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● Blinken ends latest Mideast mission after new Israeli snub of proposed Gaza

● Pakistan votes in general elections tainted by rigging claims

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● Cong releases 'black paper' to highlight govt's 'failures'

● PM Modi hails Manmohan Singh's contribution to democracy

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DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG

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PRICE ₹ 8

Modi Sarkar ki Guarantee

Modern farming, Prosperous farmers

7 crore 48 lakh Kisan Credit Cards distributed; Loans worth over ₹9 lakh crore given to farmers

Hamara Sankalp Viksit Bharat

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Govt to file FIR for school uniform irregularity

GUWAHATI, Feb 8: Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday said the state government will file police cases against those responsible for irregularities in giving school uniforms to students.

Sarma told the state assembly during the question hour that the government will start taking action after the Lok Sabha elections as there are allegations of anomalies in school uniforms across the state. "We give funds for giving school uniforms to students free of cost. However, when I visit different places, I find that uniforms in some schools are of good quality and some are not," he added.

Sarma said that while some school management utilise the funds in a proper way, but some are not doing so. "Our aim this year is to provide good quality uniforms to every student of the state. (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Drug peddlers arrested

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 8: The special task force of Assam police arrested two drug peddlers from the Lalmati area of the city on Thursday.

Acting on inputs, a team of the special task force conducted a raid at the NH parking in Lalmati and arrested the duo, who is also involved in theft. The team also recovered 37.3 grams of suspected heroin in 28 vials, cash worth ₹ 4840, three mobile phones suspected to have been stolen, three lighters and one syringe from them.

The accused have been identified as Ajit Rabha (26), son of late Porimol Rabha and Subrato Singh (29), son of late Shyam Singh. While Rabha is a resident of Lalmati Samuguri village, Singh hails from Lalmati Tetelitol village in the Kamrup (Metro) district.

No More India-Myanmar border free movement

Amit Shah cites internal security, maintenance of demography of NE states

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: Union home minister Amit Shah on Thursday said the Centre has decided to scrap the India-Myanmar Free Movement Regime (FMR) to maintain the country's internal security and demographic structure of the northeastern states.

As the Union ministry of external affairs is currently in the process of scrapping it, the Union ministry of home affairs (MHA) has recommended the immediate suspension of FMR, Shah said.

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

"It is Prime Minister Shri @narendramodi Ji's resolve to secure our borders. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has decided that the Free Movement Regime (FMR) between India and Myanmar be scrapped to ensure the internal security of the country and to maintain the demographic structure of India's North Eastern States bordering Myanmar," Shah said on X.

The announcement came two days after Shah said India has decided to fence the entire 1,643-km-long India-Myanmar border.



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

Fencing along the border has been a persistent demand of the Imphal valley-based Meitei groups, which have been alleging that tribal militants often enter into India through the porous border.

The Meitei groups also allege that narcotics are being smuggled

into the country, taking advantage of the unfenced international border. On Tuesday, the Union home minister had said besides constructing a fence along the entire Indo-Myanmar border, a patrol track along the border will also be paved to facilitate better surveillance.

Furthermore, two pilot projects of fencing through a hybrid surveillance system are under execution. "They will fence a stretch of one km each (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

A decisive step, says Himanta

GUWAHATI, Feb 8: Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday said the Centre's decision to terminate the Free Movement Regime (FMR) is a decisive step to secure 'Bharat' and will help build a foolproof mechanism to check infiltration and insurgency in the Northeast.

"Yet another decisive step to secure Bharat! I welcome the efforts of Hon'ble Home Minister Shri @AmitShah ji to terminate the Free Movement Regime. This policy along with the ongoing fencing of the Indo-Myanmar border will help build a foolproof mechanism to check infiltration and insurgency in the Northeast", the chief minister posted on 'X' in reply to a tweet by the Union home minister.

"Under the leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri @narendramodi ji, we are witnessing long-term solutions that will bring lasting peace and progress in our region", Sarma added.

Shah had earlier posted, 'It is Prime Minister Shri @narendramodi Ji's resolve to secure our borders. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

FMR decision holds immense significance to Arunachal: Khandu

ITANAGAR, Feb 8: Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu has welcomed the Centre's decision to junk the Free Movement Regime (FMR) between India and Myanmar.

Union home minister Amit Shah on Thursday said the Centre has decided to scrap the India-Myanmar Free Movement Regime (FMR) to maintain the country's internal security and demographic structure of the northeastern states.

As the Union ministry of external affairs is currently in the process of scrapping it, the Union ministry of home affairs (MHA) has recommended the immediate suspension of FMR, Shah said.

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

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.

"Gratitude to Hon PM, Shri @narendramodi Ji & Hon Home Min, Shri @AmitShah Ji, for their steadfast commitment to safeguard our borders. The decision to revoke Free Movement Regime (FMR) between India & Myanmar holds immense significance for our internal security and demographic integrity of the North Eastern States," Khandu wrote on X.

This landmark decision signifies yet another important step in the ongoing efforts to address illegal immigration. This builds on the recent announcement by the Centre to fence the 1,643 km Indo-Myanmar border, Khandu said in another social media post.

The porous border gives easy access to various insurgent groups staying in Myanmar to carry out unsocial activities in the three eastern districts of the state – Tirap, Changlang and Longding. (PTI)

BJP-led alliance will return to power in Asaam in 2026: Himanta

GUWAHATI, Feb 8: Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday claimed the BJP-led alliance will win at least 100 of the state's 126 seats in the 2026 assembly polls, and form the third consecutive NDA government in Assam.

Replying to the Motion of Thanks on the Governor's address in the assembly, Sarma said his government has laid the foundation for a modern Assam.

"In 2026, we will not get less than 100 seats and form the government. My government's tenure of three years is not a big time, but several landmark decisions have been taken in these three years. It has been the golden period

for Assam," he claimed.

There was no movement or agitation during this period as people believed in development and progress, he said.

During Congress tenure, the number of medical colleges went up from three to six, while it has reached 25 during BJP's rule, Sarma said.

"Over 7,000 youth came out of the jungle and joined the mainstream. The number of bridges over Brahmaputra has also more than doubled in the last few years, and work for three more will start soon. We have brought those to the discussion table who wanted to divide Assam," he said. (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Foundation Day of District Press Club of Karbi Anglong observed

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Feb 8: The District Press Club of Karbi Anglong (DPCKA) on Thursday observed its 7th foundation Day at Recreation Park in Diphu with much enthusiasm.

The programme began with hoisting of its flag led by its president, Diganta Teron while condolence to the departed media persons was led by working president, Swarup Laskar.

