

6 WORLD Border security and Ukraine aid collapses despite Biden's plea for Congress
8 NATION Cambodian PM Hun Manet visits Thailand with busy schedule to extend close ties
All talk, no action, govt playing game of 'smoke and mirrors': Cong
PMLA court extends ED remand of Hemant Soren by 5 days

Modi Sarkar ki Guarantee Construction of National Highways at an unprecedented pace Hamara Sankalp Viksit Bharat In last 10 years, National Highway network expanded from 91 thousand kms to 1 lakh 46 thousand kms

HT BRIEF Lot Mandal GUWAHATI: A complaint was received at this Directorate of Vigilance & Anti-Corruption, Assam, alleging that Arafad Alom Bora, lot mandal of Naduar Revenue Circle, Sootea, and District-Biswanath had demanded ₹ 5,000 as bribe from the complainant for name correction and updation in land records.

83,000 ha of Assam land facing encroachment, House told



GUWAHATI, Feb 7: The Assam assembly on Wednesday witnessed a noisy scene over border disputes with other northeastern states as the opposition alleged that Assam is giving away its land to resolve the issue, even as the House was informed that almost 83,000 hectares of land belonging to Assam are being occupied currently by four neighbouring states.

Noisy scene in assembly over inter-state border disputes War of words witnessed between minister Bora and Akhil Gogoi

going on and it is not clear which state will get what portions of the disputed areas. "We are trying to settle the disputed land parcels," he said. When Gogoi reiterated his allegation that Assam is giving away state land, the minister said, "No one can satisfy Akhil Gogoi. He has been disturbing the assembly since he joined the proceedings."

Pursue new-age technical training, CM tells youths



GUWAHATI, Feb 7: Assam youths need to train in new-age, modern technical works to grab remunerative employment opportunities across India and abroad, said chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday.

KAAC honours Sarsing Teron on 126th birth anniversary



DIPHU, Feb 7: Under the aegis Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong observed 126th Birth Anniversary of Sarsing Teron (Langkung Habe).

has also declared a holiday. At the Town Hall the chief executive member (CEM), KAAC, Tuliram Ronghang paid floral tribute and offered prayer at the statue of late Sarsing Teron, which was joined by executive member (EM) of KAAC and members of Autonomous Council.

Meiteis welcome move Indo-Myanmar border fence will sever ethnic ties, say Kuki-Zo people

IMPHAL/AIZAWL/ITANAGAR, Feb 7: The Centre's decision to fence the Indo-Myanmar border has evoked mixed reactions with the Kuki-Zo people claiming that the move will sever ethnic ties and Meitei organisations hailing the step saying it will check movement of unscrupulous elements from across the border.



The reactions came a day after the announcement by Union home minister Amit Shah on X that the Centre had decided to fence the Indo-Myanmar border.

dent's body of Mizoram, said fencing the border will divide the Zo ethnic people between the two countries and bring an end to the Free Movement Regime (FMR). The FMR allows people living on either side of the border enter up to 16 km of each other's country with-

Assam govt to merge Class 10, 12 boards into one new body

GUWAHATI, Feb 7: The Assam government on Wednesday proposed to merge the state boards for Class 10 and 12 to make one single entity in order to manage secondary education.

National Commission for Indian System of Medicine is the apex statutory body for regulation within the Indian system of medicine Sarba inaugurates NCISM office in Delhi

HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Feb 7: Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal inaugurated the new office of the National Commission for Indian System of Medicine (NCISM), the apex regulatory body of the country for traditional medicines in New Delhi on Wednesday.



The new office is housed in the 'Padmabhushan Vaidya Devendra Triguna Sadan' within the Mahasammelan complex. Speaking on the occasion, the Union minister of Ports, Shipping & Waterways and Ayush, Sonowal said the India is moving ahead confidently as its rich heritage in traditional medicine powers the country to become a healthy and happy nation, as it strives towards realising the vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi of a Swastha Bharat.

policy making in the traditional medicine of Bharat," he added. He also informed that the government is developing Mahasammelan complex at an international standard. "The role of NCISM is of paramount importance as we move ahead to bolster the prospect of traditional Indian medicines to keep pace with the modern medicine for an integrated healthcare patient care solution approach for a health-

the complex already has other major offices like Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences (CCRAS), Rashtriya Ayurveda Vidyapeeth (RAV). The event was graced by the Union minister of State for Women & Child Health and Ayush, Dr Mahendrabhai Kalubhai Munjapara; the secretary of the Ministry of Ayush, Vaidya Rajesh Kotecha; the chairman, All India Ayurveda Mahasammelan Trust, Padmabhushan Vaidya Devendra Triguna; the chairman, National Commission for Indian Systems of Medicine (NCISM), Vaidya Jayant Dev Pu-jari; the chairman, Ethics and Registration Board, NCISM, Vaidya Rakesh Sharma; and the advisor, Ayurveda, Ministry of Ayush, Government of India, Vaidya Manoj Nesri among others.

String of attacks on Indian students in US continues

NEW YORK, Feb 7: In a series of disturbing incidents, an Indian doctoral candidate was found dead at Purdue University in Indiana while another Indian IT student was brutally attacked near his house in Chicago. The back-to-back incidents since Sunday were the sixth in the US in 2024 alone.

Stop creating narrative to divide country into north, south: PM to Cong

NEW DELHI, Feb 7: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday urged the Congress and its government in Karnataka to stop creating a narrative to divide the country into north and south saying it jeopardises the country's future.



jeopardise its future. He lamented that a vaccine is made in one part of the country and someone says that it can't be given to other parts. "What is this thinking? And it is very painful that such language is emerging from a national party, it is very sad," he noted. "This nation is not just a piece of land for us. It is like the human body, if there is pain somewhere, the hand doesn't say that the thorn is in the foot and it doesn't concern me...if there is pain anywhere in this country, pain should be felt by everyone. If one body part does not work the entire body is dubbed as handicap. If any part of the country is left without development, then the country cannot become (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Oil cos losing close to ₹ 3 a litre on diesel, profit on petrol down

BETUL (GOA), Feb 7: State-owned fuel retailers are losing close to ₹ 3 per litre on selling diesel while the profit on petrol has trimmed due to recent firming up in international oil prices, industry officials said detailing reasons for continuing to hold retail prices.

Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL), who control roughly 90 per cent of India's fuel market, "voluntarily" have not changed petrol, diesel and cooking gas (LPG) prices for almost two years now, resulting in losses when input cost was higher and profits when raw material prices were lower.

International oil prices, against which domestic rates are benchmarked as India is 85 per cent dependent on imports to meet its oil needs, had softened late last year but firmed up again in the second half of January.

They have resisted calls to revert to daily price revision and pass on softening in rates to consumers on grounds that prices continue to be extremely volatile - rising on one day and falling on the other - and that their past losses haven't been fully recouped.

"There are losses on diesel," an industry official said. "It had turned positive but now oil companies are losing close to ₹ 3 per litre." He said the profit margin on petrol has trimmed from low teens to around ₹ 3-4 a litre.

Asked about fuel price revision, Oil Minister Hardeep Singh Puri told reporters on the sidelines of the India Energy Week that the



government does not dictate prices and the oil companies take their decision considering all economic aspects. "They say there is still volatility (in the market)," he said. Asked about the bumper ₹ 69,000 crore profits that the three firms have clocked in the first nine months of the current fiscal, he said the expectation would be to start price revision if the trend continues in the fourth and last quarter of the current fiscal year ending March 31. "They had losses when they voluntarily decided not to raise prices (despite oil prices going up)," he said.

The combined net profit of IOC, BPCL and HPCL in the April-December (first nine months of current fiscal year) was better than their annual earning of ₹ 39,356 crore in pre-oil crisis year, regulatory filings by them showed.

The firms had posted a combined net loss of ₹ 21,201.18 crore during the April-September 2022 despite accounting for ₹ 22,000 crore announced but not paid LPG

subsidy for the previous two years. Subsequent softening of international prices and government giving out LPG subsidy helped IOC and BPCL post annualised profit for 2022-23 (April 2022 to March 2023 fiscal) but HPCL was in the red. This fiscal year, things have changed dramatically. The three firms posted record quarterly earnings in the first two quarters (April-June and July-September) when international oil prices - against which domestic rates are benchmarked - almost halved to USD 72 a barrel from a year ago. International prices rose again in the subsequent quarter to USD 90, leading to moderation of their earnings.

But, on a year as a whole they had rich profits.

The fuel price freeze that began on April 6, 2022, had a loss as high as ₹ 17.4 a litre on petrol and ₹ 27.7 per litre on diesel for the week ended June 24, 2022. However, subsequent softening led to losses being eliminated. The three firms

had a margin of ₹ 11 a litre on petrol and ₹ 6 on diesel last month.

But now things have changed, another industry official explained.

International oil prices have been turbulent in the last couple of years. It dipped into the negative zone at the start of the pandemic in 2020 and swung wildly in 2022 - climbing to a 14-year high of nearly USD 140 per barrel in March 2022 after Russia invaded Ukraine, before sliding on weaker demand from top importer China and worries of an economic contraction.

But for a nation that is 85 per cent dependent on imports, the spike meant adding to already elevated levels of inflation and derailing the economic recovery from the pandemic.

So the three fuel retailers froze petrol and diesel prices for the longest duration in the last two decades. They stopped daily price revision in early November 2021 when rates across the country hit an all-time high, prompting the government to roll back a part of the excise duty hike it had effected during the pandemic to take advantage of low oil prices.

The freeze continued into 2022 but the war-led spike in international oil prices prompted a ₹ 10 a litre hike in petrol and diesel prices from mid-March 2022 before another round of excise duty cut rolled back all of the ₹ 13 a litre and ₹ 16 a litre increase in taxes on petrol and diesel done during the pandemic.

That followed the current price freeze that began on April 6, 2022 and still continues. (PTI)

Essar unveils blueprint for green economy at India Energy Week

BETUL (GOA), Feb 7: Diversified conglomerate Essar Group will invest billions of dollars in setting up a green hydrogen plant, the world's first green refinery, and building an LNG and electric ecosystem to decarbonise long-haul heavy trucks as it charts a new phase of growth, a top official said.

Armed with a substantially lighter balance sheet after it repaid ₹ 1,40,000 crore of loans over the last four years, the group now has a strong revenue stream of over ₹ 1 lakh crore from existing businesses.

"Essar is charting its path to a resurgence by investing in ecosystems for sustainable growth in India and beyond," Prashant Ruia, Director at Essar Capital, said at India Energy Week here.

Anchored around three core themes of decarbonisation, decentralisation and digitalisation, Essar is looking to play a pivotal role in shaping a greener future.

"As India emerges as the world's fastest-growing and third-largest economy, Essar is dedicated to fulfilling climate commitments and promoting green growth," he said.

Essar will invest USD 3.6 billion to build one of the world's largest low-carbon (blue hydrogen) plants and the world's first green refinery, he said without giving further details.

It is also looking to develop a 1 gigawatt green hydrogen project in Gujarat.

In the realm of green mobility solutions, Essar is focused on building an LNG and electric ecosystem to decarbonise long-haul heavy trucks, contributing to a cleaner transportation sector, he said.

Besides, the group is also producing gas using coal seams from a block in West Bengal, he said. Its arm, Essar Oil and Gas Exploration and Production Limited (EOGEP), India's leader in the coal bed methane industry, contributes nearly 65 per cent of the country's total coal bed methane production and aims to increase its contribution to India's total gas production to 5 per cent within the next five years, he said.

Ruia did not share the investment details in green mobility and hydrogen plants.

"With these initiatives, Essar is at the forefront of driving the nation's vision of energy transition and sustainable growth," he said. Separately, in a post on X, Ruia said: "Excited to be back at the @IndiaEnergyWeek, where impactful dialogues are shaping a sustainable future. Hon'ble PM @narendramodiji's vision for India's economic



and journey towards becoming the world's third-largest economy is truly inspiring. Privileged to be part of the round table chaired by the PM. His insightful vision is bound to get the global leaders to invest in the massive opportunity in #energytransition that India offers."

Essar had over the years invested ₹ 2 lakh crore in sectors ranging from ports to steel plants, oil refining and fuel retailing, power generation, mining, shipping and telecom. It sold its oil refinery at Vadinar in Gujarat and fuel retailing network to Russia's Rosneft-led consortium in an over ₹ 86,000 crore deal (USD 13 billion), which was the largest FDI in the sector.

Its steel plant was sold to ArcelorMittal-led group in insolvency proceedings.

Essar currently owns businesses in the core sectors of energy, metals and mining, infrastructure, services and technology. In the energy sector, it has commercial interests in oil, gas and coal bed methane exploration and production in India, Vietnam and Nigeria, oil refining and retailing in the UK and power generation in India and Canada.

The group's aggregate revenues now stand at about USD 15 billion. Its businesses include a 10 million tonnes per annum oil refinery in the UK, 12 trillion cubic feet reserves (including some producing fields) of unconventional hydrocarbons in India, an iron ore mine and pellet project in the US, and a high-grade thermal coal mine with 72 million tonnes of proven reserves in Indonesia, among others.

It is now building the UK's first 1 GW blue hydrogen project and is looking to produce green hydrogen and green ammonia in Salaya in Gujarat. It is also investing in the LNG value chain, including LNG trucking and LNG fuel stations. (PTI)

HSBC mutual fund launches New Fund Offering

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 7: HSBC Mutual Fund on Wednesday announced the launch of HSBC Multi Asset Allocation Fund (HMAAF), an open-ended scheme investing in equity and equity-related instruments, debt & money market securities and Gold/Silver ETFs. The fund aims to generate long-term capital growth, help reduce volatility and offer diversification. The new fund offering (NFO) opens on February 22 and will reopen on March 1.

HMAAF will capitalise on an optimum multi asset allocation investment strategy. The fund will follow a flexicap approach and invest across market caps based on prevailing valuation comfort. The investment process considers several factors including the quality of business, competitive advantage, corporate governance track record, sustainability practices, financial strength, risk-reward evaluation, key earnings drivers, etc. The fund will be managed by Cheenu Gupta, SVP Fund Management Equities (for Domestic Equities), Dipan Parikh, VP Dealing Equities (for Gold/Silver ETFs), Mahesh Chhabria, VP, Fund management Fixed Income (for Fixed Income) and Sonal Gupta, Head Research Equities (for Foreign Securities).

Multi asset allocation funds enable customers in diversification along with asset rebalancing. They rebalance allocations, ensuring timely adjustments to maintain a balanced investment approach. This proactive approach helps investors who are

seeking a comprehensive and dynamic investment strategy to navigate the current financial landscape, while optimizing their asset mix. In the calendar year 2023, under hybrid category, multi asset allocation funds witnessed the second highest inflow at ₹ 22,415 crores* industrywide.

Commenting on the launch, Kailash Kulkarni, CEO, HSBC Asset Management Company (India) Pvt. Ltd., said, "India's growth story is driven by several factors including increasing domestic consumption, strong forex reserves, focus on manufacturing and infrastructure development, improving debt markets, foreign investments, strong government reforms, etc. These factors, combined with significant market volatility, calls for a multi asset allocation strategy, considering different asset classes behave differently depending on economic situations. With an efficient asset allocation, the HSBC Multi Asset Allocation Fund aims to spread the risk and optimise performance to deliver risk adjusted growth in the long run."

Venugopal Manghat, CIO-Equity, HSBC Asset Management (India) Pvt Ltd said, "With a strategic blend of equity that offers capital appreciation, fixed income that brings stability and gold/silver adding resilience, a Multi asset allocation is a prudent solution to help counter volatility and achieve return optimisation in the long run. Backed by rigorous research, our focus will be on delivering relative value using a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches ensuring prudent diversification."

'India fastest growing economy in world'

JAMSHEDPUR, Feb 7: Tata Steel CEO and Managing Director T V Narendran claimed India is the fastest growing economy of the world and the next three decades are important for the country on the development front.

China has emerged rapidly during the last 30-40 years and the next 30 years are important for India, which is the fastest growing economy of the world, Narendran said while addressing the members of Singhbhum Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) here on Tuesday evening.

"Currently, China is the largest steel-producing country in the world and we are second. In view of the global challenges being faced by the steel sector, we have to move forward keeping in mind the steel prices", the Tata Steel MD said. "Today, India is the world's fastest-growing economy and the infrastructure sector witnessed rapid momentum during last two/three years, which resulted in growing steel supply by the private steel major", he said.

As Tata Steel's Jamshedpur plant is located in a densely populated area, there was no possibility of further expansion of the Jamshedpur plant, Narendran said.

He said Tata Steel's relation with SCCI was strengthening continuously and this would help further industrial growth. Hailing the sacrifices made by workers in the growth of the company, Narendran said Tata Steel is a "multi-generation company" and the cordial relationship between Tata Steel and Tata Workers Union led the company to march forward even though "we have to work amidst the different ambience of the prevailing world scenario".

Dwelling on the MSME sector here, he said these units are the backbone of big industries, which rely on the quality products of MSME. Tata Steel is a big company and its backbone is also the MSME units, he admitted. (PTI)

Sensex, Nifty close flat in choppy trade ahead of RBI policy decision

MUMBAI, Feb 7: Benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty closed flat in a volatile trade on Wednesday as investors stayed on the sidelines ahead of RBI's interest rate decision on Thursday.

The 30-share BSE Sensex declined 34.09 points or 0.05 per cent to settle at 72,152. During the day, it hit a high of 72,559.21 and a low of 71,938.22. The Nifty ended marginally up by 1.10 points or 0.01 per cent to 21,930.50. IT shares TCS, Infosys and Tech Mahindra declined due to profit taking offsetting gains from select banking and pharma shares.

"The domestic market exhibited cautious range-bound movement, despite robust PMI data and favourable global cues ahead of RBI policy meet. While no change in stance is anticipated, the RBI's commentary on any hints regarding potential rate cuts and improvements in liquidity will be closely monitored," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services said.

Among the Sensex firms, State Bank of India rose the most by 3.78 per cent after the bank announced the acquisition of SBI CAPS subsidiary for ₹ 708.07 crore. Nestle India gained 1.68 per cent after it reported around 9 per cent growth in sales.

JSW Steel, Bajaj Finance, Axis Bank and Asian Paints were among the gainers. Tech Mahindra, Power Grid, Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services, HDFC Bank, Wipro, Larsen & Toubro

and NTPC were the major laggards.

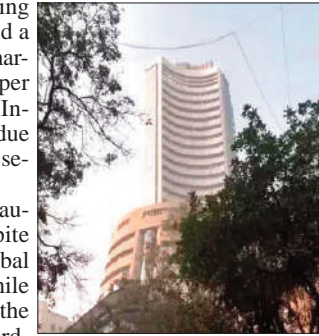
"Markets erased all its gains towards the end as profit-taking in IT stocks and sluggish global indices weighed on the sentiment. Traders are adopting a cautious stance ahead of the credit policy announcement tomorrow."

"While investors are bracing for a status-quo on the interest rate decision, what will be important to note is the tone of the announcement which would signal the central bank's stance on interest rate going ahead," said Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd.

In the broader market, the BSE mid-cap gauge climbed 1.31 per cent and smallcap index advanced 0.38 per cent.

Shares of retail firm Trent Ltd surged 19 per cent after it reported a two-fold rise in consolidated net profit to ₹ 370.64 crore for the December quarter. Paytm-owner One97 Communications climbed 10 per cent, continuing its recovery journey. Among sectoral indices, IT fell by 1.18 per cent, teck declined 0.97 per cent, services by 0.81 per cent, capital goods by 0.31 per cent and auto by 0.06 per cent. Realty jumped 1.96 per cent, telecommunication climbed 1.18 per cent, consumer discretionary (0.89 per cent), financial services (0.76 per cent) and power (0.92 per cent).

In Asian markets, Seoul and Shanghai settled in the positive territory while Tokyo and Hong Kong ended in the negative zone. (PTI)



Rupee rises 9 paise to close at 82.96 against US dollar

MUMBAI, Feb 7: The rupee appreciated 9 paise to close at 82.96 (provisional) against the US dollar on Wednesday, tracking a correction in the greenback against major currencies and fresh foreign capital inflows.

However, a rise in crude oil prices and muted domestic markets capped the sharp gains in the domestic unit, forex traders said. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.03 against the greenback. The unit hit an intraday high

of 82.94 and a low of 83.09.

The local unit finally settled at 82.96 (provisional) against the dollar, higher by 9 paise from its previous close of 83.05. "We expect the rupee to trade with a slight positive bias on a rise in global risk sentiments and a soft US Dollar."

However, the surge in crude oil prices and hawkish comments from various major central bank officials may cap the sharp upside," said Anuj Choudhary Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas. Traders

may take cues from trade balance data from the US. Investors may remain cautious ahead of the RBI's monetary policy decision on Thursday. "RBI is expected to keep its monetary policy unchanged. USD/INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of ₹ 82.60 to ₹ 83.30," Choudhary said.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.17 per cent lower at 104.04. (PTI)

India to overtake China as oil demand growth centre in 2027: IEA

BETUL (GOA), Feb 7: India will overtake China as the biggest driver of global oil demand in 2027 as transportation and industry consumption in the world's fastest-growing major economy will drive growth despite a big push for clean energy and electrification, the International Energy Agency said on Wednesday.

The Paris-based agency in a special Indian Oil Market Outlook to 2030 report released at the India Energy Week here, said the country's oil demand will rise from 5.48 million barrels per day in 2023 to 6.64 million bpd in 2030.

China currently is the biggest driver of oil demand and India ranks No.2 in growth.

The numbers given by IEA in the report seem to talk of crude oil processed into fuel for domestic as well as for exports. The domestic consumption as per the oil ministry data is around 5 million barrels per day (bpd).

"India's oil demand will grow at a rapid pace by 2030 despite accelerated green energy moves," IEA director of energy markets and security Keisuke Sadamori said.

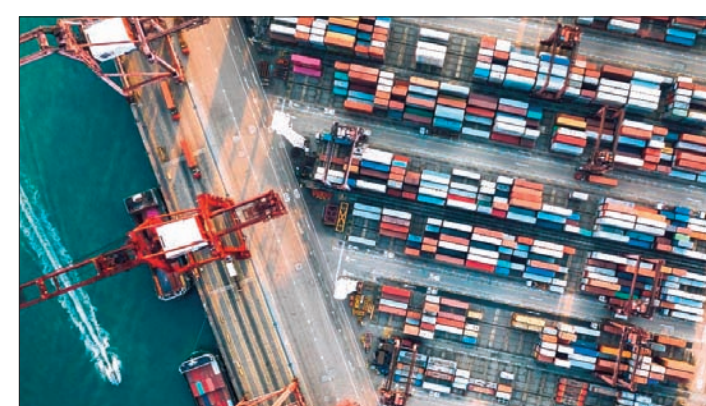
"Growth in India will surpass that of China in 2027."

But in absolute terms, demand in India will still lag China's even in 2030. "As oil demand slows in developed countries and China, India becomes the largest source of growth," said Toril Bosoni, head of oil industry and markets division, IEA. India currently is the third largest consumer of oil behind the US and China. It imports 85 per cent of its oil needs and this dependence is likely to rise as domestic production falls.

