesting ... I am sure the audiences would enjoy watching Abhay Season 3 and like the silences lent by Avtar ..."

'Abhay' (Season 3) mostly covers about Abhay, played by Kunal, faces a new unknown threat, a dark force capable of exploiting anyone in the name of a twisted belief. 'Abhay 3' will be releasing on ZEE5 on April 8.



Nagarjuna, Sonal Chauhan's crucial action sequences for 'The Ghost' canned in Dubai

HYDERABAD, March 31 (IANS): With Telugu superstar Nagarjuna and Bollywood actress Sonal Chauhan in lead roles, 'The Ghost' is being shot at a rapid pace. It is reported that the makers have wrapped up a key schedule featuring Nagarjuna and Sonal Chauhan in Dubai recently.

Helmed by Praveen Sattaru,

the film's Dubai schedule was rolled out on March 10. The schedule has been wrapped up successfully after about 19 days. The pictures from the sets have come out, as Nagarjuna and Sonal can be spotted in slick attire as Interpol officers.

In a statement, the makers said that grand action scenes were shot in top-notch locations

in Dubai. "A particular sequence canned in the desert will stun the audience," they added, as they unveiled a few pictures from the sets of 'The Ghost'.

It is reported that Sonal was trained to perform intense stunts, while she will be seen in a titular role in the movie. Nagarjuna and Sonal's fans seem to be really excited to see this

fresh pair's blazing chemistry on the big screen.

Gul Panag and Anikha Suren-dran are reported to have wrapped up their scenes alongside the 'Mamadhudu' actor already. Mukesh G is the cinematographer, while Brahma Kadali is the art director of this upcoming thriller.

Prabhas: 'Adipurush' sentimentally is a very important project in my life

NEW DELHI, March 31 (IANS): Pan-India star Prabhas, who has worked in hits such as the 'Baahubali' franchise, 'Saaho', 'Varsham', 'Darling' and 'Mr Perfect' among others, is now gearing up for his next 'Adipurush', which he says is sentimentally a very important project for his life and that it's more than just a film. 'Adipurush', which translates to 'The First Man', is a Hindu historical film based on the epic Ramayana directed by Om Raut. It also stars Kriti Sanon and Saif Ali Khan. According to reports, the movie is one of the most expensive Indian films ever made.

Talking about his slate of upcoming films to IANS, Prabhas shared: "Adipurush"

sentimentally is a very important project for my life. Om Raut, luckily I have a very good director. I had called him after three days and asked 'should I do it?' because if I do make mistake it will be very wrong."

The star, who has featured in Forbes India's Celebrity 100 list three times since 2015, stressed that 'Adipurush' is more than just a film.

He asserted: "It is not just a film." "It is not a film, it is something very important and everyone will be having a look at it. I was really frightened of it and is very important for me. It is something else I feel."

The 42-year-old star has had his share of hits and misses in a career spanning over two decades. Do box



office numbers matter to Prabhas, who is often referred as "Darling" by his fans?

"Yes, I can't get every 'Baahubali' as a film... But the budgets and the people's acceptance is very important. The box office can be

told like that. It does not mean I break records nothing like that but how much I am reaching in every part... How many people are disappointed, happy or super excited that I can only know through box office. It is important."

Nushratt on shooting for 'Selfiee': Gonna be one mad fun ride



MUMBAI, March 31 (IANS): Actress Nushratt Bharuccha now has started the shoot for 'Selfiee' in Bhopal on Thursday.

Speaking about kickstarting the shoot, Nushratt said, "I am super excited to be a part of the Selfiee cast and looking forward to be working on one more film with Akshay sir. And that too right after Ram Setu, which makes it even more special!"

'Selfiee' is helmed by director Raj A Mehta, with whom Nushratt had worked with on 'Ajeeb Daastaans'.

On reuniting with him,

Nushratt said, "Of course my director Raj Mehta, who I have last done 'Ajeeb Daastaans' with, he is one crazy fun director! And him and Akshay sir on set, it will definitely be a laugh riot all day everyday! Selfiee is going to be one mad fun ride!"

Adding to it, she said, "I'm also really looking forward to working with Emraan sir and Diana. I've enjoyed watching their movies and excited to be working with them on Selfiee."

On the work front, Nushratt currently has 5 films in her kitty, namely - 'Ram Setu', 'Janhit Mein Jaari', 'Chhorii 2', 'Hurdang' and 'Selfiee'.



SHARMAJI NAMKEEN

Rishi Kapoor's last film will make you 'senti' despite flaws

sought-after cook within Mrs Gulati's circle of merry friends. How his life evolves thereafter forms the crux of the narrative. 'Sharmaji Namkeen' is a lighthearted film, yet it is not easy to sit through, for it is unusually mounted, with two actors playing the same role.