Chief guest on the occasion, advocate of Diphu Judicial court, Sarthe Ronghi said, "Media plays a significant role in the development of our society, the news

should always be authentic and incomplete stories should always be avoided. Morals, ethics and discipline should need to be maintained by media and advocates. The roles of the judiciary and media are similar. Your actions should contribute to the welfare of the society."

He also said that reporting should have an impact on society as well as the government. Sometimes journalists are mistreated for doing an authentic story. Many journalists have lost their lives while reporting such stories. Advocate Ronghi said the law is equal for all. For any grievances (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

AAP declares candidates for Assam LS seats

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: In a sign of exasperation over lingering seat sharing talks with its INDIA bloc partner Congress, the AAP on Thursday declared party candidates for three Lok Sabha constituencies, including Guwahati in Assam. AAP national general secretary (organisation) Sandeep Pathak announced the names of party candidates Manoj Dhanohar from Dibrugarh, Bhabhon Chaudhary from Guwahati and Rishi Raj from Sonitpur.

Pathak, in a press conference at AAP headquarters here, rued that there is less time remaining for the polls and stressed that with time running out, it will become difficult to contest polls.

"The talks with INDIA bloc are going on for months. We are tired now with the talks that have been going on for months, but with no result. We have to contest the elections and win it. We do not have to contest elections just for the sake of it," Pathak said.

He, however, said the AAP stood strongly with Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) and hoped the opposition bloc will give the three seats to the AAP in Assam. "The LS polls are very close. We have to work hard for the poll preparations and a lot of work (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Arunachal assembly passes bill to create two new districts

ITANAGAR, Feb 8: The Arunachal Pradesh assembly on Thursday passed a bill by voice vote to create two new districts in the western and southern parts of the state.

Arunachal chief minister Pema Khandu introduced the Arunachal Pradesh (Re-Organisation of Districts) Amendment Bill, 2024, which paved the way for the creation of Keyi Panor and Bichom districts. With these, the total number of districts rose to 28.

Keyi Panor district with a population of over 30,000 and 195 villages will be carved out from Lower Subansiri district. It will have its headquarters at Yachuli (Ter Gapin-Sam Sath area).

Bichom district is set to be carved out from East Kameng and West Kameng districts, with Napangphung designated as the district headquarters. Encompassing an area of 2,897 square-kilometers and a population of 9,710

(as per the 2011 census), Bichom district will include 20 villages from West Kameng and 11 from East Kameng district. The state cabinet had on February 5 granted approval for the creation of the two districts for ease of administration.

In addition to the Arunachal Pradesh (Re-Organisation of Districts) Amendment Bill, 2024, the government introduced three other bills. Deputy chief minister Chowna Mein, who also holds the planning, finance and investment portfolios, introduced the Arunachal Pradesh Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (Amendment) Bill 2024.

State home minister Bamang Felix introduced the Arunachal Pradesh Lokayukta Bill 2024 in its amended form and land management minister, Nakap Nalo introduced the Arunachal Pradesh (Land Settlement and Records) (Amendment) Bill 2024. (PTI)

Construction activities created much employment opportunities: CM Sarma



GUWAHATI, Feb 8: Ongoing construction activities across Assam have created large-scale employment opportunities in the state, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said.

He also said that youths, in search of employment, were migrating to other states owing to lack of requisite skills, and taking up low-paying jobs there.

The chief minister said this while speaking at the inauguration of a skill training centre at Gogamukh in Dhemaji district on Wednesday. He stressed on the need for the state's youths to get trained in new-age and modern technical work, so that they can equip themselves for remunerative job opportunities available across the country as well as abroad.

The state government has joined hands with Larsen and Toubro (L&T) to set up the centre with the objective of enhancing the skills of registered construction workers, aligning trained resources in the construction industry, and connecting trainees with future skills and modern technology. (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Kaziranga registers over 1,79,573 tourists, revenue earning of ₹4,58,77,639 from mid-October last year till present

Record tourist flow to KNP during current season

GUWAHATI, Feb 8: The Kaziranga National Park has registered a record 1,79,573 tourists with an estimated revenue earning of ₹ 4,58,77,639 during the last three months of the current tourist season which began in mid-October, a park official said on Thursday.

The tourist flow was affected during the last two pandemic years, but this year there has been an upsurge of visitors with both travellers and wildlife enthusiasts visiting the park, particularly during the holidays, the official added.

In 2021-22, 2,55,676 tourists visited the park generating a revenue of around ₹ 5,49,78,055 while in 2022-23, 3,26,924 people visited the park generating a revenue



of around ₹7,76,07,566.

During the tourist year 2023-24, the central and western ranges were opened for tourists in mid-

October and the other two ranges were opened in late November.

The park is likely to be closed either by end of April or early May

with the onset of monsoon.

Renowned for its breathtaking landscape, rich biodiversity, and iconic inhabitants like the one-horned rhinoceros, Kaziranga has emerged as a top-choice destination for families and wildlife aficionados, the official said.

Tea tourism, offering visitors a unique opportunity to explore the region's tea culture, has also been started in the area from February and this new initiative is aimed to showcase the beauty of the area long with providing an immersive experience in the art of tea production.

The authorities have also taken up several innovative initiatives like Kazir Ronghangpi Tales, which is an (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)



NEW DELHI, Feb 8: Prime minister Narendra Modi-led government in the last Parliament session before the general elections on Thursday brought a white paper tearing into Congress-led UPA rule, saying that it had turned the Indian economy into a non-performing one through indiscriminate revenue expenditure, off budget borrowings and pile of bad debts at banks.

The 54-page document tabled in Parliament detailed how the Modi-government pull the economy from

being counted among the most fragile-five in the world to being the fastest growing and the most attractive investment destination.

Indian economy was on a "road to nowhere" in 2014 because of the multiple wrong turns taken during the 10 years of UPA rule, leaving the onus on the Modi government to deal with the challenges and restore dynamism and optimism in the economy, said the White Paper tabled by Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman.

The White Paper, highlighting the economic mismanagement by the UPA government and achievements of the 10 years of NDA rule, comes during the last session of the 17th Lok Sabha ahead of the general elections due in April-May.

The paper said, after assuming power in 2014, Modi-led government took "tough decisions" to overcome the "hydra-headed challenges" of runaway fiscal deficit, decision stasis, banking crisis, corruption and scams. The reforms undertaken by the Modi government resulted in the transition of India from the league of 'Fragile Five' to the (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Markets tumble after RBI monetary policy decision



MUMBAI, Feb 8: Equity benchmark indices tanked in late morning trade on Thursday pulled down by bank stocks, after the Reserve Bank of India's monetary policy decision.