Diesel, she said, accounts for about 50 per cent of Indian gains and 20 per cent of global demand growth to 2030.

The demand growth is despite the push for electric vehicles which make up for a small fraction of the automobiles on the road currently. The EV push will see greater adoption in two- and three-wheelers while their penetration in the four-wheeler segment would be around 5 per cent.

"More than 500,000 barrels per day of oil demand will be avoided due to increased EV penetration, energy efficiency improvements



and biofuels growth," she said. Of this, around 200,000 bpd would be because of EV penetration.

She said refinery expansions will ensure India meets domestic needs and maintain its position as a key exporter of transportation fuel to Asia and the Atlantic Basin, she said adding Indian energy companies are targeting an additional 1 million barrels per day of refinery capacity. On biofuels, IEA said raising ethanol blending in petrol from current 12 per cent to 20 per cent may be a challenge given feedstock constraints.

Lack of major discoveries will see domestic production fall to 540,000 bpd by 2030, she said adding imports will rise from 4.6 million bpd in 2023 to 5.8 million bpd in 2030.

India holds oil stock equivalent to meet 66 days of requirement. This includes 7 days requirement stored in underground strategic reserves and the rest in depots and tanks in refineries and other locations. IEA member nations maintain a stockpile equivalent to 90 days of their demand. India is an associate member of IEA.

"India will become the largest source of global oil demand growth between now and 2030, while growth in developed economies and China initially slows and then subsequently goes into reverse in our outlook," IEA said. "India is on track to post an increase of almost 1.2 million bpd, accounting for more than one-third of the projected 3.2 million bpd global gains, to reach 6.6 million bpd by 2030".

The massive industrial expansion means that diesel is the single largest source of oil demand growth, accounting for almost half of the rise in the nation's demand and more than one-sixth of total global oil demand growth through 2030. Jet-kerosene demand is poised to grow strongly, at around 5.9 per cent per year on average, but from a low base compared to other countries. Petrol will grow by 0.7 per cent on average, as the electrification of India's vehicle fleet avoids a more substantial rise. LPG rounds out the growth picture, as petrochemical industry investments in production facilities boost feedstock demand.

As a relatively small oil pro-

ducer, and with limited potential for near-term growth, India's domestic production accounted for just 13 per cent of the country's supply needs. In 2023, domestic oil production averaged around 700,000 bpd. "Despite renewed efforts by the government to attract foreign upstream investment, domestic crude oil production is expected to see continued declines over the medium term," IEA said.

India's spectacular economic growth story, however, brings myriad challenges for its security of energy supplies, IEA said. "India was already the world's second-largest crude oil net importer in 2023, having boosted imports by 36 per cent over the past decade to 4.6 million bpd to meet rising refinery intake. Increased refining processing will lift crude oil imports further, to 5.8 million bpd by 2030, with major implications for India's security of supply".

The energy crisis and recent surge in long-haul crude sources, notably from Russia, has also added further impetus to sustaining the country's oil resilience in case of market disruptions, it said. (PTI)

GEMA's eLECTROFEST concludes

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 7: The three-day "eLECTROFEST" Expo organised by Guwahati Electric Merchants Association (GEMA) concluded in the city.

GEMA president Naval Kishore Sharda said that in the last three days, more than 7000 visitors registered their presence and gave their full support to the "eLECTROFEST" Expo. Vice president & chairman of "eLECTROFEST" Expo Gopal Pasari said that not only from Guwahati but also from various districts of Assam and different states of Northeast, people registered their presence in this Expo, which speaks of the success of the event.

Expo convener Abhishek Kejriwal said that the representatives of more than 72 companies of renowned national & international brands who came to this three-day long "eLECTROFEST" Expo wholeheartedly praised this event organised by GEMA.

NAME CORRECTION

I, Azizul Hoque do hereby solemnly affirm and declare that I am a permanent resident of the below mentioned address and citizen of India by birth. That my actual and correct name is Azizul Hoque and my father's name is Azahar Ali. But my name has wrongly been recorded in some of my school documents as Md Azizul Hoque and my father's name as Md Azahar Ali respectively. That this affidavit is required to be produced before the authority concerned as a piece of document.

Sd/-
Azizul Hoque
SO- Azahar Ali
Vill- No. 1/2 Barujahar
PO- Jangalpara, PS- Dalgaoan
Dist- Darrang (Assam)
PIN - 784116

AUCTION NOTICE

It is hereby informed to the concerned that auction sale of departmental Operation Timber will be held on 12/02/2024 at the Range Office, Western Range, Borlangpher, during office hours. The interested bidders are requested to be present on the day of auction sale as mentioned above.

Sd/-
P. Rongpi, Range Officer,
Western Range, Borlangpher.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE OF PHOSPHATING PLANT AT DIBRUGARH WORKSHOP

E-Tender Notice No.: DBWS-NIET-17-2023-24. E-Tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following works: **Name of work:** Operation and maintenance of Phosphating plant at Dibrugarh Workshop for 24 months. **Tender Value:** ₹19,82,400/-. **Earnest Money:** ₹39,700/-. **Date & Time of Closing Tender:** 15:00 hrs. on 27-02-2024. For details please visit www.irops.gov.in

CWM, Mechanical Workshop, Dibrugarh
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY
Serving Customers With A Smile

Police raid nets 16 cyber criminals

HT Correspondent

MORIGAON, Feb 7: Sixteen cyber criminals were arrested in a raid conducted in Laharighat and Moirabari areas of Morigaon district on Tuesday night. The arrests took place at 22 locations under the Laharighat and Moirabari Police Stations.

The arrested individuals were identified as Sirajul Islam, Moklesur Ahmed, Musharrif Ali, Zuber Hussain, Mustafizur Rahman, Sirajul Islam, Ajmal Sheikh, Bulbul Islam, Hussain Ali, Shahrukh Ahmed, Harun Al Rashid, Iqbal Hussain, Nekibur Islam, Hibzur Rahman, Ikramul Haq, and Mustafizur Rahman. They hail from Bowalguri, Sapkati, Bhelouguri, Dewaguri, and Belguri villages in the Laharighat and Moirabari areas.

The police confiscated 33 PAN cards, 30 passbooks from various banks, 39 Android mobile phones, 107 mobile SIM cards, three laptops, cash amounting to ₹ 19,000, and several voter IDs from the suspects.

Sirajul Islam, identified as the mastermind behind these cyber criminals, was previously arrested by Morigaon Police on December 12, 2022, for cyber crimes and was subsequently sent to jail.

Final inquiry reports suggest road accident as cause of death, senior police officials acquitted

CBI concludes investigation into SI Junmoni Rabha's death



HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Feb 7: The central investigative agency, CBI, completed its investigation into the mysterious death of SI Junmoni Rabha and submitted its 59-page final charge sheets at Nagaon District and Session Court in the late

afternoon last Tuesday.

Sources said that DSP Manindra Singh of the CBI team submitted the final inquiry reports regarding three separate cases registered in Nagaon in connection with the mysterious death of the lady cop near Nagaon Jakh-

abandha last year. The central investigative agency mentioned in its final inquiry reports that the deceased lady sub-inspector was killed in a mere road accident instead of suicide or murder. The agency included 11 chapters in the charge sheets in connection

with all three separate cases, and all the senior police officials of the then Nagaon Police against whom Sumitra Rabha, the bereaved mother of the deceased lady cop, brought allegations of involvement in the mysterious death of SI Junmoni Rabha were also acquitted in the charge sheets, sources added.

It's pertinent to mention here that following the mysterious death of lady SI, Sumitra Rabha, the mother of the deceased, lodged an FIR in Jakhlabandha PS and termed it a pre-planned murder instead of a mere road mishap. She mentioned the names of then SP Leena Doley, then ASP Rupiyoti Kalita, then OC, Nagaon PS Manoj Rajbanshi, SI Abhajioti Rabha, then OC Dhing in her FIR.

The CBI team that used Nagaon Circuit House as its temporary office for over the last several months to investigate the entire incident of SI Junmoni Rabha left for New Delhi on Wednesday.

Tezpur University hosts mega program on Nasha Mukh Bharat

Union minister Kaushal Kishore assures financial assistance for campus development



HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, Feb 7: Tezpur University organised a mega program on Nasha Mukh Bharat (Drug Free India Campaign) on Wednesday at the KBR auditorium of the university. Union minister of state for Housing and Urban Affairs, Kaushal Kishore, attended the program as the chief guest and delivered a compelling address on the transformative initiative 'Nasha Mukh Bharat'.

Speaking on the occasion, the minister highlighted the need for the Nasha Mukh Bharat Abhiyan and its nationwide campaign aiming at eradicating the scourge of substance abuse among youth. The minister emphasised that the government is facilitating several schemes for various stakeholders, including the youth, to build a Viksit & Aatmanirbhar Bharat. However, all such efforts will go in vain if the youth do not stay away from substance abuse. "Many youths are consumed by these drugs and spoil their youth. The first time whenever it is offered, the temptation should be rejected," the minister advised the youth.

The minister, who is looking after Housing and Urban Affairs, also as-

sured the university regarding the grant of financial assistance for developing a sewerage treatment plant on the campus. "I am instructing NBCC (a Government of India Civil Engineering Enterprise) to execute the proposal," he said.

Addressing the students, Prof Shambhu Nath Singh, vice chancellor of the university, said that young people are always into experimenting and exploring new things, and substance use is one such thing the young people are curious about. Prof Singh advocated for creating a favourable and proactive environment for youth where they can channelise their energy constructively towards nation-building.

Before the event, the minister also offered floral tributes to Ramabai Bhimrao Ambedkar on her Jayanti at Bordoichila Women's Hostel. The event witnessed the participation of a large number of National Service Scheme, TU volunteers, students, faculty, and staff members of the university. Dr Amiya Kumar Das, programme coordinator, NSS, TU, and Dr Apurba Saha, programme officer, NSS, TU, shared the dais with the dignitaries.

NABARD organises macramé & jute crafts training program in Nagaon

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Feb 7: NABARD, Assam Regional Office, Guwahati, organised a training program on macramé and jute crafts under the Micro Enterprise Development Programme (MEDP) at the conference hall of Bholaguri Satra Samabai Samitee Ltd, Kaliabor Development Block.



The training program was inaugurated last Tuesday by Rajendra Perna, DDM, NABARD, in the presence of Khurshid Ansari, LDM, AGVB, Uttam Bhadra, BM, Mantu Bora, chairman of the Samabai Samitee, Rashmi Rekha Hazarika, BPM, ASRLM, master trainer Juri Baruah, and secretary of the implementing agency Gramya Unnayan Santha - Mukut Deka.

Over 30 members from various self-help groups under Kaliabor Development Block participated in the training program.

While inaugurating the program, Rajendra Perna, DDM, NABARD, informed that in order to bridge the skill deficits and to facilitate the optimisation of production activities undertaken by the members of self-help groups, NABARD has been supporting need-based location MEDPs since 2006. Besides the MEDP training on macramé and jute crafts activities, the training session will cover training on record-keeping as well as bookkeeping, enterprise management, business dynamics, etc., along with a practical session regarding manufacturing various products of jute like wall hangings, table tops, dining covers, flower stands, etc., Perna said, adding that the eligible trainees would be provided credit support too after completion of their training through the local bankers associated with the government agency, a release stated here.

Biswaranjan Samal delivers insightful lecture

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, Feb 7: Additional chief secretary of the Higher Education Department, Biswaranjan Samal, visited Historic DHSK College on Wednesday.

He delivered a lecture on 'Future of Jobs and Education in an Era of Accelerating Technological and Ecological Transformation'.

Samal spoke on the shifting paradigms of education in light of accelerating technological changes. His thought-provoking deliberations on ecological changes, environmental deterioration, and the escalating effects of global warming raised pertinent questions regarding imminent challenges faced by humanity.

In his interaction with students, he emphasised how addiction to social media alienates people and cautioned about data imperialism and information explosion leading to virtual identities and knowledge manipulation. He pointed out the damaging outcomes of spurious and unfiltered information while acknowledging the positive effects of technological advancement.

Samal's enlightening and futuristic talk engaging with human issues would go a long way in inculcating and encouraging independent thinking and self-reliance among young learners and future citizens of the nation.

The program was moderated by Prof Rashmi Sarma, HoD of Education, and Nikita Bhuyan performed a Borgeet.

The officer was warmly welcomed by principal Dr Sashikanta Saikia with a Gayan-Bayan, NCC cadets,



gamosa, cheleng chador, letter of appreciation, and a package of books. Swarnali Mahanta, president, Debashish Duwara, vice president, and Mriganka Sandilya, general secretary of student union and Employee Association of DHSK College, extended a warm welcome to Samal.

The event was attended by Dr Partha Ganguli, Dr Madhumita Purkayastha, Dr Moromi Talukdar, Dr Rubab Fatema Namami, retired professor Dr Sultana Hazarika, members of the college staff, members of the student union, and hundreds of students.

The program concluded with a vote of thanks by Prof Upasana Dutta, HoD of the Psychology department, DHSK College.

Morigaon DTO conducts raids on brick kiln vehicles

HT Correspondent

MORIGAON, Feb 7: The Morigaon district transport officer (DTO) conducted a search operation on Wednesday against the documents of vehicles used in brick kilns. The DTO checked the documents of vehicles used in brick kilns in Neli, Sitajakhla, and other areas of the district. The team, led by district transport officer Arun Bora, visited several brick kilns and inspected the documents of JCBs, dumpers, and other vehicles. Owners of vehicles who have failed to pay vehicle taxes have been directed to settle the taxes as soon as possible. Additionally, the district transport officer has mandated the renewal of expired documents. He warned that legal action will be taken against vehicles and owners without proper documents or those who fail to renew expired documents. He emphasised that raids will be conducted in all brick kilns in the district in the future. Driving a vehicle without valid documents is considered an offense, and people are urged to renew their documents promptly.

Concerns mount over disappearance of youth

HT Correspondent

MARGHERITA, Feb 7: It has been one month since an upcoming youth from Longtong 2 village, under Lekhapani Police Station of the 83rd Margherita constituency in Tinsukia district, went missing from Vijayawada Railway Station in Andhra Pradesh.

Khuito Sema, the father of the missing Sema Naga youth, Mokata Sema, stated that his son and two other youths from the same village went to Bangalore for a job on January 12. Unfortunately, on January 14, he received a call from his friends informing him that Mokata had gone missing from the train compartment at Vijayawada Railway Station in Andhra Pradesh. To date, there has been no information about his son, Mokata Sema, de-

spite lodging a missing report at Lekhapani Police Station.

Kahoto Sema, chairman of the All Assam Sema Naga Council, expressed concern over the unfortunate situation, noting that many youths from Longtong village in the Tirap region, within the 83rd Margherita constituency of Tinsukia district, have gone missing over the years. These disappearances are suspected cases of human trafficking, as there have been several reports of youths falling into the trap of human trafficking gangs.

Kahoto Sema appealed to the state government and Assam Police DGP GP Singh to trace the missing youth, Mokata Sema, and other youths from Longtong village who have been missing for many years.

Awareness programme on road safety organised

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, Feb 7: In a bid to eradicate regular accidents across the state, the state government's Road and Transport department is carrying out a month-long programme called 'Road Safety Month' from January 15, continuing until February 14. As part of the programme, the department held an awareness programme among students at Government Boys Higher Secondary School here on Wednesday. The awareness programme, held under the aegis of the school's principal, Rinjuman Neog, was attended by a host of officials from the district administration office of the district transport officer, Sonitpur, among others. Addressing the gathering, MVI Padmalochan Hazarika spoke on the significance of the programme.

Urging all concerned to obey traffic rules for the interest of decreasing accidents cases, the MVI also mentioned that, like in other parts of the state, awareness programmes and free eye screening tests have been organised at different public places to eradicate accident cases and create awareness among the common people. Enforcement officer Parag Baruah, in his speech, mentioned how the Transport Department is taking initiative in controlling rapidly growing accident cases in the district.

Later, in her presidential speech, the principal of the school, Rinjuman Neog Borah, expressed her gratitude towards the department for organising such a beneficial programme among the student community. She said that it would support all concerned to know how to sincerely ride/drive on the busy roads, saving one's life. During the programme, officials from the Transport Department replied to the queries on different motor vehicle act-related issues raised by the students.

Anger on conversion of educational institutions to religious sanctums

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 7: Right wing activist and Kutumb Suraksha Mancha president Satya Ranjan Borah on Wednesday raised concern on conversion of educational institutions to religious sanctums.

Borah specially took a dig at the dress code of fathers, sisters among others of Christian missionary run schools.

"Is it not exclusive religious," he asked? "To promote and expand the exclusiveness of Christianity; the educational institutions governed by the Christian Missionaries are neglecting all the fundamental duties of being the citizen of India. As per the judgment of the Supreme Court of India against a case WPC No. 25006 of 2017 (A) stated that private schools which are required to have recognition from State must not promote one religion over others; the exclusive promotion of a particular religion by private educational institutions defies the secular

character of the Constitution and denies constitutional values and morality," a press release stated.

Borah further said that installation of idol of Jesus Christ and Mother Mary and the sign of Cross in the institutions violates inclusiveness of the country.

"The presence of Churches inside the campus of educational institutions ruled by the Christian Missionaries; is not exclusive religious practices?," he asked. "We strongly opined to stop sick and intentional religious practices of Christian missionaries to promote the exclusive religion in the country in the name of providing education," a press release stated.

Meanwhile, a student of 4th standard studying in Calvary English School on January 5 was allegedly mentally and physically harassed by school authorities for chanting "Jai Shree Ram". Bora stated that such an act by the school authorities violated Article 51(A) of the Constitution of India.

Two alleged drug peddlers apprehended

HT Correspondent

BISWANATH CHARIALI, Feb 7: Acting on a tip-off, a team of Arunachal Pradesh Police, headed by Padi Payeng, the officer in-charge of Sejusa Police Station, managed to apprehend a woman identified as Jumir Gengkak (22) from Niti Darlong Basti area located on the Assam-Arunachal border on Wednesday. They recovered a soap container full of drugs along with 35 empty containers. During police interrogation, Jumir revealed that one Afjal Hussain (23) from Khanamukh area under Chariduar Police Station had supplied her with the drugs. Like other days, Afjal Hussain had also visited Sejusa along with his motorcycle bearing registration number AS 12 Z 1327, along with drugs.

The police team, who was waiting for Afjal, managed to trap him along with 12.37 grams of drugs, while the police had earlier recovered 15.42 grams of drugs from Jumir. The Sejusa Police have registered a case against the two apprehended individuals, and further investigation is ongoing. It is to be mentioned here that Jumir Gengkak is the wife of constable Hari Charan Bodo, who works in IRBN.

OBITUARY

Dinesh Chandra Baroowa, a resident of Kedar Road, Guwahati, who was the former head of the department of Political Science at Arya Vidyapeeth College, Guwahati, registrar of Gauhati University, and chairman of the Assam Higher Secondary Council, passed away on Wednesday at 6:06 am at his residence on Kedar Road.

He was 84. He is survived by his wife, one son, two daughters, one daughter-in-law, two sons-in-law, grandsons, granddaughters, and a host of relatives. His last rites were performed at the Bhatnath Cremation Ground on Wednesday, in the presence of his family members, relatives, and well-wishers. His demise is widely mourned.

NTPC Bongaigaon and IOCL Bongaigaon Refinery forge MAA for enhanced emergency response



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, Feb 7: NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati and IOCL Bongaigaon Refinery have formalised a Mutual Aid Agreement (MAA) for Emergency Response Plan (ERP) on Tuesday at NTPC Bongaigaon, aiming to bolster emergency readiness and response capabilities between the individual organisations. The mutual aid initiative, codified in a comprehensive agreement, seeks to enhance collaboration and resource sharing between the two entities to effectively address industrial emergencies and natural calamities. By pooling resources and expertise, IOCL Bongaigaon Refinery and NTPC Bongaigaon aim to minimise the impact of dis-

asters and ensure swift coordinated responses in times of crisis. The agreement was signed by Nayan Kumar Barua, ED & Refinery head of IOCL - Bongaigaon Refinery, and KC Muralidharan, CGM (O&M) of NTPC Bongaigaon in the presence of Karunakar Das, Business Unit head of NTPC Bongaigaon.

Karunakar Das expressed confidence in the agreement, emphasising its importance in enhancing emergency preparedness and response capabilities in the region. He also added that the partnership with IOCL - Bongaigaon Refinery signifies their dedication to ensuring the safety and well-being of their employees, stakeholders, and the surrounding areas. Together, they

will work tirelessly to mitigate the impact of disasters and safeguard their operations, he added.

Speaking on the occasion, Barua said that the mutual aid agreement outlines key objectives, including establishing and developing mutual aid assistance for industrial emergency situations and providing timely and organised assistance beyond the capacity of individual organisations. Under the terms of the agreement, both IOCL - Bongaigaon Refinery and NTPC Bongaigaon commit to providing personnel, equipment, facilities, and services to assist each other during emergencies, besides sensitising members and the public on disaster threats and mitigation strategies, promoting loss control procedures related to hazards associated with member industries.

The agreement also specifies designated staging areas and authorized representatives responsible for activating mutual aid assistance. The Mutual Aid Agreement is set to be effective for a period of five years, with provisions for renewal and periodic review to ensure its continued effectiveness. The agreement was attended by KC Daimary, GM (IC)-HR, Pallab Nath, GM (F&S), Anirban Chanda, CTSM, and Sandeep Das, SESM from IOCL Bongaigaon Refinery, Induri S Reddy, GM (Maintenance), Asutosh Biswas, GM (Operation), Ashish Kumar, deputy commandant, CISF, Paresh Mathur, AGM (TS), Onkar Nath, AGM (HR), Pavel Sarkar, AGM (Safety) from NTPC Bongaigaon.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Expect problems and eat them for breakfast.
- Alfred A. Montapert

China's 'foray' into Indian Ocean

The recent docking of a Chinese scientific vessel, the Xiang Yang Hong 3, in the Maldives has reignited tensions between Beijing, New Delhi, and Malé. While Beijing claims the visit is innocuous, India views it with suspicion, fearing it could be a precursor to Chinese military activities, particularly submarine operations, in the region. However, experts dismiss these concerns, citing the lawful nature of Chinese scientific research in international waters. This incident is not isolated; it's part of a larger strategic competition between China and India in the Indian Ocean, exacerbated by their ongoing border disputes in the Himalayas. Previous instances, like Chinese naval submarines docking in Colombo and research ships visiting Sri Lanka, have raised India's ire. Despite India's objections, the Maldives, historically within India's sphere of influence, appears to be tilting towards China, exemplified by President Mohamed Muizzu's pro-China stance and anti-India rhetoric. The Maldives' shift in allegiance is troubling for India, given the nation's strategic importance in the Indian Ocean. India's concerns about Chinese access to this vital location stem from China's expanding naval capabilities and its ambitions in the region. The Maldives' decision to terminate a hydrographic survey contract with India and reduce Indian military presence further underscores the deteriorating relations between the two countries.