Initially, seeing Paresh Rawal slip into Rishi Kapoor's shoes seems a bit jarring, but gradually, your mind accepts it. Both share the screen time equally as B.G. Sharma.

The film sorely lacks drama, interesting twists, and an element of freshness. It trudges along on

an even keel. Nevertheless, it is an uncompromising depiction of "the show must go on" attitude to life, while it imbues the screenplay with dignity.

Rishi Kapoor and Paresh Rawal are effortless in their performance as Mr B.G. Sharma. They are aptly supported by Suhail Nayyar and Taaruk Raina as Sharma's sons, Rinku and Vincy. They both are sincere despite their frivolous bro-banter appearing forced and amateurishly staged.

Juhi Chawla as Mrs Gulati's friend Veena Manchanda, who forms a bond with Sharma, adds a cute

layer to the narrative, but does not elevate the story.

Parmeet Sethi as Veena's brother-in-law, Robbie, the Mayor of Delhi, is charming but does not add much heft to the role.

The rest of the cast in supporting roles are mostly natural, but at times they are dramatic and over-the-top. They have their moments of on-screen glory.

Mounted with mediocre production values the film will certainly have a limited appeal. Those who can make it through are going to cherish the film for Rishi Kapoor and the film's core values. IANS



One of the characters in the film states, "Baat baat pe senti ho jaate hain". That is exactly what you experience when you see 'Sharmaji Namkeen' -- Rishi Kapoor's posthumous film.

There is nothing new, unusual, or flamboyant about this slice-of-life film, which narrates the tale of Brij Gopal Sharma, a widower with two grown-up sons who finds himself at the crossroads of life when he is laid off from work.

The film begins with a function in the office of Madhuban Home Appliances, where Sharmaji is felicitated for being a sincere and dedicated worker. His boss,

Mr Sikka, advises him to enjoy life and have fun. But this is exactly what he cannot do.

After staying at home for four months and 13 days, getting on the nerves of his sons, Rinku and Vincy, Mr Sharma feels the itch to find a purpose in his life.

Being a widower, Sharmaji has been cooking at home. Also, at times, he has been volunteering at religious functions in his locality. So, at the behest of his friend, Mr Chaddha (Satish Kaushik), he takes up a cooking assignment for Mrs Gulati's (Sheeba Chaddha) kitty party.

Since then, Mr Sharma is the most

THE 20-YEAR-OLD IS INTO HER TOUR-LEADING FIFTH SEMIFINAL OF THE SEASON

SWIATEK BEATS KVIUTOVA, ENTERS INTO MIAMI OPEN SEMIFINALS

MIAMI, March 31 (IANS): World No.2 seed Poland's Iga Swiatek advanced to the Miami Open semifinals after defeating Petra Kvitova 6-3, 6-3 in the quarterfinals on Wednesday (IST).

The 20-year-old is into her tour-leading fifth semifinal of the season and third straight at the WTA 1000 level. Swiatek joins Caroline Wozniacki, Victoria Azarenka, and Jelena Ostapenko as the only players to have made four or more WTA 1000 semifinals before their 21st birthdays.

The Polish star, who is set to rise to World No.1 after Miami, will face 16th seed Jessica Pegula on Friday night for a spot in her third consecutive WTA 1000 final.

Swiatek's run to her first Miami semifinal has been nothing short of dominant. Coming



off her back-to-back titles in Doha and Indian Wells, Swiatek has lost a total of 15 games over four matches and has not dropped more than three games in a set in Miami. Her victory over No.28 seed Czech Kvitova was her tour-leading 24th of the season (24-3). "I want to use the confidence that I have built since the beginning of Doha. I think I'm on a roll and I want to use that. Having that kind of streak got pretty tricky, but I'm pretty glad that I could play well, that I'm healthy, and that I can compete against players like Petra. She's a legend," Swiatek said.

In the first meeting between the pair, Swiatek absorbed Kvitova's baseline power game while proving herself to be unbreakable on the night. After a strong start to the match, it took just one poor service game from Kvitova to give Swiatek all she

needed to pocket the opening set. Kvitova hit 11 winners to 7 unforced errors compared to Swiatek's 6 winners and 3 unforced errors in the first set.

Swiatek continued to pressure Kvitova's serve through the second set. The Czech buckled down to save four break points to hold 2-1. Swiatek went on to grab a third and final break after 1 hour and 17 minutes to seal her eighth consecutive win over a left-handed opponent.

"From the beginning, I knew that I had to keep up with the pace because she plays really fast," Swiatek said.

"I wanted to stay low on my legs and the first serve was the key. I don't know if I had many winners, but I wanted to build up positive energy from her mistakes. I'm glad that I stayed focused and I did the tactics from A to Z."

Chess Olympiad: FIDE team arrives in Chennai, inspects venue

CHENNAI, March 31 (IANS): A team led by International Chess Federation's (FIDE) president Arkady Dvorkovich has arrived here to inspect the venue of 44th Chess Olympiad, starting from July 28.