Erasing all its early gains, the 30-share BSE Sensex fell by 746.62 points to 71,405.38. The Nifty declined 220.95 points to 21,709.55.

The Reserve Bank of India on Thursday decided to keep the key policy rate unchanged for the sixth time in a row as it maintains a tight vigil on inflation.

Announcing the bi-monthly monetary policy, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das on Thursday said the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) has decided to keep the repo rate unchanged at 6.5 per cent.

Among the Sensex firms, Axis Bank, Nestle, ICICI Bank, ITC, Maruti, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Bajaj Finance and Asian Paints were the major laggards.

PowerGrid defied the broader

market trend and jumped nearly 5 per cent after the company posted a 10.5 per cent rise in consolidated net profit to ₹ 4,028.25 crore in the December quarter, mainly on the back of higher revenues.

State Bank of India, HCL Technologies and Tata Consultancy Services were the other gainers.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo and Shanghai were trading in the positive territory while Hong Kong quoted lower.

The US markets ended with gains on Wednesday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.28 per cent to USD 79.43 per barrel.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 1,691.02 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data.

The BSE benchmark declined 34.09 points or 0.05 per cent to settle at 72,152 on Wednesday. The Nifty ended marginally up by 1.10 points or 0.01 per cent to 21,930.50. (PTI)

RBI pegs FY'25 GDP growth at 7 pc

On improved consumption demand, private capex spends

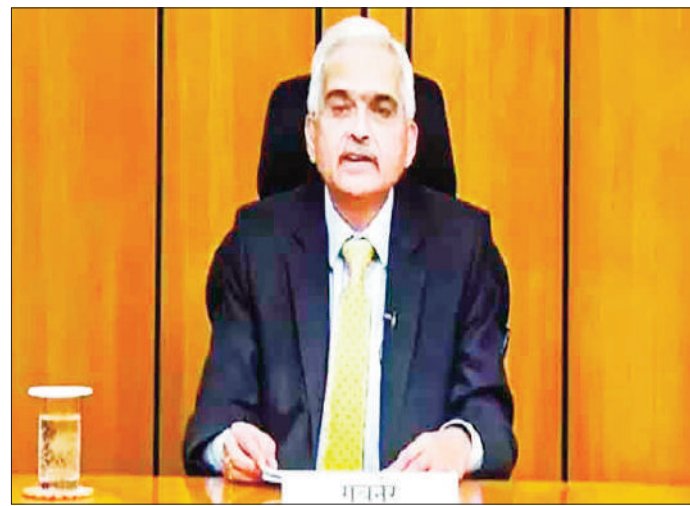
MUMBAI, Feb 8: The Reserve Bank on Thursday projected GDP growth for the next financial year at 7 per cent on the back of improved household consumption and upturn in private capex cycle.

The real GDP growth is, however, lower than 7.3 per cent estimated by the National Statistical Office (NSO) for the current 2023-24 fiscal aided by strong domestic economic activity and investments.

The Indian economy grew 7.2 per cent in 2022-23 fiscal.

In its Monetary Policy Statement, 2023-24, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das said the recovery in rabi sowing, sustained profitability in manufacturing and underlying resilience of services should support economic activity in 2024-25.

"Among the key drivers on the demand side, household consumption is expected to improve, while prospects of fixed investment remain bright owing to upturn in the private capex cycle, improved business sentiments, healthy balance



sheets of banks and corporates; and government's continued thrust on capital expenditure," Das said.

The improving outlook for global trade and rising integration in the global supply chain will support net external demand.

The RBI flagged headwinds from geopolitical tensions,

volatility in international financial markets and geo-economic fragmentation as risks to growth outlook.

"Taking all these factors into consideration, real GDP growth for 2024-25 is projected at 7 per cent with Q1 (April-June) at 7.2 per cent; Q2 at 6.8 per cent; Q3 at 7.0

per cent; and Q4 at 6.9 per cent. The risks are evenly balanced," Das said.

To keep inflation within the targeted 4 per cent (+/- 2 per cent) band, the RBI on Thursday retained benchmark interest rate or repo at 6.5 per cent.

The interest rate setting monetary policy committee (MPC) also decided to remain focused on withdrawal of accommodation to ensure that inflation progressively aligns to the target, while supporting growth.

"Global growth is likely to remain steady in 2024 after a surprisingly resilient performance in a turbulent year gone by. Inflation is edging down from multi-decade highs, with intermittent upticks," Das said.

Das said rural demand in India continues to gather pace, urban consumption remains strong and investment cycle is gaining steam on the back of increased capex.

Also, there are signs of revival in private investments. (PTI)

Gold slips ₹ 70; silver remains flat



NEW DELHI, Feb 8: Gold price slipped ₹ 70 to ₹ 63,300 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday amid a fall in precious metal prices in the overseas markets, according to HDFC Securities. The yellow metal prices had finished at ₹ 63,370 per 10 grams in the previous trade.

However, silver remained flat at ₹ 74,600 per kilogram.

HDFC Securities' Senior Analyst of Commodities Saunil Gandhi said spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at ₹ 63,300 per 10 grams, down by ₹ 70, taking cues from the overseas markets. In the international markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,029 per ounce, down by USD 4 from the previous close. However, silver was trading marginally higher at USD 22.29 per ounce. (PTI)

RBI to introduce offline e-rupee transactions soon: Das

MUMBAI, Feb 8: Digital rupee users will soon be able to execute transactions in areas with limited internet connectivity as the RBI on Thursday announced that offline capability will be introduced on the Central bank digital currency (CBDC) pilot project.

Reserve Bank of India Governor Shaktikanta Das said that programmability-based additional use cases will be introduced as part of the pilot project.

RBI launched a pilot of the retail CBDC in December 2022 and achieved the target of having 10 lakh transactions a day in December 2023. It can be noted that other payment platforms, es-

pecially the very popular Unified Payments Interface (UPI), already offer offline possibilities.

"It is proposed to introduce an offline functionality in CBDC-R (Retail) for enabling transactions in areas with poor or limited internet connectivity," Das said while announcing the bi-monthly monetary policy review.

He said multiple offline solutions, which include both proximity and non-proximity based ones, will be tested across hilly areas, rural and urban locations for the purpose.

On the programmability front, he said that currently, the system enables Person to Person (P2P)

and Person to Merchant (P2M) transactions using digital rupee wallets provided by pilot banks.