China's warm reception of President Muizzu during his recent visit to Beijing and subsequent infrastructure projects funded by China in the Maldives signal a deepening of ties between the two nations. This sudden change in Malé's stance has raised alarms in Delhi, which aims to counter China's growing influence in its backyard. However, it's not just India that's apprehensive; opposition parties in the Maldives, such as the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), are also advocating for a shift in government policy, fearing the repercussions of antagonizing India. The Maldives relies heavily on India for various essentials, including food supply, infrastructure development, and healthcare services, making it economically vulnerable to any fallout in relations. The situation underscores the delicate balance of power in the region and the complexities of geopolitics. As China expands its strategic footprint in the Indian Ocean, India must devise effective strategies to safeguard its interests and counter China's assertiveness. This may involve diplomatic maneuvers, bolstering alliances with regional partners, and enhancing naval capabilities to maintain a balance of power.

Furthermore, India must tread carefully to avoid escalating tensions with China while asserting its influence in the Indian Ocean. Any misstep could have far-reaching consequences for regional stability and India's security interests. The docking of the Chinese vessel in the Maldives is a symptom of the broader strategic competition unfolding in the Indian Ocean. India must navigate this complex landscape with caution, prioritizing its national security interests while engaging in constructive dialogue with regional partners to counter China's growing influence. The stakes are high, and India's response will shape the geopolitical dynamics of the region for years to come. India's response to China's increasing assertiveness in the Indian Ocean must be multifaceted. Diplomatically, India should engage in dialogue with the Maldives to address concerns and reaffirm bilateral ties. Additionally, strengthening partnerships with other regional players, such as the United States and Japan, can provide a collective counterbalance to China's influence. Militarily, India should invest in enhancing its naval capabilities and infrastructure in the Indian Ocean region to effectively deter any potential threats.

Harsh Mander and his 'Aman Biradari' into the trap of CBI



By: Er. Rajesh Pathak

In tandem with the insurgents, some of the missionary organisations under different denominations are reported to provide all kind of assistance to nurture anti-national elements even in the prestigious institutions in the country. FTTI, Pune, JNU, Delhi and Jadhav University are said to be the most prominent of them. In consequence to this three years back country saw the Home ministry responded with the suspension of the licenses of 4 big Christian missionaries' organizations under the provision of FCRA [Foreign Contribution Regulation Act].

These missionaries have their footholds particularly in those parts of South India, Jharkhand and Manipur which were mainly inhabited by innocent Adivasis people. Active in the same kind of misdeeds, the permissions of two other organizations named Rajnandgaon Leprosy Hospital and Clinic and Don Vasco Tribal Development Society was also terminated as also. And later in this net fell the 'World Vision' and FCRA invoked against it, cutting down all the channels of dubious foreign funds to it. World vision has been notorious for being an extended form of US state department. In the book 'The Armies of God: A study in Militant Christianity' its author, Iain Buchanan, views that World Vision and other major evangelical NGOs are the arms of implementing US foreign policy objectives.

But now in this high profile international-racket of destabilizing India that came to light is 'Aman Biradari' of Harsh

Mander. CBI raided his office in pursuit of laying hands on the evidence of FCRA violation. Never desisting from his dubious activities, 'Aman Biradari' had also gained much limelight in the news when it deputed the children of its NGO in Anti-CAA agitation.

Notably Harsh Mander, an ex IAS officer, had been the designated member of Sonia Gandhi's National Advisory Committee, which had been infamous to be above the constitutionally elected Government in the public domain then. It was the time when Congress had come into the firm fists of Ahmad Patel and Oscar Fernandez duo. Chidambaram was the home minister in Manmohan Singh government. One incident struck the attention of the entire country when an arrested wife of one top naxalite was freed from the jail in return of the kidnapped higher official of the government.

Later that lady was revealed to have been the chief of an NGO run by an ex IAS officer who had been the member of National Advisory Committee. In his book 'Accidental Prime', Sanjay Baru writes that, when alone, Sonia Gandhi used to call Prime Minister direct by the name, 'Manmohan', whereas Manmohan Singh addressed her as 'Soniajee'. Ahmad Patel served as Sonia's messenger, and when he was seen to be making far more visits in PM, the speculations began to gain momentum about some change in the cabinet. It was because of such interventions that the Manmohan's government began to go off track, ultimately things having been gone out of hands.

Bharat Ratna for Advani - Modi's guru dakshina to the party patriarch

Bharat Ratna for L.K. Advani comes at a time when his party gathers its complete might to garner maximum seats and make a record hat-trick comeback. The Bharat Ratna announcement was made by the Prime Minister himself to a roaring audience in Orissa while he was dedicating various development projects. The crowd, mostly stimulated by the declaration, sprang into an electrifying exhilaration. Decades of dedicated service by the strongman in Indian politics, the BJP patriarch, to his country was ultimately recognized.

Again, the timing of the government's decision has a queer value in it. Soon after the Ram Temple consecration and the general election at the doorstep is the juncture that Modi's political acumen chose to make this profound announcement. There is no mistake in viewing that the highest civilian honor being conferred to L. K. Advani is a guru dakshina from his close confidant junior Modi. For various reasons it has to be assumed that, Modi must have been waiting for the suitable moment to show his veneration to his guru in a big way, who, according to the Prime Minister's words paved the way for his growth as a prominent political figure. Modi's rise as a beginner in the Indian political context was cemented with the relentless support of L.K. Advani.

The veteran chose to stand by the then Gujarat Chief Minister, who was accused of facilitating a coldblooded riot that exploded soon after the Godhra train carnage and bubbles of discontent began to fume from within the BJP. Narendra Modi was re-

mindful what Raj Dharma was by Atal Bihari Vajpayee in his poetic vocabulary. But Advani's firm stance in favour of Modi helped him continue in Gujarat with vigor and the rest is history.

The Ram Janmabhoomi Movement by the BJP was the basic plank that catapulted the party's fortunes at national level. Advani could perceive his party's aspirations fructifying by the Yatra that he undertook from Somnath in Gujarat to Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh giving a stirring sense of Hindutva all the way through. That was the beginning of the saffron rise on India's political horizon. Modi had accompanied the party veteran throughout the journey and Advani had experienced the depth of the Modi persona, his acumen to organize events and his farsightedness on the prospects of Hindutva based nationalism.

The young leader from the RSS bandwagon remained intuitively focused organizing the yatra mostly as its backroom boy. Advani's rath yatra could easily shoot up his party's electoral tally from 2 to 84 seats in the Lok Sabha. He was instrumental in grooming a class of next generation leaders like Narendra Modi, Sushama Swaraj, Pramod Mahajan and Arun Jaitley in his party. And this could be exclusively seen as his organizational expertise gained as a pracharak in the RSS and the management lessons he was trained in. Karyakarta Nirman or grooming a worker is the term the RSS and his party call it.

Vajpayee's strict gestures to sack Modi after the Godhra riots

were easily contained by Advani and that was the personal alignment both the leaders developed from the beginning itself. Advani was the Home Minister when Gujarat sprung into flames. His government was accused of being passive and silent on the Modi administration in Gujarat. Advani visited the riot torn Gujarat in three days of the flare-up. His strong denial of the deliberate narratives that his political opponents flung calling the carnage a state orchestrated mayhem had helped Narendra Modi retain his chair.

Modi's subsequent victories in the state elections have effectively accentuated the standpoint of Advani and the former got enough breathing space to prove his blamelessness to the world that pelted stones at him unfeelingly. The year 2014 witnessed Advani's gentle disapproval of him being sidelined and Modi being imported to Delhi as the face for Prime Minister by his party and the RSS. Modi's benign gesticulation by pulling the veteran into the BJP's Margdarshak Mandal was a well articulated pantomime but the opposition called it scandalous and cruel.

Though L. K. Advani's political shrewdness pushed his party through the dark days of Ayodhya movement and the subsequent destruction of the Babri mosque, when time came for the party to choose between him and Vajpayee, the latter's statesmanlike softness and poetic oratory won him the preference. Advani remained a shadow man sailing the party ship through troubled wa-

ters while Vajpayee was projected as its captain. But between Vajpayee and Advani there hasn't been even the slightest of disagreement on issues that in other parties, for instance, would have been exploding beyond measure while breaking them top to bottom. This culture of being united from the highest ranks of the party cadre to the grassroots gains the BJP a special recognition and separates it from other parties. Modi's entry to the national arena as the party strongman never disrupted this framework.

Probably he could manage to glue the party and its functionaries into one political ideology, 'nation first and party next'. L. K. Advani's autobiography 'My Country My Life' is a sincere testimony of his political journey and he genuinely narrates his trepidation of being called a 'traitor' among the Sangh Parivar. Advani's visit to Mohammed Ali Jinnah's mausoleum in Karachi and his subsequent references to the man who forced the country's dissection turned the political climate in India truly volatile. He was denounced for taking an 'ideological deviation' while betraying his party's Hindutva stand.

Another instance of volatility that he as a party strongman and the Home Minister in the Vajpayee government faced was the Kargil war. Pakistan's menacing cross border assault at Kargil pushed India into an all-out war and the Islamic neighbor's war-mongering had completely toppled his government's peace initiative that Prime Minister Vajpayee began by taking bus diplomacy to Lahore. Little did the journey to Lahore on 20 February 1999 fructify as both the coun-

tries vigorously began to bombard on each other and India won the war giving Pakistan a crushing defeat. Before the crisis began to penetrate further, India could show Pakistan its place and the BJP government's audacity was lauded.

Interestingly, politics in India began to move the Modi way. The government's announcement on Bharat Ratna to Advani came soon after the same was conferred to the socialist leader and former Bihar Chief Minister Karpoori Thakur. He remained a messiah of the backward communities. Diplomatically pulling Nitish Kumar to his side, Modi could systematically nip parallel narratives demanding a nationwide caste survey in the bud. This move by the Prime Minister is expected to consolidate votes from the backward communities in states where their strong presence defines the momentum. Modi's conferring Bharat Ratna to Advani would preferably help him sustain his image as the Hindutva poster boy, an additional flavor to intensify his support base soon after the Ayodhya inauguration.

The timeline of these events would evidently hold you appreciative of the Modi blitzkrieg making its final move before the election exhilarations begin. The pran prathista and Bharat Ratna were significantly translating the long cherished dreams of Prime Minister Modi to actuality. The Bharat Ratna to the party patriarch is sure to escalate the level of jubilation in his party and the election results 2024 might add to its sweetness further. (The author is a freelance journalist who can be reached at mrlalu30@gmail.com)

DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: M.R.Lalu

Houthi pirates bring global trade through Red Sea to a near halt

By: Nantoo Banerjee

It is difficult to believe in the 21st century that some small groups of Yemeni Houthi pirates on the Red Sea can bring a \$1-trillion-plus annual global trade using the sea route almost to a halt, forcing ship-owners and shippers divert the trade through a several times longer route via the Cape of Good Hope at the bottom of South Africa. Sea piracy is nothing new. But few have shown such guts as Houthi pirates indiscriminately attacking cargo vessels passing through the trait with arms, ammunition, and anti-ship missiles. They won't even spare US Navy destroyers. Cargoes are looted and captured seamen are often thrown into the sea. The escalating Red Sea crisis poses billions of dollars of risk for India. The world mood remains inexplicably defensive. An estimated 12 percent of the global trade passes through the Red Sea.

The pirates seem to have strong backings from Iran, which it denies. The Houthi attacks are believed to be linked with Israeli counter attacks on Palestinian Gaza rebels, which have killed over 24,000 Gazans since Palestinian militants attacked an Israeli cultural entertainment programme killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, on October 7, last year. Iranian-backed Houthis have been protesting since November against the continuous hammering on Gaza citizens by Israel's military force.

Now, Houthi pirates from Yemen are increasingly attacking commercial vessels passing through the Red Sea. The attacks have forced shippers to avoid one of the world's most crucial trade routes and use the alternative longer route through the waters of the southern tip of Africa, adding more than 3,500 nautical miles (6,500 km,

approximately) to the journey taking close to half a month of extra sailing time in each trip apart from highly increasing shipping and insurance costs.

Since last November, the Houthi pirates have targeted vessels passing through the strait of Bab al-Mandab, a 32-km wide channel that splits north-East Africa from Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula. Although India, as in the case of other affected countries, is yet to react to the latest Houthi pirate attacks except keeping its naval frigates in the sea to ensure safety of the cargoes and seafarers. The incidents will have a major impact on the country's foreign trade during the current financial year and beyond. The worst affected are India's oil imports. India is the world's third largest oil importer. It gets the bulk of its Russian supplies through the Red Sea. Russian supplies made up over 35 percent of the country's crude oil imports, last year, amounting to 1.7 million barrels per day. As of now, Russian vessels are not the prime targets of the Houthi pirates. However, the rerouting of vessels via the Cape of Good Hope for safety has led to shortage of merchant ships due to the long travel time.

India is also the world's biggest importer of vegetable oils and much of the import passes through the Red Sea. The supply of sunflower oil has become tight for India. The sunflower oil imports are already said to be down. Buyers are shifting to other vegetable oils available at discount. The freight cost has increased by nearly 35 percent. Similarly, fertilizer shipments are getting delayed. Logistics costs are moving up. Exports from India through the Red Sea too are facing big trouble. The Red Sea route via the Suez Canal accounts for 50 percent of the country's exports and 30 percent of imports.

Among the sectors deeply affected by the Houthi piracy are perishable items such as agricultural commodities, farm products, and marine foods, all carrying lean margins. The crisis has also hurt the export of buffalo meat. Nearly 60 percent of India's buffalo meat exports go through the Red Sea to north African countries and Russia.

A prolonged strife can affect the profitability and working capital cycle of India's export-oriented industries. "The extent of this will vary depending on sectoral nuances. Supply chain issues could also intensify, curbing trade volume and renewing inflationary pressures," rating agency CRISIL has said. In a recent credit alert, the rating agency said Basmati rice exporters, shipping a third of India's produce to these regions, are feeling the pressure. They are selling part of their inventory in the domestic market. Marine foods like shrimp and prawn could see a significant impact as 80 to 90 percent of the production is exported, over half of which flows through the Red Sea. While sectors like textiles and chemicals may not be severely impacted as yet, a sustained disruption of trade channels could crank up working capital needs and dent operating profits for them as well as capital goods players, CRISIL has warned.

Although there is nothing new about sea piracy, Houthi pirates seem to be more politically motivated than grabbing ships just to offload goods to make money. Sea and river pirates have existed since ancient times. They attacked both passenger and cargo carriers on seas or rivers. They threatened the trading routes of ancient Greece, and seized cargoes of grains and olive oil from Roman ships. Pirates were reported to have been highly active for at least seven decades since 1650, known as the 'golden age' of piracy. The cases of

piracy were down since the 19th Century, which saw the massive rise of the global naval power. Piracy still exists in some select seas such as South China Seas and Red Sea.

Interestingly, Houthi pirates appear to be selective about their targets. They are choosy about the targeting of vessels by the flags they fly or the origin and destination of cargoes. They don't normally touch Russian, Chinese and West Asian country vessels. So far, Indian ships have also been spared. Clearly, they are more after ships or shipments linked with countries supporting Israeli attacks, directly or indirectly, on Gaza Palestinians.

India is concerned as the Red Sea route accounts for almost 50 percent of exports, a substantial part of which are meant for EU member countries, the UK, and the USA. Almost all of these countries are against Gaza militants and have done little to force Israel to stop pounding on Gaza to massacre innocent civilians, including women and children. The matter is getting increasingly complicated as there is no sign of an Israeli withdrawal of strikes on Gaza. As a result, some of the world's most powerful nations have chosen to avoid the Red Sea rather than taking up a collective agenda to negotiate with the Houthi controlled Yemen, the second largest state on the Arabian Peninsula and a member of the United Nations. Several naval forces, including the Indian Navy, are active in the Red Sea trying to prevent Houthi pirates from grabbing cargo carriers. However, they seem to have little impact on increasingly desperate Houthi attacks on cargo vessels in the Red Sea. A global action against Yemen may probably end the situation. Unfortunately, no country wants to take a lead in the matter. (IPA Service)

Empty-handed budget: Need for comprehensive reforms in health, education, and social sectors

By: Privanka Saurabh

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented her sixth budget on February 1, where she focused on the government's wide-ranging achievements in the last 10 years. Since it is an election year, the budget was not a full one, but a vote on account and did not include major announcements on the revenue or expenditure account. An interim budget, separate from the regular annual budget, is presented in an election year (2024 is an election year for the Lok Sabha).

Similar to the Union Budget, it is debated in the Lok Sabha and remains valid for the entire year (even though it is meant to serve as a transitional arrangement for about 2-4 months). Commonly known as 'vote-on-account', it authorizes specific expenditures until the new government takes office. Article 116 allows the advance allocation of money from the 'Consolidated Fund of India' to meet immediate expenditure requirements. The government did not make any changes in the income tax slabs in the last budget of its second term. Nor are any changes being made in direct

or indirect taxes. As experts say, one should not expect too much from the election year budget.

However, if the government wanted, it could have given a list of populist cuts and benefits. Despite the fiscal deficit being estimated at 5.1 percent, the government will have to be prepared to bear the brunt of the announcements of free distribution, vaccination, and benefits to farmers, expanding the scope of Ayushman Yojana, and providing free electricity. However, by not announcing MSP for farmers, the government seems to be failing to fulfill its guarantee. On the one hand, it argues that twenty-five crore people have been brought out of the poverty line, while on the other hand, it pats itself on the back for giving free rations to eighty crore people.

Overall this is an administrative tradition. In the last ten years, direct tax collections have more than tripled and the number of returns filed has increased by 2.4 times. Two crore more houses will be built in the next five years under PM Awas Yojana (Rural). Although this interim Union Budget is not very expensive. Therefore, only time will tell how much public-private partnership

will be promoted to strengthen development ambitions and meet budget commitments.

Both higher and school education got increased allocation in the budget and schemes like PM School for Rising India (PM SHRI) got almost 50% more allocation than the previous budget. The total allocation for the school education department is ₹73,008.10 crore which is more than the previous allocation. Critics argue that a large portion has gone into funding the PM-SHRI project which aims to upgrade existing government schools in the country and not allocate funds to enhance government schools.

A major announcement in the budget relates to health coverage extension for ASHA and Anganwadi workers under the PM-Jan Arogya Yojana. The allocation for the health sector has been increased from ₹89,155 crore to ₹90,658.63 crore. Experts in this field argue for the government to focus on non-communicable diseases, increase tax exemptions for preventive health care, and improve and upgrade the quality of subsidized treatments. The budget allocation for most social sector schemes and departments is more or less the same as last

year. Allocations for school and higher education as well as health and family welfare departments show a somewhat modest increase over last year's BE, around 6-8%.

Although no new announcements of major schemes were made in the Budget, the Finance Minister highlighted that 25 crore people have been brought out of multidimensional poverty (MPI) in the last 10 years. Experts argue that the MPI does not tell us about trends in income poverty, which is a useful indicator of economic well-being. The further claim that "people's average real income has increased by 50%" does not tell us much about how the lives of the poor changed because what matters is the distribution of national income.

Experts also argue that there has been modest growth in average rural worker income which is also reflected in poor growth in private final consumption expenditure. There has been a notable reversal in the structural transformation of employment, marked by an increase in the share of agriculture in total employment. This shows the lack of employment opportunities other than agriculture. The recent increase in

women's labor force participation rate over the past 4-5 years appears to be crisis-driven, as large numbers of women are engaged in unpaid family labor rather than gainful employment.

At the macroeconomic level, the Budget claims that in 2023-24, the central government has managed to ensure that its receipts, other than borrowings, are almost equal to the budget. It has met budgetary expectations concerning tax revenues and is also expected to grow its non-tax revenue receipts by 25% relative to the budget. There is a need to create an enabling environment for businesses to flourish, focus on environment-related issues, and upliftment of the marginalized section of society. Instead of focusing on big schemes, the government needs to focus on comprehensive reforms in the health, education, and social sectors.

While these are important schemes for the poor, it does not take away from the fact that health, education, and social security budgets are grossly inadequate, even as these services suffer from poor infrastructure, huge vacancies, and inadequate resources.

With unprecedented snowfall shortage, winter drought grips the Himalayas

By: Anjal Prakash

The iconic snow-capped peaks in the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) region, usually adorned with a winter white blanket, are noticeably bare this year, especially in the western Himalayas. This abnormal winter, marked by minimal or no snowfall, has triggered concerns among farmers whose livelihoods heavily rely on agriculture. The HKH region, which is highly dependent on agriculture, faces severe consequences due to the direct impact of low snowfall.

Traditionally, snow is a vital source of sustenance in mountainous regions, providing insulation for dormant crops, supporting root growth, preventing frost penetration, and safeguarding soil from erosion. The scarcity of snowfall, exacerbated by warmer temperatures this season, is poised to have adverse ecological effects on water and agroforestry in the Himalayan region. Even if there is a substantial snowfall in the upcoming months, it might be insufficient to compensate for the existing deficit. The dwindling snow accumulation raises concerns about reduced 'runoff', contributing to diminished water flow into rivers and streams crucial for agriculture.

Glaciers are vital in sustaining downstream water resources

Mountain communities in the HKH region already grapple with multiple challenges, including crop failure, livestock loss, fodder shortages, and the threat of disasters, leading to psychological distress. The current dry winter intensifies these challenges, following years of below-average snowpack accumulation, promising to strain water resources further in the coming spring and summer. Notable cases include Nepal's Humla District, where the high-altitude Limi Valley experienced an unusual early snowfall in September, followed by a pronounced lack of precipitation. Similarly, northern Pakistan's Central Hunza, a region typically covered in meters of snow at this time of year, has seen no snowfall in this warmer-than-usual winter.

The underlying cause of this unusual weather pattern is attributed to global heating, a vital component of the climate crisis, influencing La Niña – El Niño conditions and disrupting the critical 'Western Disturbance'. This meteorological phenomenon significantly impacts the hydrological regime of the Hindu Kush Himalaya, affecting water security for the region's inhabitants.

The observed rise in global temperatures, with 2023 recording the hottest global temperatures, further accentuates the urgency of addressing climate change. The consequences of these temperature anomalies are manifested in weak-



ened and delayed Western Disturbance, impacting winter precipitation, crop production, and snowfall in the western Himalayan region.

Understanding and monitoring the changing dynamics of the Western Disturbance are crucial for predicting snowfall in the Himalayas. The implications for glaciers in the HKH region are significant, as they are vital in feeding major rivers and sustaining downstream water resources. Adapting to these changes becomes imperative as the region experiences extended monsoons and shifting precipitation patterns. Swift decisions on water management, optimising food production, enhancing irrigation networks, and implementing Disaster Risk Reduction strategies are crucial steps to mitigate future water stress and ensure the resilience of Himalayan communities in the face of evolving climate challenges.

Alarming water scarcity sparks climate concerns

The Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) region is facing an unprecedented winter drought, raising serious concerns about water security amid the escalating impacts of climate change. The absence of snowfall, a rare occurrence following the record-breaking global temperatures of 2023, is causing anxiety, especially in the western Himalayas, where typically snow-covered peaks now stand bare.

Traditionally, snow accumulates from October or November until March, serving as a crucial water source, protecting crops from frost, and preventing soil erosion. The scarcity of snowfall disrupts this delicate balance, impacting water availability for agriculture and agroforestry during critical periods.