Giving the information about the FIDE team, Sanjay Kapoor, president, All India Chess Federation (AICF) said, "The FIDE president and his team are in Chennai to inspect the Olympiad venue. On Friday, an agreement between AICF and FIDE on holding the chess event will be signed in Delhi."

Kapoor informed Dvorkovich will also meet Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K Stalin in Delhi on Friday.

On Thursday, Dvorkovich, Kapoor and AICF secretary and Olympiad tournament director Bharat Singh Chauhan had met Tamil Nadu's sports minister Siva V Meyyanathan in Chennai.

According to Chauhan, the tournament, starting from July 28, will have a total of 11 rounds and the last round will be played on August 9, after which the closing ceremony will be held.

According to Kapoor, the AICF is planning to have a series of chess events during the run-up to the Olympiad. However, he declined to share additional details on the events that are likely to be held.

Speaking to IANS, chess players and officials hoped that the AICF would honour the Indian chess pioneers and stalwarts like late Rafique Khan, the first Indian to win an Olympiad medal, Woman Grandmaster (WGM) S.Vijayalakshmi, the first Indian woman to win an Olympiad medal and India's first International Master Manuel Aaron and others.

Sri Lanka to tour Bangladesh for two Tests in May

COLOMBO, March 31 (IANS): Sri Lanka will tour Bangladesh for a two-match Test series in May 2022, the national cricket board (SLC) announced on Thursday.

The Test series will be part of the 2021-23 ICC Test Championship cycle. The Sri Lankan team will arrive in Bangladesh on May 8 and play a two-day warm-up match at the MA Aziz Stadium in Chattogram on May 11 and 12, ahead of the two-match Test series, which is set to begin on May 15 at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Cricket Stadium in Chattogram. The second Test will be played at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Dhaka from May 23. The series originally was scheduled to be played during October-November 2020 but was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Later, Sri Lanka visited Bangladesh in May 2021 but they only played a three-match ODI series.

Miami Open: Casper Ruud defeats Alexander Zverev, enters into semis

MIAMI, March 31 (IANS): The Norwegian Casper Ruud earned his first win against second seed Germany's Alexander Zverev 6-3, 1-6, 6-3 in the Miami Open on Wednesday (IST) to advance to a semifinal showdown against Argentine Francisco Cerundolo.

"It feels good and it means a lot. This is my first semifinal on hard courts, so that's a good feeling. I'm very happy to do it here in Miami," Ruud said.

"I've felt good the couple weeks I've been here practising and the matches have felt very good. I want to of course keep going. Today was my toughest challenge yet of the tournament and on Friday will be another big one. I hope that I can take what I've learned from my three previous semifinals and bring it into Friday's match," he added.

Now the 23-year-old will have

a big opportunity against World No. 103 Cerundolo, who had never previously competed in a Masters 1000 main draw or won a tour-level match on hard court. This will be the pair's first ATP clash.

When the Norwegian received treatment on his right foot, which he later said was because of taping on his toe, the momentum was firmly in Zverev's corner. Ruud never panicked, though.

"The second set I was feeling... some issues with the taping of my toe. I know it sounds a little bit silly maybe, but it was slipping off my toe, so it was a little uncomfortable to move," Ruud said.

"It was great to get that break early on (in the third set) and I was able to keep it all the way out," Ruud told Tennis TV.

"I was serving well. I can thank my serving for the win today."



CSK capable of retaining the title, says Hayden

MUMBAI, March 31 (IANS): Former Australia cricketer Matthew Hayden believes that four times Indian Premier League champion Chennai Super Kings (CSK) are capable of winning IPL 2022 and retaining the title despite a change in leadership.

However, CSK succumbed to a six-wicket defeat against Kolkata Knight Riders in the first match of this season, in which both their batting and bowling had failed to click the way they would have liked.

But the Ravindra Jadeja-led side will be hoping to pick up their first points at the Brabourne Stadium when they meet with Lucknow Super

Giant on Thursday.

"CSK will not be disheartened with the loss in their opening game against KKR. There were plenty of positives for the Ravindra Jadeja-led side. Their top-order saw a rare batting collapse in the first game but there's a lot of experience in the side and I am sure they'll come back stronger in the next game," Aussie batting legend Hayden said during an episode of Cricket Live on Star Sports.

"They missed Moeen Ali in the tournament opener and he will be available for selection in the next match. CSK have it in them to it pull off and that makes them a dangerous side," he added.

Abdul Qadir inducted into the PCB Hall of Fame posthumously

LAHORE, March 31 (IANS): Legendary leg-spinner Abdul Qadir on Thursday was posthumously inducted into the PCB Hall of Fame ahead of the second ODI between Pakistan and Australia at the Gaddafi Stadium.