"It is now proposed to enable additional use cases using programmability and offline functionality," he said. The programmability feature will permit users like government agencies to ensure that payments are made for defined benefits, he said, adding that corporates will also be able to programme specified expenditures like business travel for their employees. Additional features like validity period or geographical areas within which CBDC may be used can also be programmed, he said. (PTI)

NO SYSTEMIC WORRIES

Persistent non-compliance led to Paytm action: RBI

MUMBAI, Feb 8: Persistent non-compliance by Paytm with the regulatory guidelines despite nudges over a period of time ultimately led to the stern action against the fintech, the RBI said on Thursday and also made it clear that there are no systemic worries.

Without disclosing specific details of what led to the action against the fintech, Governor Shaktikanta Das made it clear that Paytm's lack of compliance to regulations does not pose a systemic threat.

"There is no worry about the system at the moment. Here we are talking about a specific institution, a specific payment bank," Das told reporters at the central bank headquarters here at the customary post-policy media briefing.

Deputy Governor Swaminathan J said the January 31 action against Paytm Payments Bank, wherein the RBI has barred it from onboarding new customers, and asked to stop services related to deposits, prepaid instruments and e-wallet after February 29, was the culmination of a long series of bilateral engagement.

"This is a supervisory action on a regulated entity for persistent non-compliance. Such supervisory actions are invariably preceded by months and at times years of bilateral engagement, where we not only point out deficiencies but also provide more than adequate time for them to take corrective action," the commercial banker-turned-regulator said.

Das said it starts with "nudges" from the regulator for corrective action and sometimes the RBI may give more than sufficient time to an entity to comply, and it is lack of compliance which ultimately leads to the business restrictions order. The proportionality aspect

is taken into consideration before imposing any restriction, Das said, adding, "all our actions are in the best interest of systemic stability and protection of depositors or customers' interest."

"These aspects cannot be compromised. Individual entities should be mindful of these aspects for their long-term success."

Earlier in the day, Das' statement stressed on "good governance, robust risk management, sound compliance culture and protection of customers' interest" being of paramount importance for the Reserve Bank.

Das said there are a lot of questions and concerns in the minds of people, and the Reserve Bank will be coming out with a detailed FAQ (frequently asked questions) next week which will make things clear. When asked about the decision to impose the rather strong action of business restrictions, without going for other alternatives like appointing a director on the board as it has done in some cases in the recent past, Swaminathan said an "one size fits all kind of solution may not work in such situations."

"As a regulator, it's incumbent upon us to protect the interests of the ultimate consumer and thereby protecting the stability of the financial system," Swaminathan said. He was tightlipped about the future course of action, but promised that customers' inconvenience will be minimized.

When asked about the reasons for the action, specifically if it has been triggered by the ownership structure at Paytm or if it is limited to KYC concerns, Das declined to reveal anything about the "bilateral engagements". (PTI)

Show sensitivity to exporters in view of Red Sea crisis: Fimmin to PSU banks

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: Financial services secretary Vivek Joshi has asked public sector banks and insurance companies to deal with sensitivity the cases of trade finance and insurance to exporters who are facing problems on account of the Red Sea crisis.

"In view of the Red Sea crisis, we have asked public sector banks and insurance companies to take into consideration the problem because ships are taking a longer route resulting in demand for higher trade finance and increase in insurance cost," he told PTI in an interview.

In such a situation, he said, banks should deal those cases with sensitivity and they should not adopt a straight-jacket and deny them their services because of a long route taken by ships due to the Red Sea crisis.

"The requirement of trade financing and insurance should be dealt by them with sensitivity," he added.

He also said that a high-level inter-ministerial committee headed by the Commerce Secretary is also meeting to take stock of the situation in this regard on Thursday.

The Red Sea strait is crucial for 30 per cent of global container traffic and 12 per cent of global trade. About 80 per cent of India's merchandise trade with Europe passes through this route.

The situation around the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, a crucial shipping route for traders connecting the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean, has escalated due to attacks by Yemen-based Houthis militants since December 2023. Because of this, the shipping costs have jumped and the consignments are taking more time to reach Europe and the US as the ships are taking the Cape of Good Hope route, encircling Africa. (PTI)

Rupee settles on a flat note at 82.96 after RBI monetary policy decision

MUMBAI, Feb 8: The rupee settled on a flat note at 82.96 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, after the Reserve Bank decided to keep the key policy rate unchanged for the sixth time in a row to maintain a tight vigil on inflation. Forex traders said a negative trend in domestic equities weighed on investor sentiments.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 82.94 against the dollar and moved in a narrow range and settled for the day at 82.96 against the American currency, as the central bank retained the repo rate at 6.5 pc for the sixth consecutive time.

During the day, the rupee touched an intraday high of 82.89 and a low of 83 against the US dollar. On Wednesday, the rupee appreciated 9 paise to close at 82.96 against the dollar.

The Indian rupee remained flat as RBI maintained status quo in its monetary policy for the sixth consecutive time and left Repo Rate unchanged at 6.5 per cent, in line with street expectations.

The central bank revised FY24 GDP projections higher at 7.3 per cent from 7 per cent and projected

FY25 GDP at 7 per cent. It also projected CPI (consumer price-based inflation) in FY25 lower at 4.5 per cent.

However, the rupee lost earlier gains as domestic markets declined and US dollar also recovered.

"We expect rupee to trade with a slight negative bias on expectations that US dollar may recover amid hawkish US Fed speak and geopolitical tensions," said Anuj



Choudhary, Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas.

Israeli Prime Minister rejected a peace proposal by Hamas which may also lead to rise in crude oil prices.

However, positive global markets may support rupee at lower levels. Traders may take cues from weekly unemployment claims data from US and speeches by various Fed officials. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of ₹ 82.70 to ₹ 83.30.

Announcing the bi-monthly monetary policy, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das on Thursday said the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) will remain watchful of food inflation so that the benefits gained are not frittered away.

The RBI on Thursday projected a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of 7 per cent for 2024-25, which is lower than the 7.3 per cent expansion estimated for the current fiscal.

Das said rural demand continues to gather pace, urban consumption remains strong and investment cycle is gaining steam on the back of increased capex.

He said there are signs of revival in private investments.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.03 per cent higher at 104.08.

Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, rose 0.16 per cent to USD 79.34 per barrel.

In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex closed 723.57 points, or 1 per cent, lower at 71,428.43. The broader NSE Nifty declined 212.55 points, or 0.97 per cent, to 21,717.95. (PTI)

Rupee trading on flat note after RBI monetary policy decision

MUMBAI, Feb 8: The rupee was trading on a flat note after the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Thursday decided to keep policy rate unchanged for the sixth time in a row to maintain a tight vigil on inflation. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 82.94 against the dollar and was trading at 82.96 against the greenback, unchanged from its previous close, as the central bank retained the repo rate at 6.5 pc for the sixth consecutive time.