Global warming, a significant contributor to the climate crisis, alters weather patterns, underscoring the HKH's water security vulnerability.

The consequences of low snowfall extend to agriculture, with mountain communities already grappling with crop failure, livestock losses, and fodder shortages. The dry winter compounds challenges following years of below-average snowpack accumulation, posing a threat to water resources in the upcoming spring and sum-

mer.

The impact of changing weather patterns on the Western Disturbance, a crucial source of snowfall for HKH glaciers, raises concerns about downstream river hydrology. The decline in Western Disturbance activity poses a threat to the region's water security, with potential transboundary impacts on the Indus Water Treaty and water management for agriculture and power generation, especially for India and Pakistan.

To respond to these challenges, urgent action is needed, including establishing a national program to monitor and understand the changing dynamics of the Western Disturbance. Credible scientific data is deemed essential to devise effective plans to address the looming threat and safeguard the water security of the Himalayan region. Amid this crisis, proactive measures and informed decision-making are crucial to mitigate the impacts of the winter drought on the delicate ecosystems and communities dependent on the Himalayan water resources.

Consequences of the winter absence in Northwestern India

As winter envelops the majestic hills of northwest India, the conspicuous absence of snow in renowned tourist havens like Gulmarg in Kashmir and Shimla in Himachal Pradesh has become a cause for concern among the public and experts. This unexpected departure from the traditional winter landscape now unravels a complex web of consequences far beyond aesthetics and tourism.

The significance of snowfall in the Himalayan region goes beyond its picturesque appeal. It plays a crucial role in maintaining ecological equilibrium and sustaining various sectors of the local economy. Reduced snowfall in January, when the hills should be adorned with a pristine white blanket, raises alarms about potential repercussions.

The diminishing snowfall could adversely impact agriculture and tourism, two pillars of the region's economy. The snow, acting as a protective layer for crops, prevents frost damage and erosion, ensuring a robust agricultural yield. Simultaneously, the scenic allure of

snow-covered landscapes attracts tourists, contributing significantly to the economy.

The unexpected dry spell during a critical winter period raises questions about climate patterns and their implications for the Himalayan ecosystem. Climate experts underscore the need for comprehensive studies to understand the broader ramifications of this unusual weather phenomenon.

As the vanishing snow continues to perplex the region, it calls for heightened awareness, scientific inquiry, and proactive measures to address the evolving challenges. The delicate balance between nature and human activities in northwest India hinges on unravelling the enigma of disappearing snow and devising sustainable solutions for the well-being of the environment and the communities dependent on it.

Nurturing resilience: Addressing the winter drought in Himalayas for sustainable futures

As the iconic snow-capped peaks stand bare, the concerns are not merely aesthetic; they extend to the foundations of agriculture, tourism, and the region's ecological integrity. The diminished snowfall, a result of abnormal weather patterns exacerbated by global heating, threatens the traditional sustenance mechanisms of mountain communities.

The intricate interplay between snow accumulation, glacier melt, and downstream river hydrology underscores the urgency for understanding and monitoring the changing dynamics of the Western Disturbance. This meteorological phenomenon, disrupted by climate change, holds the key to the water security of the Himalayan region.

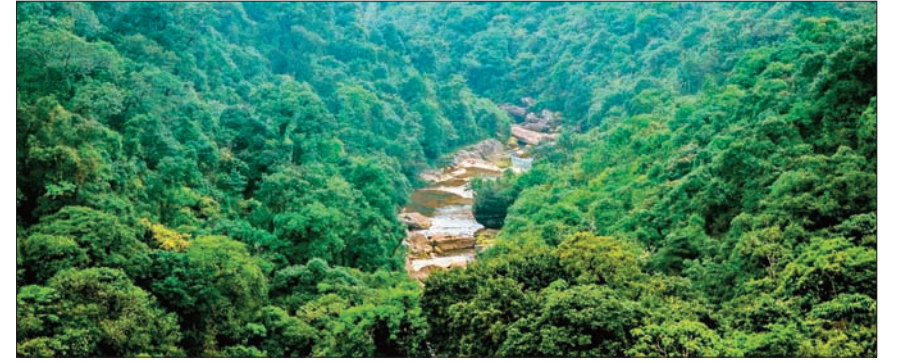
Amid the challenges of reduced runoff, agricultural losses, and heightened risks of disasters, a call for proactive measures and informed decision-making emerges. Establishing a national program to monitor the Western Disturbance and leveraging credible scientific data becomes imperative to navigate these uncertainties.

The winter drought is not just a climatic anomaly but a wake-up call to adapt swiftly to changing precipitation patterns and rising temperatures.

The resilience of Himalayan communities hinges on strategic water management, optimising food production, fortifying irrigation networks, and implementing robust Disaster Risk Reduction strategies.

In these challenges, the imperative is clear – nurturing resilience. Swift action today can pave the way for sustainable futures in the Himalayas, ensuring that these awe-inspiring peaks continue to be a source of life and sustenance for future generations. (Courtesy: The Quint)

Global warming can affect the ability of forests to suck carbon from atmosphere, shows study



By: Simrin Sirur

Forests are considered the most effective and abundantly available carbon sinks, capable of storing and sequestering millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. A new study from India joins emerging research that challenges this notion, showing that carbon uptake by forests is more volatile in a warming world than previously thought.

The goal to reach net-zero emissions by mid-century has popularised the idea of using forests as tools to aid climate mitigation, or carbon removal, in order to reduce global emissions. The Indian government bet on forests when it pledged to create a carbon sink capable of sequestering an additional 2.5-3 billion tonnes of carbon through forest and tree cover by 2030.

However, the study by researchers from the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, highlights the impacts of global warming on the forest ecosystem, suggesting that it may be affecting and reducing the carbon uptake potential of forests. Global warming could have reduced the carbon uptake potential in forests by around 6% over the last two decades, the research finds.

The findings send a "strong scientific message" that improvements in greening don't necessarily result in improvements in carbon uptake. "This analysis also has significant implications on the scientific analyses for planning to achieve net zero by 2070, as committed by India," says the paper, published in Nature in December 2023.

Scientists are still trying to fully understand the effects of global warming on the ability of forests to sequester carbon. "It's still a very novel area of research, especially in India because we don't have observational data that captures these changes," says Subimal Ghosh, convener, Interdisciplinary Program in Climate Studies at the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, and one of the authors of the study.

The fate of forests and how they navigate a warming world is driven by multiple feedback loops with complex relationships between heat, moisture and carbon dioxide. The only way to meaningfully study how effective they are is to improve the robustness of India's greenhouse gas monitoring network, several experts told Mongabay India.

Trees are able to absorb carbon dioxide through photosynthesis, a crucial process for plant survival in which it uses carbon dioxide and water in the presence of sunlight to produce glucose and oxygen. Trees also release some carbon dioxide through respiration. Scientists measure this carbon uptake through gross primary productivity and call it net primary productivity when subtracting respiration from the rate of uptake.

Global warming can affect the way plants and forests function in a number of ways. For one, elevated levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere can drive photosynthesis, in a process called carbon fertilisation. But on the other hand, higher temperatures brought on by global warming can also reduce the rate of photosynthesis.

The study from IIT Bombay relied predominantly on Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer satellite data and found that even though the Leaf Area Index – a measure of canopy cover – in India's forests went up by 6.75% between 2001-2019, its carbon uptake reduced by 6.19%, possibly due to the effects of global warming. "At higher temperatures, it is possible that the rate of photosynthesis is reduced. The other explanation is that, if there are drought-like conditions, along with atmospheric aridity, plant productivity reduces, because there's less water available," said Ghosh.

The study found that the areas which experienced the greatest warming also saw the steepest declines in carbon uptake over the last two decades. Together, the Western Ghats, northeast India and the East Coast Peninsula are responsible for 32% of gross primary productivity and 34% of net primary productivity. Yet, these regions, which the paper describes as the "most biodiverse and pristine forest regions", saw the most prominent declines in carbon uptake.

According to Ruth DeFries, a professor of ecology and sustainable development at Columbia University, the results do not bode well for net-zero plans that heavily rely on forests to act as carbon sinks. "Uptake of carbon by vegetation is a critical process in the earth system, but it is a fickle and unreliable partner in the fight against climate change," she told Mongabay India over email, adding, "The promising ways forward are to re-

duce greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels and other sources which are the primary source of climate change and reduce deforestation and degradation so vegetation can continue to be a carbon sink as much as possible."

India's policies are aggressively geared towards afforestation and it is the second largest contributor to global greening since 2000 after China, although bulk of this greening comes from the cultivation of crops. Programmes such as the National Afforestation Programme and Green India Mission are both designed to enhance forest and tree cover, while afforestation is mandatory for project developers who are diverting forest land for their projects. One of the stated objectives is to scale up carbon sequestration.

Many unknowns

Climate change is generally said to limit the carbon uptake potential of forests globally. Governments across the world have thrown their weight behind forests in the fight against climate change in the absence of large-scale carbon removal technologies. A survey of the Long Term Low Emissions Development Strategies from 41 countries found that forest and soil sinks dominated the plans of most countries. Reliance on this "creates risks for both national and global net-zero", ambitions because of instabilities in carbon sequestration and storage by forests, the survey said.

Emerging studies from Europe found that the droughts and heatwaves of 2022 negatively affected carbon uptake, and shrunk the capacity of forest carbon sinks. "Recurrent drought and heat challenges the net-zero goals of governments relying on forestry, and that forest management needs to be adapted to retain the forest carbon sink," the paper says.

Forrest Fleischman, an associate professor of environmental policy at the University of Michigan, said the results of the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, study "are plausible", but that in order to be more accurate, it needed more granular data as well as to take into consideration the impact of human activity on forests. "Absent data on how humans are modifying forests in India (data which doesn't really exist) it is difficult to draw out these comparisons properly," he said.

Another big limitation of the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, study is that it did not include the effects of carbon fertilisation on carbon uptake. In other words, it didn't account for the possible effect of increased photosynthesis because of more abundantly available carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. "There are many uncertainties, and what it boils down to ultimately is that we need more and better observational data to support these projections," said Ghosh.

The study also does not project what carbon uptake will look like in the future, when global warming rises and the effects of climate change grow more pronounced.

Scientists at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology attempted to do just this, projecting carbon uptake potential in India's forests till the year 2100, using multiple data sets and models. In the study, published in October last year, they find that even in the "most aggressive climate change projection," gross primary productivity rose till the end of the century, with the Eastern Himalayan region absorbing the most.

According to Pramit Kumar Deb Burman, a scientist with Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology and a co-author of the paper, improved carbon uptake in a climate altered future could be due to three factors – carbon fertilisation, early blooming due to warm temperatures and because shaded leaves at the bottom receive more scattered solar radiation, becoming more productive. "We are trying to do further studies to see which of these is the primary driver in India," he said, adding, "The changes in the Indian monsoon season can also complicate the carbon uptake process, because the health of so many ecosystems depends on the monsoon."

India lacks a robust network to measure fluxes in greenhouse gas emissions, which could support satellite data and modelled projections with actual, observed trends. Both Deb Burman and Ghosh said more concerted efforts were needed by both the government and the scientific community to improve observed data sets.

"Forests and our biodiversity is the most valuable system to absorb carbon, and we need more data not only to protect it, but so we know how vulnerable they are to climate change and the extent to which we can expect them to sequester and store carbon," said Ghosh. (Courtesy: Scroll.in)

In Jambavan's land: Sloth bears mostly coexist peacefully with humans in Karnataka; but conflict is not non-existent

By: M Raghuram

Karnataka, the legendary home of Jambavan, the bear king of the Hindu epic Ramayana, is also home to one of India's largest sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus*) populations. Bears mostly coexist peacefully with humans in the state. But human-sloth bear conflict is never far away, according to a survey by the state forest department.

The survey was conducted in Karnataka's Western Ghats, spanning 38,540 square kilometres during September 2021. Contrary to expectations, sloth bears exhibited a surprisingly harmonious coexistence with humans. Cultural acceptance in regions with high human densities favoured their presence, challenging the notion of human-wildlife conflict.

Yet, Karnataka has witnessed instances of human-sloth bear confrontations, raising concerns for both communities and wildlife enthusiasts. This is especially important, given the fact that sloth bears occupy a significant 67 per cent of potential habitat in India.

The ursids are not confined to protected areas but also extend into multi-use forests. Within the Western Ghats, nearly 61 per cent (roughly 15,000 sq km) of the forested landscape played host to these elusive creatures, with a preference for drier forests and rough terrains. Worryingly, less than 9,000 sq km of this area is designated as wildlife reserves.

"Though we have not taken up a survey in recent years, I can say that their numbers are not just stable but also showing a marginal and steady increase, and their habitat has also expanded; they are showing up in almost all terrains in Karnataka apart from the conventional scrubby and dry deciduous forest areas," Subhash Malkhed, the principal chief conservator of forests (wildlife) of Karnataka told this reporter.

A long relationship

For over 400 years, the sloth bear has been a tragic target of human exploitation. The nomadic tribe known as the Kalandars started 'dancing' sloth bears for emperors during the Mughal era. As kingdoms faded away, the 'dancing' bear trade transformed into cheap roadside entertainment, where villagers and



tourists paid to watch bears jump in agony.

Mother bears were ruthlessly killed, and their cubs were taken for perpetuating this brutal practice. Through underground trading, as many as 200 cubs annually ended up in the hands of the Kalandars.

In 1996, research indicated more than 1200 'dancing' bears scattered throughout India. Wildlife charity Wildlife SOS embarked on a mission to rescue and rehabilitate these bears, with help from the government and others. Today, Bannerghatta National Park in Karnataka has the most active bear protection programme under the Wildlife SOS initiative.

"Sloth bears have also been demised in many places. Rural folk say that during the collection of Mahua (A kind of wildflower that blooms only in the night), villagers used to send the elderly out in the night to collect Mahua flowers, knowing well that bears are on the prowl. This way, they disposed of their elderly and their old age problems and also collected compensation from the government. But those were archaic times; things have changed, and human-sloth bear conflicts will continue for different reasons," former principal chief conservator of forests (wildlife) BK Singh, who has travelled to bear habitats including Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, told this reporter.

Human-sloth bear confrontations in Karnataka often stem from habitat encroachment and agricultural activities, leading to accidental conflicts.

"Human-sloth bear conflict is happening everywhere in bear country. Bear habitats have been fragmented due to new areas coming under farming and allied activities. This is why human-sloth bear conflicts are common," Malkhed said.

India has four sloth bear sanctuaries that are home to over 620 of these animals. Among them is the Daroji Sloth Bear Sanctuary in Karnataka. Asia's first sloth bear sanctuary is in the Ballari district of the state, spanning 82.72 sq km.

Originally the Bilikallu Reserve Forest, the government declared it as Daroji Sloth Bear Sanctuary in 1994.

Scattered around the sanctuary in the Deccan Plateau are patches of dry deciduous scrub forest and thorn forest, with a preponderance of boulders and rocks featuring cave formations. This unique landscape provides sloth bears shelter in the extremely hot weather of the region.

Sloth bear tourism has also become popular in recent years. But sloth bear tourism spots in the wild have also been cited as a reason for disturbance in the bears' habitat.

One example is the 'Sweet Lick' areas started by the forest department in Daroji to give tourists a glimpse of the bears. Department staff would smear honey around rocks, attracting bears to lick it, making slurping sounds audible from 100 metres away.

After licking off the honey, the bears would crawl away, drink water from a nearby watering hole, scratch against nearby trees, and return to their day-to-day activities. This is not anymore in practice, as excessive, unnatural feeding used to affect health, says the forest officials.

The aforementioned survey stated that the key to mitigating human-sloth bear conflicts lies in community engagement and awareness programmes. It advocated for measures like enhancing habitat connectivity, minimising human-wildlife interaction zones, and implementing responsible waste management practices.

"Due to the Forest Department's extraordinary efforts, there is widespread awareness among villagers about the presence of sloth bears in their settlements, and they should be careful to protect themselves from bear attacks," Malkhed said. (Courtesy: Down To Earth)

Senate deal on border security and Ukraine aid faces defeat as Republicans ready to block bill

Border security and Ukraine aid collapses despite Biden's plea for Congress to 'show some spine'

WASHINGTON, Feb 7: A Senate deal on border enforcement measures and Ukraine aid suffered a swift and total collapse on Tuesday as Republicans withdrew support despite President Joe Biden urging Congress to "show some spine" and stand up to Donald Trump.

Just minutes after the Democratic president's remarks at the White House, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell emerged from a GOP luncheon at the Capitol and acknowledged that the deal was dead.

"It looks to me and to most of our members that we have no real chance here to make a law," the Kentucky Republican told reporters.

The split-screen moments in Washington represented a rapid turn of events that showed McConnell's slipping control of his GOP conference, Trump's growing influence, and Biden's ability only to look on as a cornerstone of his foreign policy - halting Russian President Vladimir Putin's advance into Europe - crumbled in Congress.

Out of funds, the Pentagon is sending no more arms shipments to Kyiv just as the war - entering its third year - reaches a critical juncture. Ukraine is struggling with ammunition and personnel shortages while Russia is on the offensive, mounting relentless at-

tacks.

"Every week, every month that passes without new aid to Ukraine means fewer artillery shells, fewer air defense systems, fewer tools for Ukraine to defend itself against this Russian onslaught," Biden said. "Just what Putin wants."

Biden had engaged for months with Senate leaders on a carefully negotiated plan to pair policies intended to curb illegal crossings at the U.S.-Mexico border with \$60 billion in wartime aid for Ukraine. The bill was intended to exhibit American strength around the world and would have also sent tens of billions of dollars more for Israel, other U.S. allies in Asia, the U.S. immigration system and humanitarian aid for civilians in Gaza and Ukraine.

But after Republicans rejected the compromise, the president and Senate leaders are now stranded with no clear way to advance aid for Ukraine through Congress. They have run into a wall of opposition from conservatives - led by Trump - who reject the border proposal as insufficient and criticize Ukraine funding as wasteful.

Biden laid blame for the bill's demise squarely on Trump - his likely Republican opponent in the November presidential election.

"For the last 24 hours he's done nothing, I'm told, but reach out to Republicans in the House and the Senate and threaten them and try



to intimidate them to vote against this proposal," Biden said. "It looks like they're caving. Frankly, they owe it to the American people to show some spine and do what they know to be right."

Democrats in the Capitol vented frustration at their colleagues as it became clear that the deal was done.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer cast on Tuesday as a "gloomy day here in the United States Senate" during a floor speech in which he scolded Republicans for backing away from the deal. He still dared them to vote against border security - an issue they have long championed.

"After months of good faith negotiations, after months of giving Republicans many of the things they asked for, Leader McConnell and the Republican conference are ready to kill the national security supplemental package even with border provisions they so fer-

vently demand," Schumer said.

Senators are still floundering for a way to get Ukraine funding through the Republican-controlled House. And after the border compromise collapsed Tuesday, some suggested jettisoning that portion from the package and advancing the aid for U.S. allies on their own.

But that idea also faces resistance in the Republican-controlled House, where House Speaker Mike Johnson is under pressure from hardline conservatives not to bring any Ukraine funding up for a vote.

When asked about wartime aid for Ukraine and Israel Tuesday, he told reporters, "We have to deal with these measures and these issues independently and separately." House Republicans on Tuesday night failed to pass a separate \$17.6 billion package of military aid for Israel. Hardline conservatives opposed the bill because the funding would not be

offset by budget cuts in other areas. Democrats were also mostly opposed because it undermined the push for a comprehensive package that would include Ukraine and other allies in Asia.

The lack of a national security deal will loom large over Biden's Friday meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Biden plans to underscore to Scholz that he remains committed to providing Ukraine the funding it needs to continue to repel the nearly two-year-old Russian invasion.

McConnell said in an earlier floor speech that it was essential to assert American strength in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, yet also blamed Biden for not responding sooner to threats from rival powers. "Either we confront challenges we face with clear strategy and firm resolve or we lose," McConnell said.

But he reacted with frustration when he was later asked by reporters whether he misread his colleague's demands for border policy. "I followed the instructions of my conference, who were insisting that we tackle this in October," he said. "I mean, it's actually our side that wanted to tackle the border issue. We started it."

After Trump excoriated the compromise, however, the long-time Republican leader has not been able to convince his conference to support the proposal. (AP)

Qatar gets 'positive' response from Hamas on cease-fire plan as group reiterates its broader demands

DOHA, Feb 7: Hamas' response to the latest plan for a cease-fire in Gaza and the release of hostages was "generally positive," key mediator Qatar said on Tuesday, as the militant group reiterated its demand for an end to the war, something Israel has thus far ruled out.

Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani announced the response during a news conference with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who said he would brief Israeli leaders on it Wednesday when he meets with them.

Blinken, who met with Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman the day before, said the Saudis still have a "strong interest" in normalizing relations with Israel but require an end to the war and a "clear, credible, time-bound path to the establishment of a Palestinian state."

Qatar, which has long mediated with Hamas, has been working with the U.S. and Egypt to broker a cease-fire that would involve a halt in fighting for several weeks and the release of the over 100 hostages still held by Hamas after its Oct. 7 cross-border raid that ignited the war.

Hamas said in a statement that it responded in a "positive spirit" to the latest proposal. But the militant group said it still seeks "a comprehensive and complete" cease-fire to end "the aggression against our people." Hamas is also expected to demand the release of a large number of Palestinian prisoners, including high-profile militants, in exchange for the hostages. (AP)

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has ruled out both demands, saying Israel is committed to continuing its offensive until "total victory" over Hamas and to returning all the hostages. He has also dismissed U.S. calls for the creation of a Palestinian state. When asked by reporters, President Joe Biden said Hamas' response "seems to be a little over the top" but that negotiations would go on.

A U.S. official said Blinken was told the Hamas response was delivered to Qatar just an hour before his meeting with the prime minister. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the behind-the-scenes negotiations. Blinken acknowledged "there's still a lot of work to be done."

But he said he still believed an agreement on the hostages was possible and that a pathway to more lasting peace and security in the region was "coming ever more sharply into focus."

"We know the immense benefits that would come for everyone concerned with Israel's further integration into the region, starting with the benefits for Israel," Blinken said. "That's something that Israelis will have to decide for themselves."

"All of this requires difficult, hard decisions, made all the more challenging given the focus on the conflict in Gaza," Blinken said. Netanyahu's office said the Hamas response had been delivered to Israel's Mossad spy agency and was being "thoroughly evaluated." (AP)

Cambodian PM Hun Manet visits Thailand with busy schedule to extend close ties

BANGKOK, Feb 7: Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet arrived on Wednesday in Thailand's capital on his first official visit since becoming his country's leader last year, seeking to renew the close ties the two countries have maintained in recent times.

In addition to meeting with his Thai counterpart, Srettha Thavasin, Hun Manet is slated to have a royal audience with King Maha Vajiralongkorn, preside over the signing of several documents on bilateral cooperation and address a Thailand-Cambodia business forum.