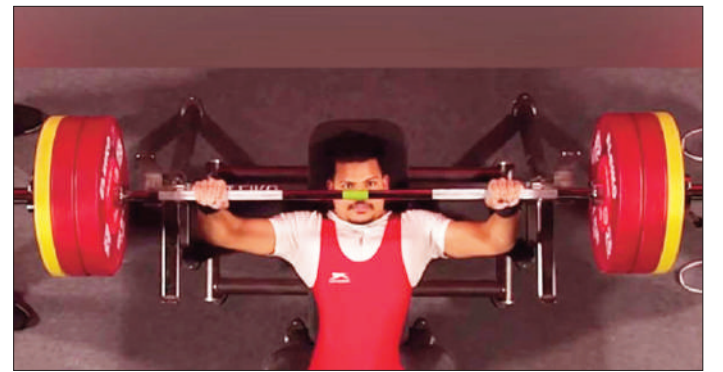
In an international career spanning from 1977 to 1993, Qadir picked 236 wickets in 67 Tests at an average of 32.80 and 132 ODI scalps in 104 ODIs at an average of 26.16.

Former off-spinner Saqlain Mushtaq, currently serving as the head coach of the men's team, inducted Abdul Qadir into the eight-man elite Hall of fame by presenting the commemorative cap and plaque to his youngest son, leg-spinner Usman Qadir, who is part of Pakistan's white-ball squad for the ongoing series against Australia. "I am sure dad watching

from up there will be absolutely delighted and pleased with the way his institution has recognised him today in front of his own fans and at his favourite cricket ground. Cricket was everything for him and on behalf of my family, I thank the PCB for acknowledging his services to Pakistan and the global game," said Usman in a statement by the PCB.

Ironically, Qadir's best Test performance came at the Gaddafi Stadium when he took nine for 56 against England in 1987. He played seven ODIs at the venue but he is most remembered for his nine-ball 16 not out against the West Indies in the 1987 World Cup that earned Pakistan a one-wicket victory and a place in the semi-finals ahead of the two-time former world champions.

Powerlifters Sudhir, Jaideep shine as Haryana top with six Gold medals in Nat's



NEW DELHI, March 31 (IANS): Asian Para Games medalist Sudhir and Jaideep, who represented India at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics, clinched gold medals as Haryana topped the medals table with six gold medals at the 19th Senior and 14th Junior National Para Powerlifting Championship 2022 held at Netaji Subhas Eastern Centre, Kolkata.

Overall Haryana won 11 medals that also included three bronze and two silver. Haryana was followed by Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Delhi and UP with three gold medals each.

In the men's under 88kg category, Sudhir lifted an impressive 232kg enough to take the gold way ahead of Delhi's Joginder Singh (150kg) and Bihar's Mahan Aditya (145KG). Jaideep, competing in men's under 72kg, lifted 151kg for the gold finishing ahead of Gujarat's Ramubhai Bambhava (150kg) and Delhi's Kuldeep Kumar (146kg).

The other gold medalists for Haryana were Ashok (men's -65kg), Deepak (men's -80kg), Pradeep Joon (men's -107kg) and

Geeta (women's -73kg).

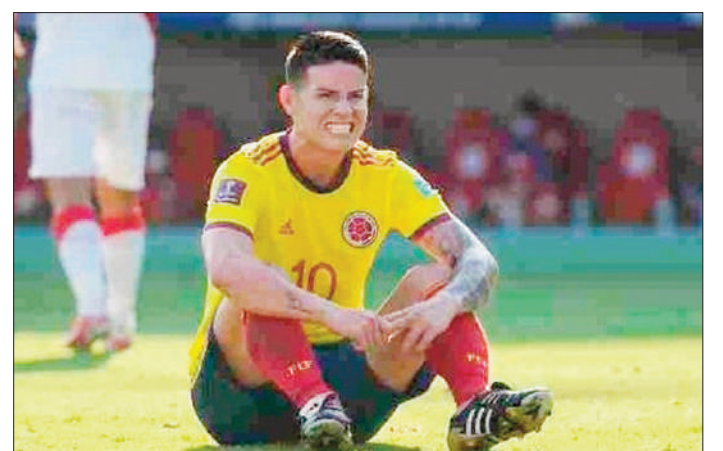
In men's under 49kg finals, World Championships medalist Paramjeet Kumar from Punjab came out with one of his best shows lifting 165kg for the gold. His lift was way ahead of his Worlds bronze medal effort as he finished ahead of Gujarat's Dilip Shukla (118kg) and Delhi's Gulfam Ahmed (118kg).

Seasoned powerlifter Farman Basha, an Asian Para Games medalist, was also in action representing Karnataka claiming the gold in men's under 54kg event.

In the women's event, Asian Para Games silver medalist Shakina Khatun of Karnataka took the under 50kg event gold with her third successful lift of 95kg. Tamil Nadu's Gomathi (58KG) and Sapna Shah of Gujarat (52kg) finished second and third, respectively. Otherwise, it was powerlifters from Rajasthan and Punjab who claimed two gold medals each in women's events.