On Wednesday, the rupee appreciated 9 paise to close at 82.96 against the dollar.

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Das said there are signs of revival in private investments.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.05 per cent lower at 104.

Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, rose 0.30 per cent to USD 79.45 per barrel. (PTI)

Experts cautiously optimistic on RBI monetary policy

KOLKATA, Feb 8: Experts are cautiously optimistic about the Reserve Bank of India's decision to maintain the REPO rates unchanged at 6.5 per cent for the sixth consecutive time.

Siddhartha Sanyal, chief economist and head of research at Bandhan Bank, provided insights into the potential future trajectory of monetary policy.

"Status quo in the repo rate in today's MPC meeting was no surprise. Legroom for the repo rate from the current 6.50 per cent is

limited," Sanyal remarked, highlighting the cautious approach likely to be adopted by the RBI in light of global economic conditions and political events.

Sachin Marani, director of Square Feet Group and secretary of CREDAI MCHI - Thane, expressed satisfaction with the decision, highlighting the stability it brings to the market.

"We are pleased that the RBI has decided to maintain the REPO rates unchanged, considering that inflation remains above the 4 per

cent target," Marani stated.

He emphasised the need for potential relief for homebuyers and developers. Anshuman Magazine, chairman & CEO of CBRE India, South-East Asia, Middle East & Africa, pointed out the minimal impact on home loan interest rates due to the unchanged repo rate.

"The stability in interest rates is poised to motivate potential homebuyers and empower developers to plan and launch new projects with increased confidence," Magazine remarked. (PTI)

Training 75K women developers in India

Nadella announces expansion of 'Code Without Barrier' prog



BENGALURU, Feb 8: Microsoft chief Satya Nadella on Thursday announced the expansion of Microsoft's 'Code Without Barriers' programme to India, aiming to train 75,000 women developers by 2024.

The programme is to democratise access to tech skills nationwide, the chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Microsoft said, as he spoke about the impact Indian developers are making in accelerating AI inno-

vation globally during his address to 1,100 developers and technology leaders at the Microsoft AI Tour here.

"One of the things that I'm very excited also is to bring one of the initiatives which we've had called Code Without Barriers, and expanding to India and really helping 75,000 women developers by 2024," Nadella said.

According to Microsoft, "Code Without Barriers" programme will be expanded to India this month, as the company aims to democratise access to tech skills nationwide.

"The programme was launched in 2021 across nine Asia Pacific (APAC) countries to help close the gender gap in the region's fast-growing cloud, AI, and digital technology sectors.

"It provides support, training, and networking opportunities for female developers and coders, and those in other technical roles to contribute to inclusive economic

growth, encourage innovation, and reflect the region's social makeup," the statement said.

Microsoft said it will provide skilling and certification to 75,000 women developers in India in 2024 under the programme. Speaking about Siksha Copilot, which was jointly developed by Shiksha Foundation and Microsoft Research India, he said it empowers teachers.

"One of the things that I always think about is really empowering teachers because at the end of the day, if we can put tools in the hands of teachers, they have the ability, quite frankly, to inspire more students than any AI can. And so to me, having Siksha Copilot really be that tool that allows teachers to be able to do their job more effectively," the Microsoft CEO said.

AI aims to improve learning outcomes, and empower teachers to create comprehensive, age-appropriate lesson plans with personalised learning experiences.

It is powered by Azure OpenAI models and helps teachers develop a complete lesson plan with engaging content in 60 to 90 seconds instead of 60 to 90 minutes.

It is currently deployed in about 30 rural and urban schools in Bengaluru, India, and the Siksha Foundation is working with Microsoft to deploy it at scale, according to Microsoft.

Nadella said an open healthcare network in India was born on GitHub copilot AI tool, which are built on an open source EMR system and tele EMR system.

Stating that a lot of innovation was happening around Copilot, the Microsoft chief said, "India is a place where you know, what the momentum around developers and development is unbelievable."

He noted that India is number two only next to the United States in terms of total number of developers on GitHub and it's going to become number one in 2027 or 2028. (PTI)

Centre tightens wheat stock limit for wholesalers, big chain retailers & processors

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: The government on Thursday tightened wheat stock holding norms for wholesalers, big chain retailers and processors to curb hoarding and check price rises.

According to the food ministry, traders and wholesalers are now allowed to maintain wheat stock of up to 500 tonnes instead of 1,000 tonnes, while big chain retailers can hold 5 tonnes in each outlet and total 500 tonnes at all their depots instead of 1,000 tonnes.

Processors will be allowed to maintain 60 per cent instead of 70 per cent of their monthly installed capacity multiplied by the remaining months till April 2024, the ministry said in a statement.

The stock limits on wheat were imposed on June 12, 2023, applicable till March this year in order to manage the overall food security and to prevent hoarding and unscrupulous speculation.

The ministry said all wheat stocking entities are required to register on the wheat stock limit portal (<https://evegoils.nic.in/wsp/login>) and update the stock position on every Friday.

Any entity which is found to have not registered on the portal or violates the stock limits will be subject to suitable punitive action under the Essential Commodities Act, 1955.

In case the stocks held by the above entities are higher than the prescribed limit, they will have to bring the same to the prescribed stock limits within 30 days of the issue of the notification.

The ministry said officials of both central and state governments will be closely monitoring enforcement of these stock limits to ensure that no artificial scarcity of wheat is created in the country. (PTI)

Final Photo Electoral Rolls published for multiple assembly constituencies

Electoral officials conduct meetings with political representatives, emphasise voter engagement and participation

HT Correspondent
MARGHERITA, Feb 8: As per the directions of the Election Commission of India, the Final Integrated Photo Electoral Roll in respect of 83-Margherita LAC under Margherita Election District was published on Thursday.

In this connection, a meeting was held on Thursday with the representatives of different recognised political parties at the Conference Hall of SDO (Civil), Margherita by Parikshit Thoudam (IAS), district election officer, Margherita in the presence of Aditi Neog, election officer, and ERO Margherita, and other officials.

The Special Summary Revision (SSR) of the Photo Electoral Rolls for the year 2024 with the qualifying date as January 1, 2024 was conducted from December 8, 2023 to February 8, 2024 as per the schedule notified by ECI.

After the disposal of claims and objections received up to January 22, 2024, the total number of eligible electors under 83-Margherita LAC now stands at 167,232, including 82,865 males, 84,367 females, and 'nil' transgender. The total number of persons with disabilities in the final electoral roll is 735. With a total addition of 7,005 electors (M- 3,093, F- 3,912) and total deletions of 7,567 (M-3,956, F-3,611), there has been a net decrease of 562 electors in the final photo electoral roll compared to the draft electoral roll published on December 8, 2023. It is to be noted that the total number of service voters is 319.