Hun Manet's scheduled one-day visit "is an important opportunity for both countries to further strengthen the bilateral cooperation, especially in the economic development of border areas, promotion of two-way trade and investment, closer transportation connectivity, tourism cooperation as well as fostering closer ties between the peoples of the two kingdoms," the Thai Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Cambodian government spokesperson Pen Bona said Hun Manet's visit would reaffirm the close relationship for peace, development and cooperation established by his father and predecessor, Hun Sen. Hun Sen stepped down as prime minister last year after 38 years in power, including periods of tensions with Thailand, especially over territorial disputes.

Human rights activists say that the coop-

eration extends to the repression of political dissidents. Several Cambodian opposition figures and other government critics who fled to Thailand to escape arrest under Hun Sen's government were recently detained in Bangkok in an apparent effort to quash possible protests against Hun Manet.

Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director of Human Rights Watch, issued a statement appealing to Thai authorities to release the detained U.N.-recognized Cambodian refugees "and cease the crackdown on Cambodian rights and democracy activists who have fled to Thailand."

"Hun Manet is proving to be the same kind of human rights abusing dictator that his father was, and Thailand should not cooperate with his expanding transnational repression efforts," Robertson said.

Cambodian officials are keen to point out that Hun Manet and Srettha both assumed office on Aug. 22 last year and quickly set their relations on a positive course with congratulatory phone calls to each other. Srettha paid an official visit to Cambodia last September.

Cambodia and Thailand are neighboring countries with generally warm relations. Thailand's economy dwarfs that of its neighbor, which is one of Asia's poorest nations. Cambodia sends substantial numbers of laborers to Thailand to fill low-paying jobs, especially in the construction sector. (AP)



Syria says Israeli airstrikes over Homs have killed and wounded civilians

DAMASCUS, Feb 7: Israeli airstrikes over the central city of Homs and nearby areas killed and wounded civilians, the Syrian military said on Wednesday.

There was no immediate comment from Israel. Syrian state news agency SANA quoted an unidentified military official as saying the strikes late Tuesday damaged both private and public property, without giving additional details. The Israeli jets reportedly struck the Syrian city and the countryside from over the Mediterranean Sea near the Lebanese coastal city of Tripoli.

The strikes come as tensions across the Middle East flare with the Israeli-Hamas war and a drone attack on Jan. 28 that killed three US troops and injured dozens more in northeastern Jordan, near the Syrian border.

The pro-government Sham FM radio station said the areas struck included the affluent al-Malaab neighbourhood and Hamra Street. It said Israel hit farmland in al-Waer, causing fires but no casualties there.

Britain-based pro-opposition war monitor the Syrian Observatory for Humanitarian Rights said at least six civilians were killed, among them a woman and a child, as well as two militants from the Lebanese Hezbollah group. The casualties were all in a building on Hamra Street that was apparently targeted in one of the strikes, it said. Search efforts were ongoing, the Observatory added. It said at least nine explosions were heard in Homs and its outskirts, where Hezbollah is reportedly present.

Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes on targets inside government-controlled parts of war-torn Syria in recent years.

Israel rarely acknowledges its actions in Syria, but it has said it targets bases of Iran-allied militant groups such as Hezbollah, which has sent thousands of fighters to support Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces. It has also targeted members of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard in Syria, including a high-ranking general last December. (AP)

Prince Harry arrives in London after King Charles III, is diagnosed with cancer

LONDON, Feb 7: King Charles III's cancer was caught early and the monarch will "crack on" with his constitutional duties, Britain's prime minister said on Tuesday, as Prince Harry flew in from California for a rare visit with his father.

Royal officials announced on Monday that the 75-year-old king has been diagnosed with an undisclosed form of cancer and is receiving treatment as an outpatient.

Less than 18 months into the reign that he'd famously waited decades to begin, Charles suspended public engagements but will continue with state business - including weekly meetings with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak - and won't be handing over his constitutional roles as head of state.

On Tuesday afternoon, Harry could be seen arriving at the king's Clarence House residence in a black SUV after an overnight flight. The two have a troubled relationship, and Harry has seen his father infrequently since the prince quit royal duties in 2020 and moved to Los Angeles with his wife, Meghan, citing what he said was the unbearable intrusions and racist attitudes of the British media. Harry, 39, has since detailed his rocky relationship with his family and his royal inheritance in TV interviews, a documentary and a memoir, "Spare."

About an hour after Harry arrived, Charles and Queen Camilla were driven from their residence to nearby Buckingham Palace in a royal Bentley. The couple waved to tourists and well-wishers gathered outside the palace gates. They then traveled by helicopter to Sandringham, the monarch's rural residence in eastern England.

Buckingham Palace said the king's cancer was found during Charles' recent hospital treatment for an enlarged prostate but is a "separate issue" and not prostate cancer.

"Thankfully, this has been



caught early," Sunak told BBC radio, adding: "We'll crack on with everything." "Many families around the country listening to this will have been touched by the same thing and they know what it means to everyone," Sunak said. "So we'll just be willing him on and hopefully we get through this as quickly as possible." The palace said Charles, who has generally enjoyed good health, "remains wholly positive about his treatment and looks forward to returning to full public duty as soon as possible."

Charles became king in September 2022 when his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, died at the age of 96 after 70 years on the throne.

News of the king's diagnosis comes as his daughter-in-law Kate, Princess of Wales, recovers from abdominal surgery that saw her hospitalized for about two weeks.

Kate is taking a break from royal duties as she recovers. Her husband, Prince William, who is heir to the throne, also took time off to help look after her and the couple's three children, but is due to preside over a ceremony at Windsor Castle and a charity dinner on Wednesday.

Charles departed from royal tradition with his openness about his prostate condition. For centuries Britain's royal family remained tight-lipped about health matters.

Disclosing information about his cancer diagnosis - albeit in a limited way - is another break with tradition. When U.K. monarchs had real power, news of illness was withheld for fear it might weaken their authority. (AP)

Azerbaijan holds snap presidential vote as Aliyev rides support from retaking of Karabakh

BAKU, Feb 7: Azerbaijanis are voting on Wednesday in an election almost certain to give incumbent President Ilham Aliyev another seven-year term, following his government's swift reclaiming of a region formerly controlled by ethnic Armenian separatists.

Aliyev, 62, has been in power for more than 20 years, succeeding his

father who was Azerbaijan's Communist boss and then its president when it became independent after the 1991 Soviet collapse. The next presidential vote was set for next year, but Aliyev called an early election in December, shortly after Azerbaijani troops retook the Karabakh region from ethnic Armenian forces who controlled it for three decades.

Analysts suggested Aliyev moved the election forward to capitalize on his burst in popularity following the blitz in Karabakh. He will be in the limelight in November when Azerbaijan, a country which relies heavily on revenues from fossil fuels, hosts a UN climate change conference.

Aliyev's time in power has been marked by the introduction of in-

creasingly strict laws that curb political debate as well as arrests of opposition figures and independent journalists - including in the run-up to the presidential election.

In January, Aliyev told local television channels that he wanted the election to "mark the beginning of a new era," in which Azerbaijan has full control over its territory. (AP)

Chile wildfires: Death toll reaches 131, and more than 300 people are missing

VIÑA DEL MAR, Feb 7: The death toll from wildfires that ravaged central Chile for several days increased to 131 on Tuesday, and more than 300 people were still missing as the blazes appeared to be burning themselves out. The fires in Valparaiso are said to be Chile's deadliest disaster since an earthquake in 2010. Officials have suggested that some could have been intentionally set. President Gabriel Boric during a visit to the region announced that furniture used for the 2023 Pan American Games will be donated to victims. He said the government also will forgive the water bills for 9,200 affected homes.

The fires began Friday on the mountainous eastern edge of Viña del Mar, a beach resort known for a festival that attracts the best in Latin music. Two other towns, Quilpe and Villa Alemana, also were hit hard as the fires spread quickly in dry weather and strong winds. (AP)

Rights bodies express concern over failure of Pak's major political parties to allocate 5 pc seats for women

ISLAMABAD, Feb 7: Ahead of the general elections in Pakistan on Thursday, prominent rights bodies have expressed dismay over the failure of major political parties to allocate at least five per cent of their party candidates for women on general seats.

The legal requirement is set in Section 206 of the Elections Act 2017, the major statute that deals with all aspects of elections.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) in a statement on social media platform X advocated for a minimum requirement of women representation, with parties urged to take affirmative action to ensure that at least one-third of their candidates for general seats are women.

"In principle, this should be a minimum requirement, with parties taking affirmative action to ensure that at least a third of their candidates for general seats are women," the HRCP, an independent rights



body, said. Till now there is no consolidated data from the Election Commission of Pakistan on the total number of women candidates fielded by the political parties in the February 8 polls. The statement underscores the importance of gender parity in political representation, emphasizing that increased women's participation is essential for the development of inclusive and representative governance.

HRCP welcomed the decision of the Islamabad High Court to request an explanation from the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) regarding the issue.

The move reflects a step towards

addressing the systemic barriers that hinder women's meaningful participation in politics. Aurat Foundation in a statement urged the ECP to ensure that all political parties allocate five per cent of tickets to women candidates on general seats in each of the provincial and national assemblies. Sharing serious concern about the delay in the publication of final lists of candidates by political parties, the organization stated that compliance with Article 206 was a legal obligation for their eligibility for allocation of electoral symbols.

The foundation termed it a legal and constitutional requirement to safeguard the participation of women in electoral and political processes. "If not fulfilled, parties cannot contest elections," it added.

Appreciating measures taken by the ECP to protect women's rights, the Aurat Foundation said it expected that the commission would ensure the allocation of 5 per cent of party tickets to women. (PTI)

Former Chilean President Sebastián Piñera dies in a helicopter crash; He was 74

VINA DEL MAR, Feb 7: Sebastián Piñera, the two-time former president of Chile who faced social upheaval followed by a pandemic in his second term, died on Tuesday in a helicopter crash. He was 74.

Chile Interior Minister Carolina Tohá confirmed the death of the former president. No further details were immediately released about the cause of the accident.

Serving as president from 2010 to 2014 and again from 2018 to 2022, Piñera led the South American nation during moments of crisis, including the aftermath of an 8.8 magnitude earthquake and tsunami.

He gained a spotlight for his administration's rescue of trapped Chilean miners

in 2010, and his governance during the coronavirus pandemic, when Chile was placed among the top five countries for vaccination rates for the illness.

His legacy is marred by

violent police repression in October 2019 against protesters who were demonstrating against the country's education, health and pension systems dating to the country's 1973-1990 military dictatorship. A United Nations investigation alleged that police used force "improperly and indiscriminately" injuring

deadly wildfires in the country's central region.

Chilean President Gabriel Boric honored Piñera in a speech Tuesday afternoon as a leader "seeking the best for his country," highlighting his management of the pan-

demie and other emergencies. "He was a democrat from the very first moment," Boric said.

The death also drew an outpouring of condolences from leaders and former leaders across Latin America from both the left and right.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva wrote on X, formerly Twitter, that it was sad that Piñera had died so "abruptly."

"We worked to strengthen the relationship between our countries and we always had a good dialogue when we were both presidents, and also when we weren't," he said.

Argentinian President Javier Milei sent condolences, as did his predecessor, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. (AP)

Arunachal Pradesh CM hails Centre's move to fence India-Myanmar border

India shares 1,643 km long international border with Myanmar

ITANAGAR, Feb 7: Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu hailed the decision of the Centre to fence the entire 1,643-km-long India-Myanmar border, saying that the move will check the movement of unscrupulous elements from across the border.

Union home minister Amit Shah had on Tuesday announced the decision to fence the India-Myanmar border, which could virtually put an end to the Free Movement Regime (FMR) prevalent along the porous border.

The FMR allows people residing close to the India-Myanmar border to venture 16 km into each other's territory without any document.

The 1,643-km-long India-Myanmar border, which passes through Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, currently has FMR. It was introduced in 2018 as part of India's Act East policy.

Arunachal Pradesh shares a 520-km border with Myanmar.

"A great move in the right direction to make our borders foolproof. Gratitude to Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri @narendramodi ji and Hon'ble Home Minister Shri @AmitShah ji to fence our borders along Myanmar", Khandu posted on X.

A state-of-the-art surveillance will check the movement of unscrupulous elements, Khandu said in another social media post.

"The Modi government is committed to building impenetrable borders. It has decided to construct a fence along the entire



1643-km-long Indo-Myanmar border. To facilitate better surveillance, a patrol track along the border will also be paved", Shah posted on X on Tuesday.

Out of the total border length, a 10 km stretch in Moreh, Manipur, has already been fenced. Furthermore, two pilot projects of fencing through a Hybrid Surveillance System (HSS) are under execution. They will fence a stretch of 1 km each in Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. Additionally, fence works covering approx 20 km in Manipur have also been approved, and the work will start soon, the Union Home minister added.

The porous border gives easy access to NE insurgent groups staying in Myanmar, to carry out unsocial activities in the three eastern districts of Arunachal Pradesh — Tirap, Changlang and Longding.

There have been numerous reports of kidnapping and killing of civilians by insurgent groups, who fled to the neighbouring country after committing crimes.

Border trade between India and Myanmar which existed along the Pangsau Pass in Changlang district of the northeastern state, came to a grinding halt after the outbreak of Covid pandemic in 2020.

The governments of the two countries, on September 26, 1950, signed an agreement, according to which the indigenous hill tribes of both sides living within 40 km of the border were exempted from the requirement of a passport for trade purposes.

A MoU was signed in 2012 between India and Myanmar for the establishment of border haats along the international border at Pangsau Pass to facilitate trade. Accordingly, both countries established border haats for trading purposes.

Sixty-two commodities, including, food items, vegetables, utensils, cosmetics, 100 cc motorbikes and cement, were allowed for trade by both the countries which were under tax exemption, trade development officer at Nampong in Changlang district, Tangli Mossang said.

The state administration and the government of Myanmar, through a mutual understanding, had allowed border trade on 10, 20 and 30th of every month at Pangsau Pass and every Friday at Nampong, local MLA Laisam Sima said.

The border trade has been suspended after the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 and since then, it has not been resumed, Changlang deputy commissioner Sunny Kumar Singh said.

"The fencing along the Indo-Myanmar border will boost our national security and will reduce the negative issues pertaining to cross-border illegal movement", Singh added. (PTI)

Meghalaya budget to be presented digitally



SHILLONG, Feb 7: In yet another notable move towards achieving a paperless Meghalaya legislative assembly, chief minister Conrad K Sangma will digitally present the budget for the financial year 2024-25 during the upcoming Budget Session. This marks the inaugural occasion of the budget presentation being conducted in a paperless manner.

The budget speech will be made available at the National eVidhan Application website: <https://neva.gov.in/Home/NeVA> and at the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly website: <https://megassembly.gov.in/>.

Members of the Meghalaya legislative assembly will be able to access the speech through the tablets provided in the House.

Officials of the IT Cell of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly Secretariat, led by computer programmer, Dapborlang Marwein, on Wednesday provided training to chief minister Conrad K Sangma on the use of the National eVidhan Application.

Andrew Simons, commissioner and secretary of the Meghalaya legislative assembly secretariat, conveyed that this measure aligns with the objective of transitioning the assembly proceedings to a paperless format.

He also informed that several innovations are being initiated towards the goal of making the Meghalaya legislative assembly fully paperless.

Starting this session, hard copies of the list of business, questions, motions, resolutions, etc., will be limited and the documents will be uploaded in the NeVA website and the Meghalaya legislative assembly website.

Legislators will also be provided the option of submitting their questions and other notices through the application, as the app hosts a secure page for each member of the House. (NNN)

WOW to strengthen feeling of one India one nation: NCW chairperson



HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, Feb 7: National Commission for Women chairperson Rekha Sharma said the 'Women on Wheels (WOW)' programme would help strengthen the feeling of 'one India one nation' among the people of the northeastern region.

She said this at an interaction programme with the members of WOW in Kohima. A 24-member team of WOW (Season 2) arrived in the Nagaland capital on Tuesday afternoon.

At the programme, Sharma shared the problems faced by the people of the Northeast, especially women in mainland India, saying life is challenging for them there. She hoped that the WOW programme would help spread widespread information that the northeastern region too is an inte-

gral part of India.

Sharma said it was noteworthy to see women taking on new roles and challenges by breaking societal barriers, especially in areas like motorsports. Sharma noted that such stories of women give other women a sense of empowerment through initiatives like WOW.

She said, "Beyond that it serves as an inspiration for men too while reflecting on the historical division of responsibilities shared between men and women."

The NCW chairperson pointed out that women are embracing not only material possessions, but also enriching experiences and cultural understanding as they travel from one place to another.

She extended her great appreciation to the Nagaland State Commission for Women for organising the programme.

She was also all praise for the Mahila Band of Nagaland for its extraordinary talents showcased in the recently concluded programme of the National Commission for Women in Delhi. She also said she was overwhelmed by the beautifully articulated weaving stories by Theyiesino Keditso, adding she would invite her to the next national programme of the National Commission for Women.

NSCW chairperson Ngingyeh Konyak delivered the introductory address at the programme.

The WOW initiative includes two teams—one headed to Arunachal Pradesh and the other to Nagaland. The team members in six cars were flagged off at the Cotton University in Guwahati on February 4. They are scheduled to conclude their journey on February 10.

Mizoram Police recovers crystal meth worth ₹ 31 crore

AIZWAL, Feb 7: The Mizoram police has seized 10.3 kg of crystal methamphetamine worth ₹ 31.1 crore at Melbuk area in east Mizoram's Champhai district, officials said.

Acting on a tip-off, police recovered the contraband stored in 10 packets on Tuesday, they said.

Two persons have also been arrested for possessing the contraband, the officials said.

The origin and destination to which the drugs were being carried is currently under investigation. (PTI)

Meghalaya govt to spend over ₹ 2,500 crores for administrative city

SHILLONG, Feb 7: The Meghalaya government is proposing to spend more than ₹ 2,500 crore for the construction of the much-awaited administrative city at the new Shillong township.

Informing this at a function held in Shillong on Wednesday, chief minister Conrad K Sangma said the planned administrative city is coming up very soon in Mawdangiang side.

"It is a project that is going to be worth more than ₹ 2,500 crore if you were to include everything from road connectivity, water supply and the building infrastructure," he said.

The CM said that he had recently taken a representation of the designs of the administrative city and he would soon present the same before the state cabinet.

"Once those designs are ap-

proved by the cabinet, we should be able to tender out the works after the DPRs are made by the end of the second quarter of 2024-2025," he said while adding that he is hoping within the present term, the government would be able to shift the secretariat, if not all the directorates, to the new administrative city.

He said that the idea is to bring governance and overall services to the public under one roof so that people can get all kinds of different services and all the help they require at one location.

Further, the CM informed that the government has also sanctioned ₹ 100 crore for the construction of three roads leading to the new administrative city, the foundation stones of which were laid recently.

"The tenders are already out

and work should start in about a couple of months. We are expecting that within the next financial year, all three roads leading to the new Shillong township are ready so as to facilitate the infrastructural work for the actual secretariat," he also said.

The CM said the government is not trying to do things on a piecemeal basis.

"We have a larger and a bigger plan for the city and we are really working on a long-term, medium-term and short-term basis to see how we can improve the overall living conditions in the city of Shillong. While we are working on that long-term and larger project which I am sure will lead to a larger development for the decongestion of Shillong city, there are small things we need to do to really improve things," he added. (NNN)

Oil like substance found in waters of Manipur's Iril river

IMPHAL, Feb 7: Authorities of the Manipur government swung into action on Wednesday to investigate an oil-like black substance, which was found floating in the Iril river near Dolaithabi Barrage in Manipur's Imphal East district.

The barrage is situated on the edge of the Imphal East district bordering Kangpokpi district. After the news went viral on social media platforms, the state public health engineering (PHE) department and Imphal East district police rushed to the spot and examined the substance.

Spot examination has confirmed that the substance is soluble. Initially, there were suspicions of oil that spilled on the river.

However, the authorities collected the sample for further laboratory investigation.

The development came a month after the alleged leakage of heavy fuel from a defunct power station flowed into streams on January 10 in Kangpokpi district. The police did not delay in responding and taking up precautionary measures to prevent floating of substance downstream further on Wednesday.

A team of Sagolmang police station of Imphal East district rushed to the scene and took up necessary



steps to close the water gates of the Dolaithabi Barrage to halt any further spread of the unknown substance to the downstream of the river.

Higher authorities of the state government also dispatched a team of experts to conduct a spot investigation into the matter.

Dolaithabi Barrage is constructed in the Iril river that flows through the Imphal valley in Imphal East district. Besides being the main source of water for various water supply plants in the valley areas, the water of the river is used by the local people for domestic and agricultural purposes. (NNN)

'Golden jubilee testament of Zeliangrang Heraka's illustrious history'

HT Correspondent

HAFLONG, Feb 7: Assam Governor Gulab Chand Kataria said that the golden jubilee celebrations of the North East Zeliangrang Heraka Association are testimony of the organisation's illustrious history. Kataria said this while attending the golden jubilee celebrations of the Zeliangrang Heraka Association at Haflong Lodiram village in the Dima Hasao district on Tuesday. The three-day extravaganza that began on February 5 concluded on Wednesday. Upon reaching Lodiram village in Haflong, The Governor paid rich tributes to freedom fighters Rani Maa Gaideliu and Haipu Jadunang. Debolal Gorlosa, chief executive member of the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council was also present on the occasion. Speaking on the occasion, Gulab Chand Kataria shed light on the Heraka movement led by freedom fighter Haipu Jadunang against British rule.

Cashless transaction at PRS gaining popularity

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 7: As a part of the central government's Digital India initiative, Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) is further promoting cashless transaction among passengers. The Indian Railways have made efforts to enhance digital transactions as per the policy of the Centre by implementing cashless counters at a few nominated passenger reservation system with digital payment mode. With every passing day, the cashless transaction is becoming popular among passengers. In NFR from ₹ 1.8 lakhs (0.87% of total across the counter transactions) on January 30, it has

now increased to ₹ 3.78 lakhs (2.67%) on February 3, which shows steady improvement to facilitate payment through UPI and POS. Passengers are being made aware of cashless transaction in various reservation counters over NFR and they too are adapting the initiative taken by the central government by booking their tickets through the online method. They are thankful to the government for such initiative for the development of our country. The contribution of cashless transaction from January 31 to February 2 in passenger reservation system located over NFR in five divisions at a few railway stations.

23 Bangladeshi smugglers arrested in Tripura, 6,000 kg of sugar seized

AGARTALA, Feb 7: As many as 23 Bangladeshi smugglers have been arrested by the Border Security Force (BSF) from Samarganja in South Tripura district, an official said. The BSF troops also seized over 6,000 kg of sugar and 17 mobile phones from them, he said.



"Acting on specific information regarding trans-border smuggling of sugar, troops waited at Samarganja on Tuesday and apprehended 23 Bangladeshi smugglers," the BSF official said.

It appears that around 30 Bangladeshi smugglers, divided into small groups, crossed the international border to receive a consignment of sugar from their counterparts on the Indian side.

"A total of 6,250 kg of sugar, packed in 125 bags, were recovered from them, and 17 mobile phones seized. Of the 23 arrested, 22 are residents of Feni district, while one is from Chittagong in Bangladesh," he said.