The National Championships was held by Bengal Paralympic Association under the aegis of the Paralympic Committee of India.

James Rodriguez unsure about Colombia future



BOGOTA, March 31 (IANS): James Rodriguez has cast doubt over his international future after Colombia's failure to qualify for this year's FIFA World Cup.

The 30-year-old said he felt "deep pain" after Colombia finished the South American qualifying tournament one point shy of a playoff berth.

"I don't know what's ahead. I don't know if I'll be here or not," the Al-Rayyan midfielder said on social media.

"What I do know is that it breaks my soul to lose. It makes me uncomfortable not having qualified and this cannot happen again. I'm sad, not only for me but also my teammates, who deserve to shine like I know they

can," he said.

The comments came less than a day after Colombia ended their qualifying campaign with a 1-0 away victory over Venezuela.

The result wasn't enough to secure the Cafeteros a place at their third consecutive World Cup as Peru held onto fifth place - the South American group's only playoff spot - by virtue of a 2-0 home win over Paraguay, reports Xinhua.

"Colombia should go to all of the World Cups," Rodriguez said. "We need to plan, join forces and work hard at both an administrative and sporting level to show the world the potential and talent our country has," he added.

England have the bowling attack to put Australia under pressure, says Charlotte Edwards

LONDON, March 31 (IANS): Former England skipper Charlotte Edwards believes the defending champions' bowling attack has the potential to put an unbeatable Australia under pressure in the final of ICC Women's Cricket World Cup.

At Hagley Oval on Sunday, England and Australia will square off against each other to grab their hands on the silverware.

The road to the final for Australia and England has been contrasting. Australia are the top-ranked side in the format, have won eight out of eight matches in the ongoing World Cup and emerged victorious in 37 of their last 38 ODIs. Moreover, they beat England 12-4 during the multi-format women's Ashes held before the World Cup.

On the other hand, England's defence of the title they won at



home in 2017 began on a bad note, losing their first three matches to Australia, West Indies and South Africa. But the

Heather Knight-led side flipped the tables and are now on a five-match winning streak after thrashing South Africa by 137

runs in the semi-final on Thursday. In the huge win, opener Danni Wyatt made 129 while left-arm spinner Sophie Eccle-

stone clinched career-best figures of 6/36.

"Funny things can happen in a one-off game that means a lot. England have been under pressure more in this tournament than Australia. England need to put Australia under pressure and they have the bowling attack to do that. I think England need to bat first, get over 230 on the board and in a final I think that will be enough," said Edwards to Sky Sports News.

Edwards, who led England to 50-over and 20-over World Cup titles in 2009, thinks Australia can be defeated despite the defeat in multi-format women's Ashes. "I think the slate is clean for England. Who cares what happened in the Ashes? It's a one-off game and I can tell you who is under more pressure and it's Australia. Australia have had an unbelievable run of form.

They are a very good cricket team but they are beatable. We pushed them in the Ashes and just couldn't get over the line."

Edwards, 42, had words of appreciation for England on reaching the final despite a horror start to the tournament. "England are full of depth and world-class players and have shown that in the last week or so. They are going in with form and a lot of their main players with good scores under their belt. I am delighted to see them in the final."

"Two weeks ago this looked a long way off but I had firm belief that England would get there. It was never in doubt for me. They hadn't played Bangladesh or Pakistan so the situation looked worse than what it was. It was not ideal, obviously, but results went their way and they needed to keep winning."

5th Guwahati Open Junior Tennis Championship-2022

Chandogya, Naman, Nayeem, Arnavi, Borneel, Nishtha reach finals

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 31: Chandogya Trivedi Pathak reached the final defeating Eashandeep Boro in the Boy's Singles (under 12 years) semi-final by 4-1, 4-0 while in the other semi-final Naman Borah beat Aayan Rehman 5-3, 4-0 in the 5th Guwahati Open Junior Tennis Championship - 2022, organised by Guwahati Lawn Tennis association (GLTA) held at the RG Baruah Sports Complex, Nehru Stadium played here on Thursday.

In the Girl's Singles (under 12 years) Nayeem Hussain reached final by defeating Semiramis Baruah 4-0, 4-0 while in the second semi-final Arnavi Debnath beat Sernya La 4-0, 4-0.

In the Boy's Singles (under 14 years) Borneel Borah and Chandogya Trivedi Pathak reached finals by defeating Parthiv Kalita 6-0, 1-6, 10-5 and Ritik Rout 6-4, 7-5 respectively in their respective semi-finals.

In the Girl's Singles (under 14

years) Nishtha Priya Bezbarua reached final by defeating Soni Prajapati in the semi-final 6-1, 6-0 while in the second semi-final Bishnupriya Borgohain beat Adrika Rajkumari by 7-5, 3-6, 10-4.