Electors will be able to search for their names and obtain other electoral details on the voters service portal <https://www.voters.eci.gov.in>, voter helpline app, etc., or may contact their respective BLOs for detailed information. The non-photo electoral roll is also available for download on the CEO, Assam website <https://ceoaassam.nic.in/> and on

the district commissioner, Tinsukia's website www.tinsukia.assam.gov.in/ latest.

The DEO, Margherita, informed that extensive awareness activities under Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation Programme (SVEEP) were carried out during the SSR period. As part of SVEEP, special camps were organised by BLOs in their respective polling areas on four special campaign dates in December 2024 as per the instructions of CEO, Assam. Door-to-door campaigns were also undertaken by the BLOs. Furthermore, special voter enrollment camps were also organised between December 20 to December 27, 2023 through the dedicated assistant electoral registration officers (AEROs) in the educational institutions having new and future voters. Additionally, special voter registration camps for PwDs, sex workers, and transgenders were also organised on December 20, 2023. A special facilitation camp for persons rehabilitated from Laika Village (under Chabua LAC) and now shifted to Namphai-Laika Village of 83-Margherita LAC was also facilitated during the period. DEO, Margherita requested all members present and various stakeholders for giving wide publicity regarding the publication of the Final Photo Electoral Roll-2024.

Our Nagaon correspondent adds: As per the directive of the Election Commission of India, the final electoral rolls for LACs 55 Dhim, 56 Rupahat, 58 Samaguri, 59 Barhampur, 60 Nagaon-Batadroba, and 61 Raha under the Nagaon Election District have been published in connection with the special summary revision of electoral rolls for 2023-24.

The names of 13,12,144 electors, among whom 6,57,768 are males and 6,54,298 are females in those six LACs,



have been enrolled in the new electoral rolls published on Thursday, as per a release.

Our Hojai correspondent adds: The final photo electoral rolls for Hojai Election District, with January 2024 as the qualifying date, were published at all designated locations under LACs 62-Binnakandi, 63-Hojai, and 64-Lumding. The final electoral roll was officially published at a meeting with nationalised and state recognised political parties held at the new conference hall of the DC Office at Sankardevnagar in Hojai on Thursday, in the presence of district commissioner Lachit Kumar Das, superintendent of police Krishan Jyoti Deka, ADC Sonakshree Bramha, Rakshishree Lakharu, DIPRO (i/c), Sneha Bhargali, ALRS, circle officer, Doboka, Nilakhi Baishya, ACS, circle officer, Hojai, Aparupa Borgohain, ACS, circle officer, Lanka, and other officials of the Election Department, as well as representatives of political parties.

According to the final photo electoral roll 2024, the total voters in Hojai Election District are 735,729, out of which

374,554 are males, 361,166 are females, and 9 are third gender. In Binnakandi LAC, the total voters are 253,490, out of which 129,929 are males, 123,555 are females, and 6 are third gender, with a total of 262 polling stations and 49 service voters, of which 48 are male and 1 is female. In Hojai LAC, the total voters are 243,564, out of which 123,895 are males, 119,668 are females, and 1 is third gender, with a total of 280 polling stations and 548 service voters, of which 545 are male and 3 are female. In Lumding LAC, there are 238,675 total voters, out of which 120,730 are males, 117,943 are females, and 2 are third gender, with 272 polling stations and 231 service voters, of which 229 are male and 2 are female.

Our Gossaigaon correspondent adds: The final electoral rolls with photos for the two assembly constituencies, namely No 1 Gossaigaon and No 5 Parbatjhora, under the District Election Office, Gossaigaon, have been published on Thursday in Gossaigaon.

The final electoral rolls were published in a press meet held at the conference hall of SDO-Civil Office on Thursday, with

Aranyak Saikia, returning officer cum SDO-Civil, Gossaigaon, in the chair.

As per the information available here, a total of 1,13,282 voters, including 56,209 female voters, are included in the list as against 57,073 male voters in No 1 Gossaigaon Assembly constituency.

Similarly, in the newly created Parbatjhora constituency, a total of 1,68,251 voters, including 85,992 males and 82,259 female voters, will be able to exercise their franchise.

On the other hand, in the press meet, it was reported that polling will be held in 149 polling booths in the newly created No 1 Gossaigaon LAC instead of 245, and in No 5 Parbatjhora, there will be 217 polling booths instead of 283 polling stations.

Our Jorhat correspondent adds: As per the directive of the Election Commission of India (ECI), along with other districts of the state, the final Electoral Roll of four assembly constituencies of Jorhat district was published on Thursday.

Addressing the media at the conference hall of the District Commissioner's Office here on Thursday evening, Jorhat district commissioner Pulak Mahanta, who is also the district election officer, stated that the total number of voters in 99-Teok assembly constituency is 192,206, out of which 94,545 are male and 97,661 are female, while there are no individuals registered under the third gender category. The number of polling stations in Teok is 242.

Mahanta said that the total number of voters in the 100-Jorhat constituency is 146,731, out of which 70,894 are male and 75,837 are female, with no individuals registered under the third gender category. The number of polling stations in Jorhat is 176. The DC stated that altogether 10,164 new voters (Teok- 5,655, Jorhat- 4,509) have been included in the

final electoral roll. He informed that since December 8, 2023, when the draft electoral roll was published, the district administration received 32,066 applications regarding claims and objections, out of which 30,101 were found to be valid.

Mahanta, after briefing about the Draft Electoral Roll, handed over copies of the roll of the constituencies to representatives of different political parties.

Meanwhile, the total number of voters in the 101-Mariani constituency is 162,598, out of which 80,160 are male and 82,438 are female, as informed by a Jorhat district administration official.

The total number of voters in the 102-Titabar constituency is 195,719, out of which 95,349 are male and 100,370 are female. Altogether 8,365 new voters have been included in the final electoral roll of both constituencies.

Our Tezpur correspondent adds: The final voter list for five constituencies including Tezpur, Barchala, Rangapara, Nduar, and Dhekiajuli in Sonitpur district was officially announced at the conference hall of Sonitpur District Commissioner's Office, with representatives from all political parties present. The list includes 951,285 individuals, with only 763 names removed compared to the provisional list. Notably, 6,359 specially-abled individuals have been included in the lists for Tezpur, Barchala, Rangapara, Nduar, and Dhekiajuli constituencies.