An FIR was registered, and then the apprehended Bangladeshi smugglers were handed over to the police for further action, he said.

There has been a spurt in the trans-border smuggling of sugar through the Indo-Bangladesh border in Tripura in recent years, the official said. Sixteen smugglers were apprehended, while a total of 5.49 lakh kg of sugar was seized in 2023 at the Indo-Bangladesh border in Tripura, he added. (PTI)

PRIME MeghaPreneur Expo 2024 begins in Shillong

Varied technology, food & agriculture, technology, manufacturing, healthcare, handloom and handicrafts products being showcased in expo

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 7: Meghalaya chief minister Conrad Sangma on Wednesday inaugurated the PRIME MeghaPreneur Expo 2024 at the Polo Grounds in Shillong.

The MeghaPreneur Expo provides an apt platform to different entrepreneurs of the state to display their varied products. The event has been organized by the Meghalaya government in collaboration with the Startup India. The three-day event will conclude on January 9.

The expo also features 'ASCEND', a financial literacy bootcamp. ASCEND is the acronym for Accelerating Startup Calibre and Entrepreneurial Drive, where experts from different sectors provide valuable information to the entrepreneurs on varied important subjects.

Entrepreneurs dealing in technology, food and agriculture, technology, manufacturing, healthcare, handloom and handicrafts and many more are participating in this expo, where their different products are being



showcased. "Launched the PRIME MeghaPreneur Expo 2024 in Polo Grounds, Shillong which

is a celebration of the entrepreneurial excellence of Meghalaya," said Meghalaya CM Conrad Sangma on 'X'.

Speaking on the occasion, Sangma said that the PRIME MeghaPreneur Expo will allow the participating entrepreneurs to connect with potential buyers from across the country. He also said that he is glad that entrepreneurs from across the state are getting to learn about new opportunities from experts of different sectors.

"Glad to see the entrepreneurs of Meghalaya showcasing their products in the Expo which is also a chance for them to connect with buyers from the country. As a Govt. we are happy to support the endeavours of our entrepreneurs of the state," the CM said on 'X'.

"Dropped in at the financial literacy bootcamp 'ASCEND' (Accelerating Startup Calibre & Entrepreneurial Drive) at the MeghaPreneur Expo 2024 organised by @startupindia in collaboration with the Government of Meghalaya. Was nice to see entrepreneurs from the state learning through various sector experts in the bootcamp," he further said on 'X'.

All talk, no action, govt playing game of 'smoke and mirrors': Cong slams interim budget

NEW DELHI, Feb 7: The Congress on Wednesday accused the Centre of playing the game of "smoke-and-mirrors" with its interim budget and asked the Modi government "kiska saath aur kiska vikas" when the poor, women, youth and farmers were among the "worst performing groups" economically.

Initiating the debate on the Interim Budget 2024-25 in Lok Sabha, senior Congress leader Shashi Tharoor said the government was about "all talk and no action" and dubbed the ruling NDA as "no data available" to reveal the real situation of poverty and consumption in the country.

Taking a swipe at finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman's remarks describing GDP as governance, development and performance, Tharoor said that under the current dispensation "G" stands for governmental intrusion and tax terrorism, "D" for demographic betrayal and "P" for poverty continuing.

"This actual 'GDP' also jettisons the trinity of 'demography, democracy and diversity' that the government claims to be serving.

"The demographic dividend is on the cusp of becoming a demographic disaster with the unemployment crisis, K-shaped growth, and the ever-widening schism between the rich and poor," Tharoor alleged.

In a scathing attack at the government, Tharoor said that in 2014 the people chose to offer a mandate to the current dispensation with the hope that this government would come through on their "bloated rhetoric" of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas



(Together will all, development for all), the "illusory promise" of inclusive development for all Indians.

"Fast forward to 10 years later, we find the people of this country have been sadly betrayed by a government whose economic mismanagement in this past decade has left the people of India staring at widespread distress, hardship, low incomes and high unemployment," the Congress leader said.

Noting that the finance minister talked about four new castes poor, women, youth and farmers, the Congress leader said all four groups are some of the worst performing groups in most categories of social and economic policy performance.

"The unprecedented levels of unem-

ployment have left countless citizens, especially our young demographic workforce, with few prospects for a brighter tomorrow," he said.

Citing unemployment data figures, Tharoor said, "We have to ask the government -- 'kiska saath aur kiska vikas' (Together with whom, development of whom)."

Democracy is suffering through this government's "arrogant contempt" for institutions, Tharoor said and cited the suspension of 146 MPs during the last session.

He alleged that laws were being bulldozed as per the government's whims and fancies with no regard for parliamentary procedure.

The Kerala MP said a government under

which a no-confidence motion is required to be moved before its leaders speak on vital issues including Manipur should ideally refrain from claiming to be "the messiah of democracy, let alone its mother".

"And when it comes to diversity, the record hasn't been great, either, with increasing attacks on religious minorities, the ruthless dispensing of 'bulldozer justice', mob lynching, communal violence and worse.

"Combined with the disregard for states... a skewed and centralising 'co-operative federalism', under which the states are meant to 'co-operate' but the Centre 'operates' as it pleases, the government has failed gravely on all the counts where it puts its own back," Tharoor alleged.

Therefore, it is imperative that this House realises the game of "smoke-and-mirrors" that the government is playing with the interim budget - with nearly no redressal of the crises plaguing our economy and affecting the common person.

"It is high time that this election gives others an opportunity to show up their shallow rhetoric for what it is which is - all talk and no action," the former Union minister said. Tharoor said this government still believes in trickle-down economics.

"We believe in trickle-up: if our economy produces the things that people wish to consume at affordable prices, the 'aam aadmi' (common man) will not only live better but will become a full participant in the economy," he said.

Talking about the poor sections of society, Tharoor said the government claims it

made 25 crore people free from multi-dimensional poverty in the last 10 years but that claim needs to be interrogated.

"We are in a statistical void and what we only have is the multi-dimensional poverty index of the Niti Aayog which is a new index that they have created and it cannot be compared with any past poverty numbers.

"We absolutely have no basis for judging whether poverty has actually gone down as the finance minister claims... the NDA apparently stands for No Data Available," he said.

On farmers, Tharoor said that close to 689 lakh farmers enrolled under the PM Fasal Bima Yojana during the 2022-23 season but claims were paid to only 7.8 lakh.

"The number of beneficiaries enrolled under PM Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana decreased from 11.84 crore in 2019 to 3.78 crore in 2022, marking a 67% decline," he said.

Tharoor said the "rhetoric" surrounding Nari Shakti too requires "additional debunking as while we in the opposition welcome the women's reservation law, we are deeply sceptical about the vague timeline of the government".

The finance minister reserving an amount of ₹ 11,11,111 crore for capital expenditure shows there is nothing particularly scientific about the calculations in her budget, Tharoor said and added that the minister who chooses a lucky number is heading an economy that needs all the luck it can get. (PTI)

PMLA court extends ED remand of Hemant Soren by 5 days

RANCHI, Feb 7: A special PMLA court on Wednesday extended the Enforcement Directorate (ED) remand of former chief minister Hemant Soren by five days in a money laundering case linked to an alleged land scam, lawyers said.

Soren, JMM executive president, on February 2 was remanded to five days' ED custody by the special PMLA (The Prevention of Money Laundering Act) court which ended on Wednesday.

"The ED had prayed for seven days of remand which we objected saying no further remand is required because he has already been interrogated for eight hours on January 20 and another eight hours on January 31," Advocate General Rajeev Ranjan, who appeared for Soren, told reporters.

Apart from that, he has already been interrogated for 120 hours in five days.

"So, there is no need for any further remand. But they have tried to expand this scope of investigation beyond the predicate offence matter. We have been saying that they (ED) have no power and jurisdiction to investigate anything beyond the predicate offence," the AG said.

The FIR has been lodged in connection with 8.5 acres of land which is there in the scheduled offence, he added.

"In today's petition, they (ED) have used certain other chats which have nothing to do with the present land deal in which he has been arrested... They want to keep him in custody in the view of the upcoming (Lok Sabha) elections," Singh said.

The AG claimed that the former chief minister has been kept in a basement room where even sunlight does not reach as there are no windows.

He said he has brought to the knowledge of the court that even air comes through a pipe in that basement room and Soren is constantly being monitored by the armed guards, even while sleeping.

Earlier during the day, the ED took the former CM to the civil court in Ranchi amid tight security.

Soren availed at his supporters, who raised slogans such as 'Hemant Soren Zindabad' and 'Jail Ka Darwaja Tootega, Hemant Bhaiya Choochte' (Jail doors will be broken, brother Hemant will be released).

Hemant Soren's wife Kalpana Soren earlier met her husband at the ED office and posted on X on the occasion of their 18th wedding anniversary that she is the life partner of a warrior and will always be his strength.

She said her husband is not with the family on their wedding anniversary but she will not be emotional as he will "defeat conspiracy and emerge as a winner".

"Hemant ji did not accept to bow down, to protect the identity and existence of Jharkhand. He chose to dedicate himself and fight the conspiracy. Today is our 18th wedding anniversary but Hemant ji is not among the family or children. We believe that he will defeat this conspiracy and emerge as a winner and join us soon.

"I am the life partner of a brave Jharkhand warrior. I will not be emotional today. Like Hemant ji, I will smile even in difficult circumstances and become his strength of courage and struggle," Kalpana Soren posted on X.

Hemant Soren was arrested on the night of January 31 after a seven-hour grilling by the ED in the money laundering case. He resigned as the chief minister before that. (PTI)

Court asks Kejriwal to appear on February 17 on ED's plea

NEW DELHI, Feb 7: A Delhi court on Wednesday summoned Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on February 17 on a complaint filed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) against him over the non-compliance of its summons in a money-laundering case linked to the now-scraped excise policy for the national capital.

"Cognisance of the complaint has been taken and summons is being issued to him to appear on February 17," Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Divya Malhotra said.

The judge had reserved the order after the ED submitted that it had concluded its arguments in the matter.

The ED had on February 3 filed a fresh complaint case against Kejriwal for the non-compliance of its summons.



Kejriwal on Friday skipped the fifth summons issued to him by the ED. The agency had issued the summons to him on last Wednesday.

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) convenor had earlier written to the ED, describing the summons as "illegal and politically motivated". He had alleged that the summonses were aimed at preventing him from campaigning in elections. (PTI)

K'taka BJP leaders court arrest as they try to lay siege to CM's office in Bengaluru

BENGALURU, Feb 7: BJP legislators in Karnataka were taken into preventive custody when they tried to lay siege to the chief minister Siddaramaiah's office as part of their protest against the alleged failures of Congress government on Wednesday.

BJP legislators and leaders led by the party state president B Y Vijayendra staged a sit-in demonstration in front of Mahatma Gandhi's statue near Vidhana Soudha, which houses the State Legislature and Secretariat of Karnataka.

Thereafter, they marched towards the office of the chief minister, who was away in Delhi, inside the Vidhana Soudha, prompting police to take them into preventive custody.

The BJP staged the protest apparently to counter the dharna held in Delhi by the ruling party under the leadership of Siddaramaiah to

"fight for financial justice".

Holding placards, the BJP protesters raised slogans condemning the Congress government for allegedly failing to offer relief to drought-hit farmers and incentives to milk producers.

Former chief minister Basavaraj Bommai, leader of opposition in the Karnataka Legislative Assembly R Ashoka, leader of opposition in the Legislative Council Kota Srinivas Poojary and many former ministers were among those who took part in the agitation.

Addressing the gathering, Bommai said: "there was never any other government, which did so much drama in the history of Karnataka by staging demonstrations at New Delhi against the Centre".

"The government has failed on every count, be it administration, law and order, development works, protecting the water resource of

the state and drought management.

How can they stage a demonstration in Delhi? They should be ashamed of it," he said.

He challenged the chief minister to disclose the extent of funds that the State had received from the Centre during the UPA dispensation as well as the BJP-led NDA rule. Speaking on the occasion, Vijayendra said the government which came to power "through the drama called 'five guarantees'" has failed on all fronts and the Chief Minister is clueless about what to do next.

"There is an atmosphere against Congress in the state. So, the Congress leaders have resorted to another theatrics today (in New Delhi). More than 500 farmers have committed suicide in the state but the government has not yet responded to them. Now it is trying to pass the buck to the Centre for

its failure," he alleged.

Earlier speaking to reporters in Shivamogga, BJP MP B Y Raghavendra alleged that the Congress government is 'staging a political drama' to cover up its failures.

He said voters of Karnataka had elected the Congress to power with a lot of expectations but in just six months people as well as MLAs of the ruling party lost hope in the government as no developmental activities were taking place in the State.

"Now the government is not in a position to face the impending Lok Sabha election. They are trying to divert public attention from their failures. To cover up their failure, they are staging this political drama of pointing fingers at the Centre," Raghavendra, son of former chief minister B S Yediyurappa, said. (PTI)

Karnataka CM, Cong leaders protest against Centre at Jantar Mantar

NEW DELHI, Feb 7: Top Congress leaders from Karnataka led by Chief Minister Siddaramaiah staged a protest at Jantar Mantar here on Wednesday against the Centre over "injustice" meted out to the state in devolution of taxes.

Deputy chief minister D K Shivakumar, several MPs, ministers and MLAs from the state took part in the protest. The Congress alleges that "injustice" has been meted out to Karnataka in tax devolution and grants-in-aid over the past few years.

The protesters demanded that the Centre set right the losses to the tune of ₹ 1.87 lakh crore allegedly incurred by Karnataka under the 15th Finance Commission. Siddaramaiah said this protest is not against the BJP but the discrimination against Karnataka.

Dismissing the BJP's allegation that the protest was aimed at rak-

ing up the North-South divide, the chief minister said the Congress wants the country to be united but there should be no discrimination against the southern states.

"We are raising the issue of discrimination meted out by the government of India to the state of Karnataka and other southern states," Siddaramaiah said while addressing the protesters.

"This is why I had written a letter to all the MPs of the BJP and the JD(S) asking them to participate in this agitation," he said.

The chief minister said the formula used to devolve taxes to the states, especially Karnataka, under the 14th Finance Commission was changed by the 15th Finance Commission and called for reverting to the old formula to stop the loss of revenue for his state.

He said they would also submit a representation to the new Fi-

nance Commission for adopting the formula used by the 14th Finance Commission.

Shivakumar said Karnataka ranks second in Goods and Services Tax (GST) collection and is the biggest contributor to the country's revenue.

"We are asking for our rights, we are asking for our share. The Karnataka government had sought drought relief funds from the Centre but not even a single rupee was given," he said.

"We are the voice of Karnataka. We demand justice," Shivakumar said.

CPI(M) veteran and Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan, along with his cabinet colleagues, will stage a protest in Delhi against the Centre's alleged negligence towards the southern state on February 8. (PTI)

Modi govt meting out injustice to labourers by weakening MGNREGA: Priyanka Gandhi



NEW DELHI, Feb 7: Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra accused the Narendra Modi government on Wednesday of meting out injustice to the country's labourers by "weakening" the MGNREGA, as she flagged the outstanding dues to be paid by the Centre to the states under the scheme. The Congress general secretary shared on X a media report that claimed that payments under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) have not been made to labourers in Madhya Pradesh.

"The labourer should get his wages before his sweat dries". In 'Amritkaal', this phrase has become a joke for the workers," Gandhi said in his post on the microblog-

ging platform.

"According to reports, MGNREGA payments worth Rs 16,000 crore to be made to states are pending as of February 1. The labourers are facing the problem of raising children but the government does not care about it," she added. Prime Minister Narendra Modi first described the MGNREGA as a "monument of failure" of the Congress and tried to shut it down, but when he came face to face with the ground reality, he could not stop it but continuously reduced the budget, Gandhi claimed.

"This time too, they are trying to garner applause by making a minor increase, whereas the truth is that the amount allocated in the budget is equal to the revised budget of 2023-24. Experts say that only 25 days of employment can be provided in the amount that would be left after paying the dues and other expenses, whereas the MGNREGA scheme guarantees 100 days of employment," she said. The Congress government had brought the MGNREGA so that money comes into the hands of common villagers, the poor and labourers, and their households can be run, Gandhi said.

"The BJP government is doing injustice to the workers of the country by weakening MGNREGA," she alleged. (PTI)

82 Vande Bharat trains operational, work on to enhance speed to 160 kmph: Railway minister

NEW DELHI, Feb 7: The number of Vande Bharat trains has been increased to 82 and work is underway to increase the speed of these trains to 160 kilometres per hour on the New Delhi-Mumbai and New Delhi-Howrah routes, the government informed Parliament on Wednesday.

In a written reply in the Lok Sabha to questions raised by 10 MPs regarding the services of the Vande Bharat trains, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said, "As on January 31, 2024, 82 Vande Bharat train services are operating across the Indian Railways, connecting states having Broad Gauge (BG) electrified network."

"Besides, provision of stoppage of train services and introduction of new train services, including Vande Bharat, are ongoing processes on Indian Railways subject to traffic justification, operational feasibility, resource



availability etc.," he added.

"Train-wise and state-wise revenue generated is not maintained," the minister said to questions on the state-wise average income generation from the Vande Bharat trains.

Vaishnaw also responded to the MPs' concern regarding the steps that the railway is taking to increase the speed of the Vande

Bharat trains and said, "Sectional speed over 10,981 route kilometres covering Golden Quadrilateral (GQ) and diagonal routes and other 'B' routes have been raised to 130 kmph."

"Further, works for raising of sectional speed to 160 kmph on existing New Delhi-Mumbai (including Vadodara-Ahmedabad) and New Delhi-Howrah (includ-

ing Kanpur-Lucknow) routes have been taken up," he added.

On the question of occupancy in the Vande Bharat trains, the minister said, "During the financial year 2022-23, overall occupancy of Vande Bharat trains was 96.62 per cent."

The MPs also wanted to know about the other changes proposed in the said trains for the convenience of passengers.

"The improved version of Vande Bharat trains presently running over the Indian Railway network with enhanced safety features, faster acceleration, better ride index and passenger amenities, such as automatic plug doors, reclining ergonomic seats, comfortable seating with revolving seats in executive class, mobile charging sockets for every seat etc. and is fitted with KAVACH system," the railway minister said. (PTI)

Uproar in Chhattisgarh Assembly over coal mining in Hasdeo region, Cong MLAs suspended

RAIPUR, Feb 7: Opposition Congress on Wednesday created an uproar in the Chhattisgarh Assembly over tree felling for a coal mine project in the biodiversity-rich Hasdeo-Arand area, saying it will affect flora and fauna and tribals in the region and demanding discussion over it. Amid pandemonium, the proceedings had to be adjourned once and the Congress legislators, who trooped into the well of the House after the chair disallowed their demand for discussion, were also suspended. During zero hour, leader of opposition Charan Das Mahant moved an adjournment motion notice, which is meant to draw the attention of the House to a matter of public importance, on the issue.

Mahant said the state Assembly had unanimously passed a private member resolution urging the Centre to cancel all coal blocks in Hasdeo area, in the state's northern region, in July 2022 (during the previous Congress government). The government had then written to the Centre in this regard but no action was taken, he said. Surprisingly, Mahant claimed, ahead of the chief minister Vishnu Deo Sai's oath-taking ceremony in the newly elected BJP government, the principal chief conservator of forest issued an order on December 11 last year to fell 15,307 trees on 91.3 hectares of forest land for a coal mine project in Hasdeo area. If the Assembly had already passed a private member resolution cancelling mines in Hasdeo area, how such an order could be issued by the forest department, he said, demanding a discussion on the ad-

jourment motion notice.

The deforestation and coal mining will have an adverse impact on the biodiversity of Hasdeo. The mining will affect Hasdeo river that flows through the area and Bango dam which helps in irrigation, while it will also trigger human-elephant conflicts, he said.

Senior Congress MLA and former chief minister Bhupesh Baghel called the matter a serious issue and said that the coal mining in Hasdeo area will not only affect flora and fauna but also the tribals living in the region. Baghel and other Congress members also sought discussion on the adjournment motion.

State's parliamentary affairs minister Brijmohan Agrawal urged the chair to reject the demand on the grounds that in the ongoing budget session, the members will get sufficient time to raise issues during budget discussion. However, Congress continued to demand for a discussion, raising slogans.

Assembly Speaker Raman Singh disallowed the discussion on the adjournment motion notice and said the members would get an opportunity to raise the issues during discussion on department-wise demand proposals for the budget. The speaker's decision led to pandemonium in the House. The ruckus prompted the speaker to adjourn the proceedings for five minutes. After the House reassembled, Bhupesh Baghel again raised the issue saying the treasury bench should admit the demand and sought discussion on the motion (PTI)

Poonam Pandey not considered govt's cervical cancer awareness campaign ambassador: Health ministry officials

NEW DELHI, Feb 7: Actor Poonam Pandey is not being considered as the brand ambassador of the government's national campaign to spread awareness on cervical cancer, Union health ministry officials said on Wednesday.

The clarification came after sources said Pandey is likely to be the face of the campaign and she and her team are in talks with ministry officials.

Earlier this month, news of Pandey's "death" from the disease dominated the headlines and led to intense debate on social media. It later turned out that the news was fake and was a stunt pulled off by the actor and her team to spread "critical awareness" about cervical cancer.

In a video, posted on her official Instagram page, Pandey on February 3 said, "I feel compelled to share something significant with you all. I am here, alive."

"Cervical cancer didn't claim me, but tragically, it has claimed the lives of thousands of women who stemmed from a lack of knowledge on how to tackle this disease," the 32-year-old added.

"Unlike some other cancers, cervical cancer is entirely preventa-



ble. The key lies in the HPV vaccine and early detection tests. We have the means to ensure no one loses their life to this disease.

"Let's empower one another with critical awareness and ensure every woman is informed about the steps to take. Together, let's strive to put an end to the devastating impact of the disease and bring #DeathToCervicalCancer," she wrote.

Union Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her interim budget speech

said the government will encourage vaccination of girls in the age group of 9-14 years to prevent cervical cancer.

The Union health ministry had last month said it is closely monitoring incidence of cervical cancer in the country and is in regular touch with states and various health departments on this.

In June 2022, the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunization recommended the introduction of HPV vaccine in the

universal immunisation with "a one-time catch-up for 9-14 year-old adolescent girls followed with routine introduction at nine years", the Rajya Sabha was told in March.

India is home to about 16 per cent of the world's women, but accounts for about a quarter of all cervical cancer incidence and nearly a third of global cervical cancer deaths. Indian women face a 1.6 per cent lifetime cumulative risk of developing cervical cancer and one per cent cumulative death risk from cervical cancer, officials had stated.

According to some recent estimates, every year almost 80,000 women develop cervical cancer and 35,000 die due to it in India.

Currently, the Serum Institute's made-in-India vaccine against cervical cancer, CERVAVAC, is available in the private market for about ₹ 2,000 per dose. MSD Pharmaceuticals Pvt Ltd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Merck Sharp and Dohme (known as Merck and Co, Inc in the US and Canada) continues to sell its HPV vaccine Gardasil 4 (quadrivalent vaccine) in India which is currently priced at ₹ 3,927 per dose. (PTI)

Three men held for illegally entering India as they reach Mumbai from Kuwait by fishing boat

MUMBAI, Feb 7: The Mumbai police on Wednesday arrested three men, originally from Tamil Nadu, for entering India illegally using a fishing boat in which they sailed from Kuwait in a bid to escape from that country, an incident that raised concerns over potential maritime lapses.