Till reporting of the news the semi-final matches of Boy's and Girl's Singles (under 18 years) respectively are still going.

All the finals of the championship will begin tomorrow from 7.30 am onwards. The closing function of the championship will start from 3.00 pm on April 01 where Bimal Bora, Minister of Sports and Youth Welfare, Assam will attend the function as the Chief Guest while Nibedan Das Patowary, Director of Sports and Youth Welfare, Assam and Lakhya Konwar, General Secretary, Assam Olympic Association will attend as Guests-of-Honour. The organisers requested all sports lovers to witness the final matches to encourage the young budding talents and also attend the closing function.

Wyatt, Ecclestone fire England to another World Cup final

CHRISTCHURCH, March 31 (PTI): Danielle Wyatt made the most of the luck that came her way enroute to a memorable hundred as defending champions England showed their big-match temperament with a 137-run win over South Africa to enter the Women's World Cup final here on Thursday.

Wyatt (129 off 125), who was dropped five times, struck a maiden World Cup hundred before Sophia Dunkley produced a fine 60 off 72 balls to take England to an imposing 293 for eight after South Africa chose to bowl.

South Africa, who had reached the last-four stage as the second best team from the league stage and also eliminated India from the competition, crumbled under the pressure of a knock-out game.

They could never recover from the body blow received in the second over of the chase when pacer Anya Shrubsole (2/27) had tournament's leading run-getter Laura Wolvaardt caught and bowled. Their innings ended at 156 in 38 overs.

Left-arm spinner Sophie Ecclestone completed the job for England by cleaning up the lower-order, ending with six wickets for 36 runs in eight overs. She had also hit an unbeaten 24 off 11 balls to take England close to the 300-run mark.

With five wins on the trot after three



losses that had them staring at an early exit, England's juggernaut is well and truly rolling as they stand on the cusp of a fifth title.

Their final and familiar opponents Australia, on the other hand, are eyeing a record-extending seventh crown.

"That was a complete performance from

us, something we were searching for a little bit. Really cheered that the girls have brought their best cricket when everything's on the line," said England skipper Heather Knight referring to their comeback after a disastrous start to their tournament campaign.

"I think the knockout cricket that we have

been playing for the last four games has helped us." On meeting the undefeated Australia in the final on Sunday, she added: "We will go in as underdogs. We have put a lot of energy in the last few weeks and need a one last push and hopefully we can do that on Sunday."

It was a brilliant display of swing bowling from Shrubsole that broke the backbone of South Africa batting in the run chase.

Wolvaardt's opening partner Lizelle Lee was Shrubsole's second wicket as the out-of-form batter flicked it straight into the hands of the mid-wicket fielder, ending her forgettable campaign in the ICC event.

After Kate Cross removed Sune Luus with a beauty that seemed to nip back in sharply, the writing was on the wall for South Africa, who paid the price for their sloppy fielding early on in the game.

Their decision to chase in a high-pressure game was also debatable.

However, it was still a good run for South Africa in the competition.

"We needed to bring our best performance today and we didn't and we are feeling it. We needed to be clinical today and we weren't, it is time to keep on working," said South Africa skipper Sune Luus.

I still think we had a great campaign and we are not taking anything away from that."

KKR promise bold play against power-packed Punjab Kings

MUMBAI, March 31 (PTI): Kolkata Knight Riders are expected to continue with their risk-taking approach despite mixed returns when they on Punjab Kings in the Indian Premier League here on Friday. KKR head into Friday's game at the back of a three-wicket loss against RCB though managed to make the game close after a below-par total.

Punjab began their campaign with a win but they would expect a better bowling effort after conceding more than 200 runs in their first game. South Africa speedster Kagiso Rabada is expected to play after completing his three-day quarantine and that will give a big boost to the Punjab attack.

Batting at the Wankhede, where the track is relatively fresh, has not been easy as seen in the two games played at the venue so far. It may be early days in the two-month long IPL but the toss is already playing a significant role in the game's outcome with dew coming into picture in the second half of the game.



Kolkata's openers, Ajinkya Rahane and the attacking Venkatesh Iyer perished cheaply against RCB and the duo would be looking to provide a strong start to the team.

While skipper Shreyas Iyer, who has been in good form despite the failure against RCB, would be an important cog in the wheel, but would need support from the likes of Nitish Rana.

For left-handed Rana, consistency would be the key. Apart from the duo, the responsibility in the middle order

needs to be shouldered by Sam Billings, Sheldon Jackson and the big-hitting Andre Russell. The KKR lineup has batters who can tear into any attack and the management would hope that they all fire in unison against Punjab.