District commissioner Deba Kumar Mishra highlighted efforts to include them and ensure smooth voting on polling day. Additionally, 14,390 'D voters' were included after scrutiny, while 9,911 names of deceased voters were removed. The press conference organised for the occasion was attended by representatives from BJP, AGP, NCP, and Rajdar.

Sixth Schedule council officials foster collaborative capacity building at BTC



HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, Feb 8: Representative officials from seven Autonomous District Councils (ADC) of the north-eastern state's Sixth Schedule visited the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and its Secretariat, Bodofa Nwgr, in Kokrajhar on Wednesday. They shared knowledge and information regarding capacity building under the ongoing program on autonomous district councils' financing and resource planning.

The representative officials of the Sixth Schedule included the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council, Khasi Hills Autonomous

District Council, Garo Autonomous District Council, Mara Autonomous District Council, Lai Autonomous District Council, and Chakma Autonomous District Council.

The team was led by Dr MK Srivastava, programme director at the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR). They held several meetings with government officials of the Bodoland Territorial Region.

An interactive session was held between the different Sixth Schedule Councils and the BTC government aimed at strengthening

resources and funding for comprehensive rural development. Several pertinent matters were discussed deeply, including building cooperation, strengthening communication, jointly preparing suggestions on the Sixth Schedule Amendment Bill, submitting them to the Centre, having joint representation in the Centre, establishing a coordination Secretariat in Guwahati/New Delhi, and knowledge sharing and learning from each other on various subjects.

The meeting was graced by deputy chief executive member of Bodoland Territorial Region, Gobinda Chandra Basumaty, BTR executive member Ranjit Basumaty, principal secretary Akash Deep, and other senior government officials from BTC, including block development officers (BDOs).

Deputy CEM Basumaty stated that the program was a commendable initiative for sharing knowledge and capacity building on the financing and development of Sixth Schedule councils.

Justice BP Saraf Memorial Inter College Debate Competition organised



HT Correspondent
HOJAI, Feb 8: The Purbottar Pradesh Marwari Yuva Manch (PPMYM), a non-profit voluntary youth organisation, organised the finale of the inaugural edition of the Justice BP Saraf Memorial Inter College Debate Competition in Guwahati on Wednesday. The competition paid homage to the late Justice BP Saraf, a former Chief Justice of the Jammu and Kashmir High Court, and a noted jurist and philanthropist, known as a great son of Assam.

The competition aimed to provide a platform for young debaters from various colleges across North East India to showcase their oratory skills and express their views on diverse topics of contemporary relevance. The competition was the brainchild of Om Prakash Aggarwal, the former provincial president and former NVP of the All India Marwari Yuva Manch, who envisioned a debate show fostering intellectual discourse and critical thinking among the youth.

Coordinated by project chairman and PTA vice president Devesh Munda and PTA convener Prachi Harlalka, the competition saw diligent efforts to make the event a suc-

cess. Supported by all branches of the Marwari Yuva Manch, which hosted preliminary rounds in their respective locations, the competition commenced at Gauhati Commerce College Auditorium on Tuesday, and concluded on Wednesday, at KBR Auditorium, Cotton University. The grand finale was jointly organised by the Guwahati Samridhhi and Guwahati Professional branches.

Eminent personalities from various fields attended the grand finale as judges. The chief guest was Malay Barua, a retired IAS officer and distinguished administrator. The special guest was Tirthanka Das Kalita, the regional intellectual head of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Invited guests included Swapnil Barua, another retired IAS officer, Professor Sudeshna Bhatnagar, the head of the Sanskrit department of Guwahati University, Dr Niranjan Kalita, the head of Sri-manta Sankardev University, and Dr Radheshyam Tiwari, the principal of BMBB College. Valuable guidance was provided by Diganta Biswa Sarma, a Sahitya Akademi Award-winning writer and speaker, who mentored the participants throughout the competition. The

program was attended by many executive members of the Purbottar Pradesh Marwari Yuva Manch and various branches of MYM Guwahati.

The welcome speech was delivered by Babita Mittal, the president of the Guwahati Samridhhi branch. The vote of thanks was given by CA Ekta Garodia Aggarwal, the secretary of the Guwahati Samridhhi branch.

The competition witnessed a fierce battle of words among the finalists on various topics of current relevance. Drishti Barua from North Lakhimpur University was awarded the best debater or the first prize for her eloquence and logic. The runner-up prize was shared by Chayanika Bora from Sibsagar College and Niskamona Asomiya from Royal Global University, who displayed remarkable skills and confidence. The third prize was awarded to three debaters: Mintu Deka from Gauhati University, Sabnam Suhana from Ajmal Foundation, Hojai, and Pradipta Roy from Gauhati Commerce College, for their commendable performances.

The competition received overwhelming appreciation from all participants and guests, who praised the Marwari Yuva Manch for organising such a meaningful and enriching event. They expressed hope that the competition would continue in the future, inspiring more young minds to participate and excel. This information was provided by PPMYM PRO coordinator Nikhil Kumar Munda.

Livestock owners receive free medical services

HT Correspondent
NAGAON, Feb 8: The Nagaon Sadar Veterinary Hospital, in collaboration with the Pathori Veterinary Health Sub Centre, organised an Animal Health Fair under the Self Priority Fund 2023-24 at Bhutai-Pathori last Wednesday.

The fair was inaugurated by Dr Avindam Garg, who addressed attendees on proper livestock management practices and provided guidance on medical care during seasonal diseases affecting domestic animals such as cows, goats, and poultry.

Veterinary physicians from the Nagaon Veterinary Hospital, including Dr Mustafizur Ahmed and Dr Abhishek Anand, distributed free medicines for various ailments affecting livestock. They also conducted medical treatments for animals during the fair. Local animal breeders welcomed the initiative undertaken by the Veterinary Department and expressed their hope for similar programs to be conducted in the future. This initiative aims to promote better animal health practices and support livestock breeders in the region.

Guwahati IASST spearheads innovative approach to snakebite management

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 8: The Institute of Advanced Study in Science and Technology (IASST), Guwahati, organised a pioneering event on Thursday featuring a 'Continuous Medical Education (CME)' session. This exclusive gathering aimed to provide a collaborative platform to tackle the complex challenges of managing snakebite incidents, declared a neglected tropical disease by the WHO in 2017. Snakebite is a medical emergency and requires immediate attention. In collaboration with the Indian Medical Association, Assam Chapter, the CME session centered on the 'Snakebite Problem and Hospital Management' theme. The event brought together a diverse array of experts and clinicians, all focused on delving into the dynamics of medical management, particularly concerning effective strategies for addressing snakebite cases.