The boat was spotted off the Mumbai coast during patrolling on Tuesday morning, a police official said.

In the probe conducted so far, the police found that the trio were fishermen from Tamil Nadu, who had been working in Kuwait since the last two years. Allegedly ill-treated by their agent, the trio set sail on a fishing boat of their master without permission to escape from the Gulf country and entered the Indian territory illegally, he said.

The arrested persons were identified as Infant Vijay Vinod Anthony, Sahaya Antony Anish - both aged 29 and residents of Kanyakumari- and Nidiso Dito (31) from Ramnathpuram in Tamil Nadu, the official said.

A local court here remanded them to police custody till February 10.

The incident has raised concerns over maritime security as 10 Pakistani terrorists had arrived by the sea route before launching a terror strike in the metropolis in November 2008. The 26/11 terror attacks had claimed the lives of 166 individuals and left hundreds of people injured.

"A suspicious boat was spotted by the officials of the Yellow Gate police station around 7.30 am on Tuesday when they were on patrolling duty in the Arabian Sea. The boat, which was of a different make, was found moving near the Sassoon Dock, following which the police patrolling boat went closer and found three persons aboard," the FIR

said.

The three persons were neither able to speak Marathi nor Hindi. They were speaking broken English, due to which the suspicion surrounding them grew, it said.

The police patrolling team then informed the South Region control room and sought assistance, following which two police boats and another from the Navy arrived at the spot, the FIR said.

The three persons then stopped the boat. The police asked them to go along for an inquiry, but they did not start the boat, following which it was towed to the Gateway of India, the official said.

During the inquiry it came to light that the three of them were fishermen and the fishing boat in which they sailed was owned by their master Abdullah Sharahit in Kuwait, he added.

The FIR said they took the fishing boat from Kuwait without permission, crossed the international borders and entered Indian territory illegally without passports.

The city police formally placed them under arrest on Wednesday.

The boat with the trio on board was anchored at the Gateway of India on Tuesday. Prima facie, nothing suspicious was found on the boat, he said.

A case was registered against them by the Colaba police here, the official said.

"The police arrested them after filing a case under section 3 (a) with penal section 6 (a) of the Passport (Entry into India) Rules for not following the due procedures required for entering India," he added.

A complaint was filed at the Colaba police station by a 34-year-old police constable of the Yellow Gate police station. (PTI)

Cops recover stolen control unit of EVM; two held



PUNE, Feb 7: Police have recovered the control unit of an electronic voting machine (EVM) after it was allegedly stolen from the office of a revenue official in Maharashtra's Pune district, and nabbed two persons in this connection, an official said on Wednesday.

The incident of theft had occurred at the office of a tehsildar in Saswad on February 3 and a CCTV footage of the offence surfaced on social media.

"Three thieves allegedly stole the control unit of the EVM and some stationary material from the tehsildar office. The incident came to light on Monday," a senior police official said.

The stolen control unit of the EVM was recovered within 24 hours of the theft, he said.

"We nabbed two persons involved in the crime and the control unit was recovered from them in Jejuri area of the district. We are investigating the matter further," he added.

A case was registered at the Saswad police station against the accused trio, the official said. (PTI)

IMA writes to NMC highlighting concerns about NEXT

NEW DELHI, Feb 7: The Indian Medical Association (IMA) has written to the National Medical Commission (NMC) stating that the implementation of the NEXT without proper evaluation would jeopardise the affordability and accessibility of medical education and urged it to reconsider certain provisions.

The NMC has sought comments from all the stakeholders on the implementation and preparation of conducting the National Exit Test (NEXT) by filling up the feedback form by February 7.

The stakeholders have also been requested to go-through the NMC National Exit Test Regulations, 2023.

The doctors' body said bringing in the NEXT defies the vision of the prime minister and government of affordable and accessible

medical education by seriously hampering the survival of medical institutions in underprivileged communities.

"We cannot afford to train doctors and deny degree to practise," it said. The association further pointed out that currently, uniform standards of medical education across all academic institutions do not exist and testing the entire country with one test would not be feasible.

"Using the same exam to test the basic minimum required for licensing and highest standards required for post-graduate entrance assessment is completely illogical," it said.

The IMA further stressed that the NEXT cannot be conducted both as a licentiate exam and a PG entrance exam, as the focus of the licensing exam should be on assessing the minimum standard while that of the PG exam

should be to select the most meritorious students.

The suggested format of an MCQ-based test will only decrease the attention and interest of students in classes and clinics and help in the mushrooming of coaching centres that are already threatening the medical education system in the country by patronising only the rich and affordable classes, it pointed out.

This will also seriously hamper the academic and clinical skills of the students, it stated.

As and when the NEXT gets planned, the IMA asked for extensive discussions with it and other stakeholders.

It further stated that the establishment of a passing criteria that strike a balance between accessibility and the preservation of academic rigour needs to be considered. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

83,000 ha of Assam

occupied currently by four neighbouring states. In a written reply to a query by BJP MLA Bidya Sing Englung, Bora said a total of 82,751.86 hectares of land across 17 districts are under the control of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram. The largest amount of such land - 59,490.21 hectares - is being controlled by Nagaland, Bora said. Meghalaya has 3,441.86 hectares of Assam's land, the least among the four states, the minister said. Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram have encroached upon 16,144.01 hectares and 3,675.78 hectares respectively, he added.

The 17 affected districts of Assam are Sonitpur, Biswanath, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Charaideo, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Golaghat, Goalpara, Cachar, Kamrup, South Salmara-Mankachar, West Karbi Anglong, Hailakandi and Karimganj. (PTI)

Pursue new-age technical

of major rooftop solar panel projects would be launched in the state in days to come, the chief minister Sarma appealed to the youths to get themselves trained in solar technology so that employment and earning opportunities the sector would unveil don't slip out of their hands. He also said L&T has been asked to train those who enrol into Construction Skill Training Centre in rooftop solar panel installation.

It is worth mentioning that a joint initiative of the Government of Assam and Larsen & Toubro, the Construction Skill Training Centre has been established with the objective to provide skill training enhancement for registered construction workers, align trained resources in the construction industry from workmen to supervisors, connect trainees with future skills and modern technology, and training of unemployed youths with employable construction skills. The chief minister said L&T shall also provide employment opportunities to those who complete the 90-day training at the Construction Skill Training Centre. "Construction Skill Training Centre at Gogamukh was just the beginning. The government is also going ahead with establishing similar institutions in Nalbari and Jorhat districts," he stated. He said that the state government is committed to providing state-of-the-art skill training in various fields and the upcoming Skill University, construction of which is ongoing, is a manifestation of that commitment.

"The state government is going ahead with all its energy in filling up the vacant positions in the government sectors," the chief minister further added. The event was attended by education minister Dr. Ranaj Pegu, minister of skill, employment & entrepreneurship Jayanta Mallabarua, minister of labour welfare Sanjoy Kishan, chief executive of Mising Autonomous Council Paramananda Chayengia, member of Parliament Pradan Baruah, member of Legislative Assembly Manab Deka, principal secretary to Government of Assam B. Kalyan Chakravarty and top officials of L&T, along with a host of other dignitaries.

KAAC honours Sarsing

We should honour him," CEM said. He also declared late Teron as the 'Father of Karbis' or 'Father of Karbi Anglong.

"Late Sarsing Teron is also one of our great leaders and should honour him with respect. He is 'Father of Karbis' or 'Father of Karbi Anglong.' Next year the celebration will be grander at Taralungso. All government offices will have a holiday. The government employees in their respective offices will honour late Teron by offering floral tributes at his portrait and discuss about his life and activities," he added. On the occasion, a booklet 'Short life sketch of Sarsing Teron (Langkung Habe)' was also released by the CEM.

The grandson of late Teron, Ratul Teron appreciated the KAAC authority under the CEMship of Ronghang that late Teron has been due recognition. Teron suggested organising seminars and workshops and celebrate his birth anniversary annually. He particularly thanked the CEM for keeping a KAAC holiday in honour of late Teron.

Indo-Myanmar border

said Mizo people can't accept the present Indo-Myanmar border as it was imposed by the British during colonial period without consulting the Mizo people and fencing the border would mean accepting the colonial demarcation. Last month the MZP had written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi urging him that the Centre should reconsider its decision to fence the border.

"It (FMR) enables us to participate in each other's marriages and funerals, pay visit to patients, participate in religious meetings, and engage in local-level sports tournaments. Any decision to terminate the FMR regime will take away these essential aspects and will deprive us of our rights as human beings, much like other communities around the world," the MZP had said.

Coordinating Committee (COCOMI), a joint body of valley-based Meitei civil bodies, welcomed the decision but cautioned that no area of the state should be compromised during the process.

M Dhananjay, assistant media coordinator of COCOMI told PTI, "Had this (border fencing) been done 30-40 years back, we would not have seen the violence we are seeing today". "Porous borders have undoubtedly led to massive smuggling of drugs threatening the lives of the youths and influx of illegal immigrants have caused enormous demographic changes threatening the indigenous population of Meiteis and state Nagas," Dhananjay said. Manipur's Churachandpur-based United Zou Organisation, General Headquarters (UZO-GHQ) also opposed the government's plan to fence the border without taking into account the socio-historical implications and the existence of the Zou/Zo people. In a statement, UZO said, "The Zou/Zo are trans-border communities who have long lived in the former Manipur-Chin (now Indo-Myanmar) boundary regions." It asserted that without their knowledge or approval, the British colonial overlords segmented their inhabited regions and gave them to Manipur and Chin Hills, in the late 19th century. In a statement, the Kuki Chiefs' Association, Tengnoupal, expressed dismay over "blatant" disregard of its sincere appeal against border fencing. "In the face of vehement public opposition, this brazen action signifies a stark betrayal of democratic values, as it silences the collective voice of the people, undermining the very essence of democratic principles," the association said.

Naga bodies in Manipur also said border fencing and cancellation of FMR "is not acceptable" to them.

President Ng Lorho of the United Naga Council, the apex Naga body in the state, told PTI, "We are against border fencing. Whatever Union home minister said is not acceptable to the UNC."

Tangkhuil Naga Long, a prominent body of Tangkhuil Naga tribe in Ukhrul and Kamjong districts of the state that shares border with Myanmar, told PTI, "Our stand is very clear. We do not approve of fencing along the India-Myanmar border and cannot be accepted".

Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu hailed the decision of the Centre to fence the border, saying the move will check the movement of unscrupulous elements from across the border.

"A great move in the right direction to make our borders foolproof. Gratitude to Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri @narendramodiji and Hon'ble Home Minister Shri @AmitShah ji to fence our borders along Myanmar", Khandu posted on X.

A state-of-the-art surveillance will check the movement of unscrupulous elements, Khandu said in another social media post. (PTI)

Assam govt to merge

the preamble of the legislation stated. The ASSEB will be headed by a chairman, to be nominated by the government. Under him, individual vice chairman will look after each division and he or she will be nominated by the government. The new board will have a total of 21 members, who will have a three-year term and it can be renewed for an equal period. "The objective is to introduce the Assam State School Education Board Bill, 2024 to develop, regulate and supervise the standards and quality in school education in the state of Assam," education minister Ranaj Pegu said in the Statement of Object and Reasons of the Bill.

Earlier in November last year, the merger decision was taken at a meeting of the state cabinet, chaired by chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. The SEBA conducts the Class 10 board examination, while the Class 12 examinations are looked after by the AHSEC.

The move comes after leaking of at least two question papers in the Class 10 board examinations by SEBA in 2023. In March last year, general science and Assamese papers were leaked. This forced the SEBA and government to reschedule the examinations of general science, all subjects of Modern Indian Languages (MIL), including Assamese, and English (IL). (PTI)

String of attacks on

attacked by unidentified men near his house in the US city of Chicago on Sunday, February 4. There were videos posted on social media and in one video posted on X, Ali can be seen with a bloodied nose and face and blood stains on his clothes as he describes his ordeal. Ali, who moved to the US from Hyderabad about six months ago, told ABC7 Eyewitness News that one of the attackers pointed a gun at him.

Video surveillance shows Ali walking to his home at night with a packet in his hand when the three men chase him when he was punched by the men in the eye and hit on the face, ribs and back. The ABC7 report said he was taken to a local hospital where he was treated for several cuts and bruises. Ali is pursuing Masters in information technology from Indiana Wesleyan University.

"America has been my dream country and I came here to fulfil my dreams and pursue my Masters. The incident gave me trauma," he told the channel. The report said that the police do not have any suspect in custody and the investigation is ongoing.

The Consulate General of India in Chicago said on X that the "Consulate is in touch with Syed Mazahir Ali and his wife in India Syeda Ruqiyah Fatima Razvi and assured all possible assistance. The consulate has also contacted the local authorities who are investigating the case." Ali's wife Ruqiyah Fatima reached out to external affairs minister S Jaishankar, requesting assistance to travel to the US along with three minor children. Last week, 19-year-old Shreyas Reddy Beniger, a student at the Lindner School of Business in Ohio State was found dead. However, local authorities have ruled out foul play.

Another Indian student, identified as Neel Acharya at Purdue University, Indiana, was confirmed dead days after being reported missing on January 28. The incident comes just days after 25-year-old Indian student Vivek Saini, who had recently earned an MBA degree in the US, was hammered to death by a homeless drug addict in Georgia state's Lithonia city on January 16.

The horrifying incident was caught on camera when assailant Julian Faulkner, a homeless man, mercilessly struck Saini nearly 50 times on the head with a hammer. Akul B Dhawan, an 18-year-old at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, was found dead last month with signs of hypothermia. (PTI)

Stop creating narrative

developed. Therefore we should look at the country as one and not separate parts," Modi said. He cited the example of the Himalayas, saying what if one starts saying that rivers flow from there and they won't be shared with others. "What will happen to the country, where will this stop? States which have coal if they say that we won't share it with others, how will the country function?"

"If eastern states had said that we won't share oxygen with other regions what would have happened. "Desh ke andar yeh bhav todne ka kya prayas ho raha hai?" (What is this narrative being played to break the nation). 'Hamara tax hamara money'. (Our tax, our money) what is this language being spoken?"

"Stop giving such new narratives to break the nation. It poses a threat to the future of the country. Make efforts to take the country along," the prime minister noted. (PTI)

Developed as another home for cheetahs, Gandhi Sagar sanctuary in MP ready to welcome felines

MANDSAUR (MP), Feb 7: Madhya Pradesh, which currently hosts 21 cheetahs at the Kuno National Park (KNP), is ready to welcome a new batch of the spotted felines as the second such facility has been developed at the Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary in Mandsaur district of the state.

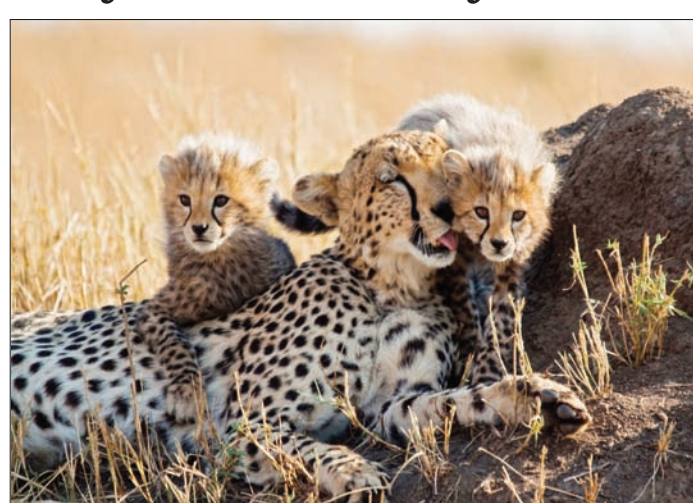
This new home for cheetahs is located around 270 km from the KNP in Sheopur district.

Forest department officials said the Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary is ready to welcome cheetahs and all preparations for the introduction of these animals have been completed.

"This new home for cheetahs, which is spread over 64 square kilometres of area, has been developed in Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary at a cost of ₹ 17.72 crore," Mandsaur's Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) Sanjay Raikhedra said.

This area is protected with a wired fence, he said.

"The sanctuary is ready to welcome cheetahs and all preparations for their introduction have been



completed," he added.

Raikhedra, however, said the decision on the time and other formalities regarding the settlement of cheetahs in this sanctuary will be taken by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA).

"About 25 employees and officials posted at the Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary and the forest department have already received

training required for monitoring and taking care of cheetahs from the KNP," the official said.

A hospital is also being constructed to provide medical services to cheetahs, he said.

A team of veterinarians from the KNP is soon visiting the sanctuary to provide guidance regarding the construction of the hospital, he said.

Raikhedra said prey is available for cheetahs in Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary in abundance.

"There are many animals, including chitals (spotted deer), that are available in large numbers in the sanctuary," the DFO said.

A new batch of cheetahs is likely to arrive from South Africa at this sanctuary, he said.

Cheetah, the fastest land animal, was declared extinct in the country in 1952. The relocation of cheetahs from Africa is part of the government's ambitious plan to revive their population in India.

Under the Cheetah Reintroduction Project, eight Namibian cheetahs - five female and three male - were released into enclosures at the KNP on September 17 in 2022. In February 2023, another batch of 12 cheetahs were brought to the park from South Africa.

Since March 2023, seven adult cheetahs and three cubs have died in the KNP due to various reasons. The total number of cheetahs at the KNP currently stands at 21 - six males, seven females and eight cubs. (PTI)

NEW DELHI, Feb 7: Actor-author Soha Ali Khan says she would love to write a book on the life and times of her mother, veteran actor Sharmila Tagore, even though she has doubts about being the "right person" for the job.

Soha is co-producing a biopic on legal luminary Ram Jethmalani with her actor-husband Kunal Khemu. She has also penned a memoir besides writing multiple children's book with Khemu.

"The Perils of Being Modern-

ately Fa-



Would love to write my mother's biography: Soha Ali Khan

"I would love to. It's so close to home though... When people read them, they will be like 'would they be able to share the grey aspects of this personality because you are their child'."

"So, I can write a story about her but I don't know if it would do justice to all the facets of her personality, and I don't know if I'd

be able to share everything about her as a child. Honestly, I would like to tell that story," Khan told PTI.

The "Rang De Basanti" actor said not just her mother, there is a compelling story waiting to be told about her father, legendary cricketer Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi.

"There is a wealth of information. There is lots of content," she said, adding that her brother, actor Saif Ali Khan, a voracious reader himself, is another person in the family who can take up that responsibility.

Having co-authored three children books in the famous "Inni and Bobo" series with her hus-

band, Khan said there is a "book in each of us" and it is all about "discipline and practice" when it comes to writing but she believes she lacks it.

"It is like a practice, it's a discipline and when that discipline is gone you know it's kind of sad. So I keep telling her (my mother) that I am going to get back to it... There are many books but how am I going to write them? I have no discipline at all, and I am just enjoying life too much," the actor-writer said on the sidelines of an event organised by 'Almond Board of California'.

Khan, who'll be completing two decades in the industry this year, said she now wants to try

her hand at thrillers, something that she has not done before.

Some of her favourite directors in the genre are Shoojit Sircar, Sriram Raghavan, Hansal Mehta and Tanuja Chandra.

The 45-year-old actor said she is always drawn to good stories and wants to be part of projects backed by good writers.

"I really feel like I want to do a thriller, which is something that I haven't done before. I think that there are many directors who are very good... There are a lot of people. As an actor, I think your work will be improved by working with them," she said.

Khan will be next seen in horror film "Chhorii 2" with actor Nushrat Bharucha.

"I have not done horror as a genre, I enjoy it very much but I have never had an opportunity to play a scary character before and I am the scare in 'Chhorii 2'. It should be out this year," she said. (PTI)



You need good films in all genres or we'll be living in limited reality, says Shahid Kapoor

NEW DELHI, Feb 7: Actor Shahid Kapoor says he grew up watching love stories on the big screen and believes that the genre has the potential to do well in theatres if it is done on a certain scale with good music and visuals. The actor is looking forward to the release of his new film "Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya",

pegged as a unique romantic comedy that revolves around the relationship between a regular guy and a hu-



manoid. Also starring Kriti Sanon, the movie releases in theatres on Friday. "I have loved watching love stories on the big screen and even the songs. I remember seeing 'Shava Shava' (from 'Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham...') for the first time on the big screen or watching 'Aati Kya Khan-dala' (from 'Ghulam') on the big screen. (PTI)

John Abraham, Sharvarestarrer 'Vedaa' set for July 12 release

MUMBAI, Feb 7: Filmmaker Nikkhil Advani's upcoming movie "Vedaa", starring John Abraham and Sharvare in the lead roles, will be released in theatres on July 12, the makers announced on Wednesday. The film, dubbed as a "high-energy action-drama", marks a reunion between Abraham and Advani after the movies "Salaam-e-Ishq" and "Batla House". It also stars Abhishek Banerjee in a pivotal role. The filmmaker has directed "Vedaa" from a script by Aseem Arora. The movie is produced by Zee Studios, Advani's Emmay Entertainment and Abraham's JA Entertainment. "Vedaa" is not just a film. It's inspired from real events and is a reflection of our society and pushes the boundaries of reality. Working with John, Sharvare and Abhishek

Banerjee has been an incredible experience and I'm glad to finally announce the release date and fingers crossed the audiences gets moved the way we all did when we first heard the story of 'Vedaa'," Advani said in a statement.



Sharqi Patel, CBO, Zee Studios, said he is excited about the production banner's association with Advani and Abraham for the movie. "The film promises to captivate audiences with its compelling sto-

ryline and stellar performances. The collaboration with John and Nikkhil adds an extra layer of anticipation and we are pleased to announce the release date," he said.

Abraham, who last featured in Shah Rukh Khan-starrer "Pathaan",

also shared the news of the film's release date on Instagram.

"#Vedaa #WaitForIt. She needed a savior. She got a weapon. Releasing in cinemas on July 12th," the actor wrote alongside the film's official poster. (PTI)

Excel Entertainment, Baweja Studios team up for action-adventure movie

MUMBAI, Feb 7: Farhan Akhtar-Ritesh Sidhwani's banner Excel Entertainment and Baweja Studios on Wednesday announced their collaboration for an action-adventure film.

The project will mark the third collaboration between the two studios as they are already developing a courtroom drama and vigilante-action series.

"The new collaboration further strengthens their journey of making high content driven

films," a press release said.

In a joint statement, Akhtar and Sidhwani said their collaboration with Baweja Studios is based on their shared dedication to great storytelling.

"Our collaboration is focused on bringing together our unique perspectives and creating an exceptional cinematic experience for our audiences everywhere," they said.

Harman Baweja of Baweja Studios said the company aims to

create impactful and innovative content across all genres.

"We are thrilled to extend our collaboration with Excel Entertainment. Our upcoming project is going to be a high-octane film, poised to deliver an extraordinary cinematic experience for our audiences. We look forward to beginning this journey soon," he added.