On the bowling front, pacer Umesh Yadav was splendid in both the games with the new ball. Experienced Kiwi bowler Tim Southee, who replaced Shivam Mavi and picked up three wickets, too has a key role to play up-

front. The concern for Kolkata would be the form of spinner Varun Chakaravarty, who needs to hit the straps quickly. For Punjab, a lot would rest on how their top three - skipper Mayank Agarwal, flamboyant Shikhar Dhawan and Sri Lankan Bhanuka Rajapaksa, who played a match-winning cameo against RCB, perform.

While head coach Anil Kumble would expect more contributions from the middle order, the likes of Odean Smith and Shikhar Khan proved their mettle when they steered the side home against RCB and would be keen to be among the runs again. It remains to be seen if Under-19 World Cup star Raj Bawa, who failed on IPL debut, gets another chance. Punjab bowlers came up against a marauding Faf Du Plessis in the first game and the likes of Sandeep Sharma, Arshdeep Singh and Odean Smith would need to up their game against KKR.

The eight overs from spin duo of Rahul Chahar and Harpreet Brar could

also make a difference in the game.

Teams (From): Kolkata Knight Riders: Aaron Finch, Abhijeet Tomar, Ajinkya Rahane, Baba Indrajith, Nitish Rana, Pratham Singh, Rinku Singh, Shreyas Iyer, Ashok Sharma, Pat Cummins, Rasikh Dar, Shivam Mavi, Tim Southee, Umesh Yadav, Varun Chakaravarty, Aman Khan, Andre Russell, Anukul Roy, Chamika Karunaratne, Mohammed Nabi, Ramesh Kumar, Sunil Narine, Venkatesh Iyer, Sam Billings, Sheldon Jackson.

Punjab Kings: Shikhar Dhawan, Mayank Agarwal, Arshdeep Singh, Kagiso Rabada, Jonny Bairstow, Rahul Chahar, Harpreet Brar, Shikhar Khan, Prabhsimran Singh, Jitesh Sharma, Ishan Porel, Liam Livingstone, Odean Smith, Sandeep Sharma, Raj Angad Bawa, Rishi Dhawan, Pre-rak Mankad, Vaibhav Arora, Wriddick Chatterjee, Baltej Dhandha, Ansh Patel, Nathan Ellis, Atharva Taide, Bhanuka Rajapaksa, Benny Howell.

Match starts at 7.30 PM.

Fit-again Surya joins MI ahead of IPL fixture against Rajasthan

MUMBAI, March 31 (PTI): Having recovered from his finger injury, star India batter Suryakumar Yadav has joined the Mumbai Indians ahead of their second IPL game against Rajasthan Royals, the five-time champions said on Thursday.

Surya, who was undergoing rehabilitation at the National Cricket Academy after suffering a finger injury during the home series against West Indies last month, missed MI's IPL opener against Delhi Capitals on March 27.

"Suryakumar Yadav exited his mandatory quarantine and joined the team (on Wednesday) for the gym session in the company of his mates Kieron Pollard, Ishan Kishan and Jasprit Bumrah... The mood in the camp is upbeat," MI said in a statement.

"The team underwent a strength and conditioning session yesterday under the watchful eyes of Paul Chapman. The session involved weight and fitness training, with the focus on working on core fitness and building strength."

Mumbai Indians had lost to Delhi Capitals by four wickets in their IPL opener at the Brabourne

Stadium here.

Mumbai failed to defend 178 as Delhi shot off the target in just 18.2 overs, thanks to an unbroken 75-run stand between Axar Patel and Lalit Yadav for the seventh wicket.

Star India pacer Jasprit Bumrah had a lacklustre outing, leaking 43 runs from 3.2 overs and it was their English debutant Tymal Mills who impressed returning with figures of 3-0-26-1.

Mills struck in his very first over for MI, removing Delhi captain Rishabh Pant.

As someone who employs a lot of variations to win the battle in the slog overs, Mills said it's about mindset.

"Bowling at the death is a lot about the mindset. You need to want to bowl the difficult overs when the pressure is on. It is something that I enjoy," the English pacer said.

"I understand that I am not gonna come out on top every time but when I do, it is a great feeling."

"Obviously, practice is very important so that when you are in those pressure situations, you are confident of your execution," he added.

Powar's term ends, NCA head Laxman may play bigger role in women's cricket

NEW DELHI, March 31 (PTI): Indian women's team head coach Ramesh Powar's contract has expired at the conclusion of the side's campaign in the ICC World Cup and he might have to reapply for the post as per BCCI rules.

The disastrous World Cup campaign could also lead to a radical shift in women's cricket, with National Cricket Academy (NCA) head VVS Laxman taking an active part in mentoring the next batch of the country's cricketers. The team failed to make the semifinals of the ongoing tournament.

Powar had replaced WV Raman, who had guided the team into the T20 World Cup final in 2020.

"Powar's contract was till World Cup. There is no provision for extension. So the entire process starts with applications and interviews. Powar can certainly reapply and CAC (Cricket Advisory Committee), as per the constitution, will take a call," a senior BCCI source told PTI on the condition of anonymity.

Eyebrows were raised after Raman wasn't given a second term after a good show with the team and Powar, who had a chequered history with skipper Mithali Raj, was brought back.



"The CAC takes the call and if they felt Ramesh would do better than Raman, it was their call. The board can't interfere," the source said.

As PTI reported at the end of India's campaign in New Zealand, there were serious differences of opinions between two senior players, who have been at logger-

heads for years now.

It is understood that Powar did precious little to defuse the tension between the warring duo, and it now remains to be seen if he gets his contract renewed.

Also, there is nothing to write home about Powar's performance in the two stints with the team, especially the current one when India lost every series under his stewardship before their unceremonious exit from the showpiece.

With the inaugural U-19 women's T20 World Cup scheduled next year, the BCCI is keen on preparing the next batch of players, with Laxman playing a bigger role in formulating a model for long-term success.

One of the major concerns is finding veteran fast bowler Jhulan Goswami's replacement.

"Even if you move past Mithali, in case of Jhulan there aren't too many replacements. So that's also a problem that the board is facing. Hopefully, the planned WIPL will unearth enough talent for future," the source said.

Laxman, and the men's team head coach Rahul Dravid, who had drawn up the NCA module, is expected to be consulted going forward.

Dinesh Karthik is as cool as MS Dhoni: RCB skipper Faf du Plessis

NAVI MUMBAI, March 31 (PTI): Royal Challengers Bangalore skipper Faf du Plessis has lavished praise on teammate Dinesh Karthik, saying his calm demeanour is close to what Mahendra Singh Dhoni displays in the final overs of the game.

Karthik clobbered a six and a four in the first two deliveries of the last over to take RCB home after they were in a spot of bother chasing a tricky target of 129 against Kolkata Knight Riders on Wednesday night.

"DK's experience helped in the end, cool-calm, runs weren't never really too far away. He's probably as cool as MS Dhoni can get in the last five overs," said RCB captain Faf du Plessis, who has played with Dhoni at CSK, in the post-match presentation.

Seamers Akash Deep and Mohammed Siraj had shared three wickets in the powerplays to leave KKR at 44 for 3 and Wanindu Hasaranga then snapped four to bowl them out for 128 in 18.5 overs.

Chasing the target, RCB batters had to over-



come some anxious moments as they huffed and puffed to a three-wicket win with four balls to spare in the end. "Good win, obviously chasing small scores, you want to be positive and not leave it late, but it was good bowling from their seamers. Tonight there was seam and bounce, the first night it swung a bit more," said du Plessis, who was named captain ahead of the

IPL this year.

RCB had lost their opener against Punjab Kings at the same venue despite posting a challenging 205 for 2.

"Two-three days ago, it was 200 vs 200. Tonight it was 120 vs 120, pretty good. In an ideal world, we would've liked to have won more convincingly but a win is a win."

Nursing back injury, 'gutted' Sam Curran feels IPL came 'bit too soon'

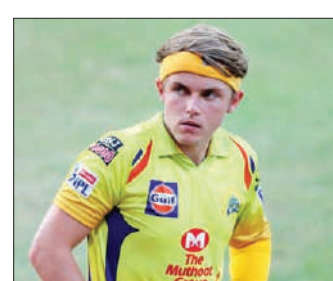
NEW DELHI, March 31 (PTI): Recovering from a back injury, England allrounder Sam Curran says he is gutted to miss the IPL this season but feels his decision to opt out of the auction was the right one.

Curran said it would have been too soon to return to action as he nurses the most serious injury of his young career.

"I'm gutted not to be there. It's a frustration watching from home," Curran, who played for Chennai Super Kings, told ESPNcricinfo.

"I wanted to go (into the auction) but I didn't at the end - which was probably the best decision. Looking back, IPL probably came a little bit too soon."

The 23-year-old, who bowls left-arm medium pace, had sustained a stress fracture on his lower



back during the second leg of IPL in October last year.

"I definitely want to go back (to the IPL) at some stage because you learn so much about your T20 game there: it's a tournament when you live and breathe cricket. You go down for breakfast every day and you're sitting with superstars, sitting down and chatting about the game."

Curran had felt pain in his back

during CSK's loss to Rajasthan Royals in October and scans later revealed that he had suffered a stress fracture of the lower back, ruling him out of the T20 World Cup and the Ashes.

He is now looking to put up a good show in Surrey's County Championship opener against Warwickshire at Edgbaston next week, while the main focus remains on getting his place back in the Test series against New Zealand in June and T20 World Cup in Australia in October.

"It's been a long winter. I'd never really experienced an injury before and missing out on what I have been pretty hard. They're probably the two biggest series or tournaments as a player: a World Cup for your country and an Ashes series down under," he said.