The two companies are yet to announce the director and the cast for the new film. (PTI)



No regrets: Ankita Lokhande on her 'Bigg Boss 17' stint

MUMBAI, Feb 7: Actor Ankita Lokhande, who emerged as the third runner-up on "Bigg Boss 17", says controversial or not, she has no regrets about showing her true self on the popular reality series.

Hosted by superstar Salman Khan, the latest season of "Bigg Boss" premiered on Colors channel on October 15, 2023 and ended on January 28, 2024. Stand-up comedian Munawar Faruqi was named the winner of the show.

Lokhande, who entered the show with husband Vicky Jain, made headlines due to their fights and arguments.

"I've been there with all my heart. Whatever emotions I felt,

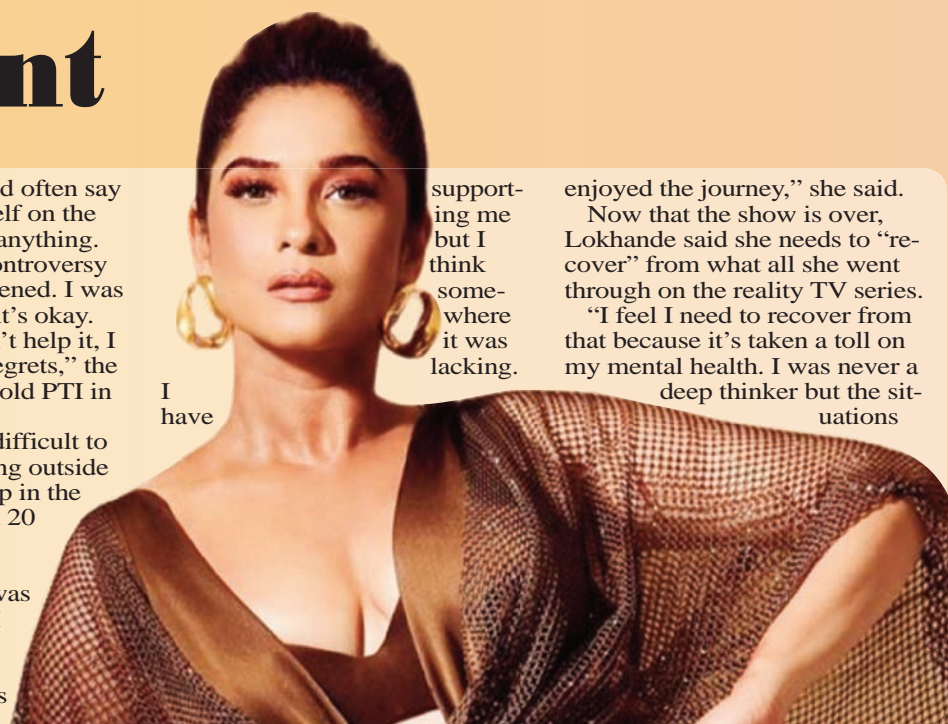
it all came out. I would often say I've shown my true self on the show, I'm not hiding anything. Even if I tried for a controversy to not happen, it happened. I was tired of myself, (but) it's okay. It's a part of me. I can't help it, I was what I was. No regrets," the "Pavitra Rishta" star told PTI in an interview here.

The actor said it is difficult to know what's happening outside when one is cooped up in the Bigg Boss house with 20 other contestants.

"But when I learnt about my eviction, I was quite okay with that. I was not upset, I was shocked. I thought I had a fandom that was

supporting me but I think somewhere it was lacking.

I have



enjoyed the journey," she said.

Now that the show is over, Lokhande said she needs to "recover" from what all she went through on the reality TV series. "I feel I need to recover from that because it's taken a toll on my mental health. I was never a deep thinker but the situations

were such that I became one. I'm trying to recover, and understand a few things of what has happened in my life. It will take time but eventually I'll come out of it.

"Vicky is there, my family, my mom and everybody from Vicky's family is also there but eventually it's about how I take things and move on. I'm trying to cope with things," the 39-year-old added.

On the show, Lokhande had hinted about taking a break from their marriage or seeking divorce. Looking back, the actor said she should have been more sensible. "We got married after being friends for years. We just say things (in jest) and it was taken seriously. I'm not sensible and I need to be more sensible and be aware of what I speak when I'm in front of the camera. I'm still learning," she said.

The actor believes her relationship has become stronger after what they went through on the show.

"If our relationship was not that strong, then maybe we may not even fight. The only difference is that our fights came out on TV, which may not happen in case of other normal couples. But because of all this, our relationship has become stronger. I could understand where I was going wrong and he could understand where he was going wrong. We are stronger than before." Lokhande, also known for films "Manikarnika" and "Baaghi 3", is looking forward to the release of her upcoming film "Swatantrya Veer Savarkar", a biopic of Hindutva ideologue V D Savarkar starring and directed by Randeep Hooda. It will hit the screens on March 22. (PTI)

Uday Saharan: New captain cool and chip off old block

NEW DELHI, Feb 7: During the U-19 Challenger tournament last year, India skipper Uday Saharan wasn't scoring runs and father Sanjeev was getting anxious as the national selection committee was about to pick the squad for junior Asia Cup.

"I wasn't in best frame of mind as Uday wasn't scoring runs, but he would tell me, 'papa, don't worry, runs will come.'"

"That's Uday for you. I am not saying because he is my son but at 19, he can remain unclut-

tered," Sanjeev, beaming with joy after his son led India to their fifth consecutive U-19 World Cup final, told PTI.

For the uninitiated, Uday plays national level cricket from Punjab but he hails from Shri Ganganagar district in Rajasthan.

"During matches, he travels from Shri Ganganagar to Bathinda which is a two-hour train journey. He is doing second year B.Com from Bathinda University. It was a friend of my mine, who suggested that Uday

be shifted to Fazilka in Punjab for cricket," the father informed. Fazilka is also Shubman Gill's village.

With one hundred and three fifties in six World Cup games so far, Punjab batter Uday is currently the highest run-getter in this edition, and his batting style resembles the 1980s and 90s' top-order accumulators.

He scores his runs at a strike rate of early 70s, something that he will need to address at senior level. As of now, it is serving the purpose.

"Uday tells me that papa jab single, double pe baat ban jaayegi toh chakka maarne ki kya zaroorat? Chakka maarna hoga toh woh bhi maar lunga (why try for sixes when I can get the job done by taking ones and twos.)"

"When the need arises, I will hit sixes too," said Sanjeev, who is an Ayurvedic doctor and a BCCI Level 1 accredited coach.

For him, technique is sacrosanct and he gave an insight into how Uday learnt to play copy-book, conventional cricket.

"During my playing days, I represented my district in Rajasthan CA's biggest tournament Colvin Shield. I was known as 'Gavaskar' in my local circuit as bowlers couldn't breach my defence.

"I have taught Uday the value of technique. And as for IPL game, when he was 16, he scored 108 off 60 balls in a local district match, hitting Arshdeep Singh for sixes," the father said.

How was the mood in the Saharan household on Tuesday

night when Uday was in the midst of a tense chase.

"Kya hi bolun. Uday ki didi, meri badi beti toh mandir wale ghar se nikli nahi. Woh toh roney lag gaayi thi. Meri patni ka bhateje ki shaadi thi lekin woh bhi pura match mandir mein baithi rahi."

"Hum Pallu Devi maa ko bahot mante hai (My elder daughter and wife prayed the whole time and didn't step out of the temple at home. My wife didn't attend the wedding reception of a relative.)"

So how does it feel when he sees himself as father of an India team captain?

"I don't have words to express that feeling. It is special. I had seen his leadership skills since he was young. When I would take him to the academy and teach him a drill, he would take a lead and teach other trainees. He has always been a responsible boy."

What will be his advice to his son before the final? "Nothing bas cup lekey aa jaaeyin (Just bring home the cup)." (PTI)

NZ beat under-strength SA by 281 runs in test cricket series opener



MOUNT MAUNGANUI (NEW ZEALAND), Feb 7: New Zealand beat an under-strength South Africa lineup by 281 runs on the fourth day of the first cricket test Wednesday to take an early lead in the two-match series. Captain Tim Southee declared New Zealand's second innings overnight at 179-4, with an overall lead of 528. New Zealand bowled out South Africa in the fourth innings for 247. New Zealand posted 511 bat-

ting first and dismissed South Africa for 162 for a 349-run first innings lead. Southee chose not to enforce the follow-on and Kane Williamson completed his second century of the match, the 31st of his career, before the declaration.

"I think it was pretty good on a good (pitch) for the batters to set it up and the bowlers to take 20 wickets," Southee said. "We knew the South Africa side would be a strong one. You look at them in all sports, they compete, they're

a very proud nation so we knew they were going to come out and fight." South Africa was in trouble early Wednesday, losing the wickets of openers Neil Brand and Edward Moore within the first four overs.

Zubayr Hamza and Raynard van Tonder batted more than 100 minutes to carry South Africa to lunch without further loss. But both were out to undisciplined shots immediately after the break, hastening the end.

David Bedingham lifted South Africa's hopes after lunch with a career-best 87 from 96 balls in a partnership of 105 for the fifth wicket with Keegan Petersen (16). The partnership occupied most of the middle session and while Bedingham and Petersen were together New Zealand was faced with the prospect that the test might continue into the fifth day. Bedingham had benefited from New Zealand's short-pitched bowling, hitting 13 fours and a six. But he chased a short ball once too often and fell to Kyle Jamieson not long after the tea interval. Jamieson removed both partners as South Africa slumped from 178-4 to 181-6. Bedingham tried to pull a ball which reached him sooner than he expected and his miscued shot flew to Mitchell Santner at deep midwicket.

Petersen attempted to hook a ball which bounced to chest height, tucked him up and his pull shot was taken by Rachin Ravindra at fine leg.

With such a big lead, New Zealand was able to work on plans to dismiss the key South Africa batters and, while it was expensive, the short-pitch policy eventually yielded the wicket of Bedingham.

Clyde Fortuin's dismissal was indicative of the bad luck South Africa has had throughout the test. He pushed a rank short ball from part-time spinner Glenn

Phillips which hit the knee of Tom Latham as he ducked at short leg and flew up to be caught by wicketkeeper Tom Blundell.

Duanne Olivier was caught by Daryl Mitchell at first slip from Santner's bowling as he pushed forward outside off. Santner found a lot of turn earlier in the day and was unlucky not to enjoy more success.

Tshepo Moreki was caught out by a ball from Santner which pitched in line and hurried on, catching him in front as he squared up in front of his stumps.

The end finally came 40 minutes before scheduled stumps when Dane Paterson holed out to Williamson from Santner's bowling. New Zealand's win was set up on the first day when Williamson and Ravindra made centuries in a partnership eventually worth 232. Williamson was out early on the second day for 118 but Ravindra turned his maiden test century into a double century before he was out for 240. Ravindra also took his first two wickets in tests in the first innings as New Zealand control of the match. South Africa selected six new caps in its lineup for the test, stripped of most of its leading players who stayed home to play in a domestic T20 series. Inevitably, there were signs of inexperience: notably that batsmen who had made a start got out after a break in play. (AP)

Bumrah becomes first Indian pacer to reach No 1 in ICC Test rankings, replaces Ashwin from top



DUBAI, Feb 7: Jasprit Bumrah on Wednesday became the first Indian pacer to top the ICC Test rankings after a stellar performance against England in Visakhapatnam. The 30-year-old's nine-wicket match haul has helped him leapfrog Pat Cummins, Kagiso Rabada and Ravichandran Ashwin, making him only the fourth from his country to attain number one position. Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja and Bishan Singh Bedi are the other Indians who have been at the top of the charts. Bumrah, who was named Player of the Match after helping India level the five-match series with a 106-run victory, ended Ashwin's 11-month long reign. Ashwin, on 499 Test wickets, is now third in the standings.

Bumrah now has 881 rating points with Ashwin (904) and Jadeja (899) the only India bowlers to have aggregated more rating points. Ashwin and Jadeja also have the unique distinction of being jointly top-ranked in March 2017. The batting rankings see left-handed opener Yashasvi Jaiswal progress 37 places to 29th after completing a fine double-century in the first innings and Shubman Gill go up 14 places to a career-

best 38th after notching a century in the second innings.

England opener Zak Crawley is another player to gain after the Visakhapatnam Test, moving up eight places to a career-best 22nd position after scores of 76 and 73.

Rookie leg-spinner Rehan Ahmed has moved up 14 places to 70th while Tom Hartley, who became just the second England player with at least 50 runs and five wickets in each of his first two Tests, has advanced in both lists - up from 103rd to 95th in the batting rankings and from 63rd to 53rd in the bowling rankings.

The latest rankings have also factored in performances in the one-off Test between Sri Lanka and Afghanistan in Colombo. Left-arm spinner Prabhath Jayasuriya has moved up to three places to a career-best sixth position after his eight-wicket match haul helped the home side win by 10 wickets.

In the ODI rankings, Australia leg-spinner Adam Zampa is up one place to third and fast bowler Sean Abbott's six wickets in the three-match series against the West Indies this past week have lifted him 35 places to joint-33rd position. (PTI)

Police collecting evidence against Varun Kumar, to approach him to join probe

BENGALURU, Feb 7: Bengaluru Police probing rape charges against Indian national team Hockey player Varun Kumar said they are collecting evidence, scanning through Call detail records, messages and voice notes exchanged between him and the alleged victim as part of the ongoing investigation.

The police would soon be approaching the 28-year-old to join the probe, they said.

"We are investigating the case and are collecting the required evidence. We have not approached Kumar yet. He is out of Karnataka, so we will be contacting him soon to join the probe. We have not sent any teams to his place where he is currently undergoing training. If he comes, fine, or we will have to send our team there," a senior police officer told PTI.

"We have already started collecting evidence. We are scanning through messages exchanged between the victim and Kumar, the voice notes, call detail records. We would also be approaching their mutual friends to record statements," he said. Kumar has been booked under the stringent POCSSO act by the Bengaluru Police after a woman accused him of sexually abusing her multiple times when she was a minor. The 22-year-old, in her complaint filed on Monday, said that she came in contact with Kumar in 2018 through Instagram, and the player raped her on multiple occasions promising her of marriage when she was 17.

She said Kumar was training at the Sports Authority of India (SAI) centre in Bengaluru when she met him. Kumar, who got the Arjuna award in 2021, was recently promoted as a DSP in Punjab Police. "Based on the complaint received from the woman, we have regis-

tered a case on Monday against the Hockey player under appropriate section of Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act and sections 376 (rape) and 420 (cheating and dishonestly inducing delivery of property) of the Indian Penal Code," a senior Bengaluru Police officer said on Tuesday.

Kumar, who was on the Indian standby list for the Tokyo Olympics, is currently training with the national squad in Bhubaneswar for the upcoming FIH Pro League. India are scheduled to face Spain in their opening encounter on February 10. There was speculation that Kumar, part of the 2022 Commonwealth Games silver-medal winning Indian team, is on the run, but Hockey India rubbished the rumour.

Kumar, who hails from Himachal Pradesh, made his debut for India in 2017.

In the FIR, the woman has alleged that Kumar insisted on meeting her after they got in touch on Instagram and she relented after some of his friends convinced her. The two eventually became friends and got into a relationship.

According to the woman, he took her to a hotel in Bengaluru's Jayanagar in July 2019 and made physical relations with her despite being aware that she was a minor at the time. She said she had resisted but he promised to take their relationship a step further and marry her later. "She accused him of getting physical with her on several occasions over the five-year long relationship she shared with him on the pretext of marriage," the FIR stated. The woman alleged that he started distancing himself from her and stopped responding to her calls and messages after her father died last year. (PTI)

'Avail limitless opportunities in diverse sectors': J-K LG

JAMMU, Feb 7: Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha on Wednesday laid the foundation stone of synthetic football turf on the outskirts of Jammu and said the state-of-the-art sports facility will be developed as per FIFA standards.

The lieutenant governor said international level sports facilities are being developed in the cities of Jammu and Srinagar. Flanked by senior officials, Sinha laid the foundation stone of the turf at Jagti Migrant Camp, housing displaced Kashmiri Pandits.

The turf is set to come at a cost of Rs 5.75 crores.

Addressing the gathering here, the lieutenant governor said, "The state-of-the-art sports facility is to be developed as per FIFA (Federation Internationale de Football Association) standards."

Sinha dedicated this vital sports project at Jagti to the community's youth and to their contribution in nation-building. "I urge them to avail limitless opportunities in diverse sectors and fulfill the goal of 'Viksit Bharat', he said.

The lieutenant governor said that "it demonstrates our unwavering commitment and dedication to promote sports" in the Union Territory. Highlighting the massive infrastructure development post 2019, Sinha said, "It has brought a sports revolution in Jammu and Kashmir. We have completed 702 sports projects." The lieutenant governor said that multipurpose indoor

sports halls have been constructed in almost every district. "Playfields have been developed in every panchayat," he added.

Sinha said international level sports facilities are being developed in Jammu and Srinagar.

"Centres of excellence have been established in canoeing, rowing and fencing divisions," he added.

The lieutenant governor further said floodlighting and synthetic turfing are being installed in several stadiums.

"The achievements of the Kashmiri Pandit community fill my heart with pride," he added. (PTI)

Living up to name: Beed's Little Sachin lives his father's dream

NEW DELHI, Feb 7: His police officer mother didn't want cricket to be Sachin Dhas' focus in life but the father knew that he was destined to make it big on the 22-yard strip despite spending a better part of his life training on 11-yard grass tracks that pass for infrastructure in his hometown Beed.

The 19-year-old Dhas is among the brightest prospects to emerge in the Indian team that is competing in the Under-19 World Cup in South Africa. He has displayed superb game sense as the team's designated finisher with 294 runs at an above 100 strike rate.

On Tuesday, his 96-run knock, along with skipper Uday Saharan's 81, was a key factor in ensuring that India sneaked into the age-group showpiece's final for a fifth consecutive time.

"You only have half pitches over here (in Beed). Sachin came here with his father when he was



four and a half years old and even before going to South Africa, he trained on half turfs," said an ecstatic Sheikh Azhar, the area's most famous coach who shaped Dhas' early years.

For a country which produces

phenomenal cricketing talent often not because of, but despite the system, Sachin's emergence as the next big thing from junior India stable shouldn't come as a surprise. Named after the iconic Mumbaier, who is synonymous

with Indian cricket, Sachin is a fan of Virat Kohli, the modern great he has perhaps seen more closely although he wears the number 10 jersey which was owned by Tendulkar in every sense of the word.

"I named him after Sachin Tendulkar when he was born in 2005 because I was a huge fan but he also likes Virat Kohli a lot," declared his beaming father Sanjay when PTI reached out to him to understand how Sachin was shaped into the promising talent he is now.

"Sachin ka koi dost nahi hai. Main hi uska dost hun. Koi shaadi, koi janamdin kahin gaya nahi. Cricket se focus hate, aisa kuch karne maine diya hi nahi (He has no friends. I am his only friend. I have never allowed him to attend marriages, birthday parties so that his focus never wavers)," he said.

"Uski mummy police mein hain toh discipline hai (His mom is in

the Match (MoM). In the second match, Golaghat defeated Tezpur by nine wickets. Barring first, Tezpur posted a score of 70/6 in 15 overs, which Golaghat chased down in 8.4 overs, losing only one wicket. Khushi Kumari of Golaghat played a scintillating innings, scoring 38 off 30 balls, and was awarded the MoM.

The upcoming match on Thursday will feature New Star Eleven against Goalpara.

The rolling of wrists while executing pull shots against pacers and the perfect body balance while executing slog sweeps against spinners might look easy to the eye but it has come after years of practice and not enjoying life like other teenagers.

Not to forget the fact that his mother had a high-risk job which kept her away from home due to long and gruelling work shifts. (PTI)

**NATIONAL ROAD
SAFETY MONTH**(15TH JANUARY
14TH FEBRUARY, 2024)GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM
Transport Department**Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma**
Chief Minister, Assam**PLEDGE TO
DRIVE SAFE,
ARRIVE SAFE**

Let's come together to foster a culture of responsible driving and make our roads safer for everyone.

**WATCH YOUR SPEED:**

65% of the accidents in Assam are a result of over speeding. Slow down and obey speed limits

**OBEY TRAFFIC RULES:**

Traffic rules are not suggestions, they are necessities. Respect traffic signals and follow lane discipline

**AVOID DISTRACTED DRIVING:**

Avoid texting, calling, or any other distractions while driving.

**WEAR SEATBELTS/HELMETS FOR SAFETY:**

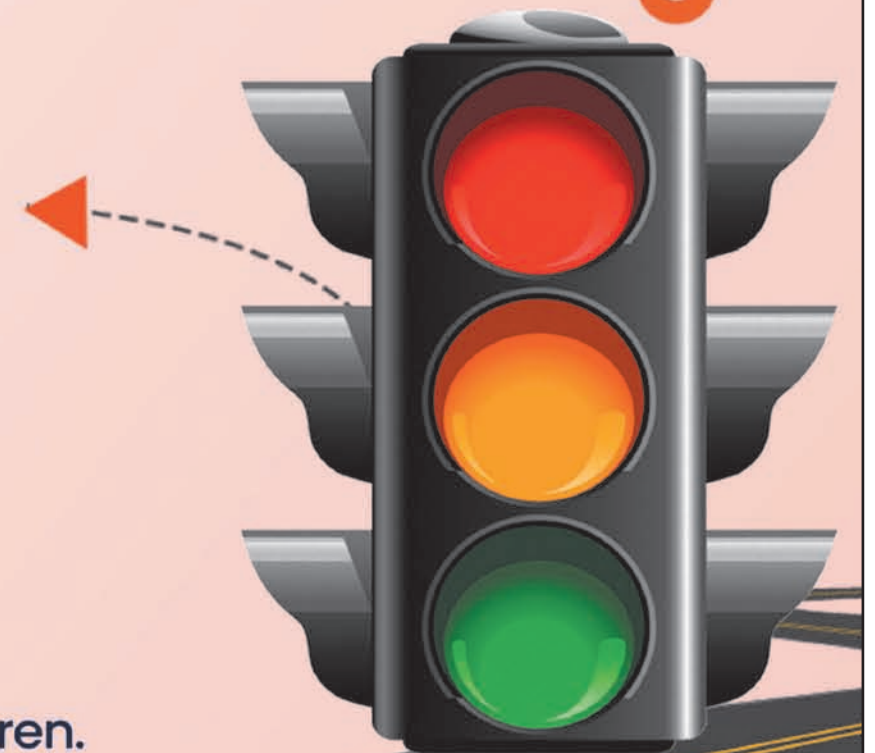
Ensure everyone in your vehicle is wearing seatbelt. Wear helmet while riding two wheelers

**DON'T DRINK AND DRIVE:**

Drunken driving is another leading cause for accidents. Avoid driving under any form of intoxication

**PROTECT THE VULNERABLE:**

Be extra cautious around pedestrians, cyclists, and children.

**Safe Roads,
Secure Tomorrow!**

Issued in public interest by Lead Agency
on Road Safety under
Transport Department, Govt. Of Assam