Groundbreaking achievement marks new era in cancer treatment

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 8: In a groundbreaking development, Apollo Cancer Centres (ACCs) has emerged as the first private hospital group in India to successfully complete a CAR-T cell program. To further augment this achievement, the group will now provide access to 'Made in India' CAR-T cell therapy, starting with NexCAR19™ (Acalytagene autoleucel), for the treatment of B-cell lymphomas and B-acute lymphoblastic leukemia in patients aged 15 years and above.

CAR-T cell therapies, often referred to as 'living drugs,' involve the extraction of a patient's T-cells (a type of white blood cells responsible for fighting cancer cells) through a process called Apheresis. These T-cells are then genetically modified in a controlled laboratory setting using a safe vehicle (viral vector) to express modified connectors called Chimeric Antigen Receptors (CARs) on their surface. These CARs are designed to recognise specific proteins expressed on certain cancer cells. The modified T-cells are then multiplied to the desired dose and infused directly into the patient.

CAR-T cell therapies have gained global recognition for their unprecedented success in transforming the lives of patients with challenging B-cell malignancies. Over 25,000 patients worldwide have benefited from this therapeutic model.

Dr Anupam Chakrapani, senior consultant - Hematology & BMT Specialist at ACC, Kolkata, stated, "The successful treatment of three patients using CAR-T Cell therapy at the commercial level represents a significant leap forward in our fight against B-cell lymphomas and acute lymphoblastic leukemia. These cases underscore the efficacy and potential of this transformative therapy in providing new hope for patients facing these challenging conditions."

Regarding the success of the program, he added, "Having successfully treated patients with imported drugs, we are now poised to treat them with indigenously built therapy."

Dr Rajat Bhattacharyya, senior consultant - Pediatric Hematology at ACC, Kolkata, emphasised, "The successful implementation of CAR-T Cell therapy represents a pivotal moment in the advancement of cancer treatment in India. Treating patients with this revolutionary therapy showcases the potential and efficacy of this transformative approach in addressing challenging B-cell malignancies."

Rana Dasgupta, CEO Eastern Region, ACC Kolkata, Apollo Hospitals Enterprises Limited, commented, "Embarking on a pioneering journey, Apollo Cancer Centres has achieved a remarkable feat in the realm of cancer treatment. With successful treatments, our commitment to advancing CAR-T Cell Therapy is unwavering. Being the first private hospital in India to achieve success in this transformative therapy sets a new benchmark, reinforcing our dedication to groundbreaking healthcare."

Apollo Cancer Centres has consistently introduced pioneering medical infrastructure and achieved numerous milestones in the Indian medical community. The introduction of CAR-T Cell therapy represents a new era for cancer treatment in the country, offering renewed hope and possibilities to patients battling these conditions.

Senior journalist launches two new books

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 8: In a gathering held at the Guwahati Press Club, two books authored by senior journalist and writer Bijoy Lakshmi Baruah were unveiled on Thursday. The books titled 'Sangbad, Sangbadikiata Aru Sangbadik' and 'Mukhar Aarar Mukh' were introduced amidst esteemed guests and fellow journalists.

Baruah, while elucidating the contents of her books, emphasised the increasing significance of the media in contemporary society. She highlighted the crucial role of journalists and stated that her works are intended to benefit individuals engaged in journalism and social life alike.

Renowned writer Hrishikesh Goswami, who released the books, praised Baruah's insightful articles, noting their relevance for aspiring journalists. He commended her ability to address pertinent issues in her writings.

Guwahati to host three-day national seminar on puppetry

Renowned personalities to lead discussions and presentations

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 8: Surojit Academy, located on the premises of Assam Engineering College, Guwahati, has been actively promoting the folk art of Assam among children and youth through seminars, workshops, and conferences conducted in schools, colleges, and universities. Continuing this tradition, the Academy is organising a three-day national level seminar and conference on 'Glory of Puppet and its Social Importance' on February 16, 17 and 19 at 10:30 am at the auditorium of West Guwahati College of Education.

The program will be inaugurated by renowned actor, director, and playwright Prabhat Goswami, with Dr Gitanjali



Chowdhury, principal of WGCE, as the chief guest. Sangeet Natak Akademi awardee Sudeep Gupta will present a paper on 'History and Origin of Puppets'.

Following this, at 1 pm, Vasudeva Putola Nach from Nalbari will present 'Sri Krishna Janmashtami'.

On the second day, February 17 at 10:30 am, there will be a presentation on 'Contemporary Puppet of India' by Sangeet Natak Akademi awardee Sudeep Gupta. Binita Devi, a resource person of puppetry, will present a paper on 'The Role of Puppetry in Education'. At 1 pm, Surojit Academy will perform the puppet play 'Ravana Badha' written by Simanta Sarma and directed by Binita Devi.

On the third day, February 19 at 10:30 am, renowned actor and director Dayal Krishna Nath will deliver a lecture on 'Folk theatre of Assam and its social impact: With special reference to Puppetry'.

Simanta Sarma, senior fellowship awardee from the Ministry of Culture, will then deliver a lecture on 'Special Impact of Puppetry on Children's Education'. At 1 pm, the puppet group 'Ma Tripureshwari Putola Theatre' from Tripura will perform Raja Harichandra directed by Suresh Das.

Students and research scholars are welcome to join the national seminar, which will be held on February 16 at 9:30 am at West Guwahati College of Education auditorium, Pandu Temple Ghat, Guwahati. For further details, interested individuals can contact Binita Devi, Surojit Academy, Assam Engineering College Campus, Amar Path, Jalukbari, Guwahati -13, Mobile 9435042348. There are no registration fees for participation.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Attitudes are more important than facts.
-George MacDonald

Strengthening India's Defence

In a strategic move to bolster India's aerial defence capabilities, Russia has expedited the delivery of the advanced S-400 system to the Indian Air Force (IAF), brushing aside concerns raised by Western sources regarding potential delays. Underlining India's commitment to fortifying its air defence, the government, and the IAF inked a significant deal with Russia back in 2018, earmarking a staggering sum of approximately ₹ 35,000 crore for the acquisition of five squadrons of the S-400 air defence system. The S-400's efficacy stems from its diverse array of missiles, each tailored to address specific threat scenarios. Ranging from short to long distances, these missiles form a formidable defence shield, capable of neutralizing a wide spectrum of airborne threats. Notably, the system's capability to detect stealth aircraft, including the much-touted Lockheed Martin-produced F-35, underscores its adaptability and sophistication in countering modern aerial challenges. Retired Group Captain Uttam Kumar Devnath aptly emphasizes the paramount importance of safeguarding India's airspace, citing the necessity for a robust Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) system capable of intercepting various airborne threats. While lauding India's strides in cultivating indigenous defence technologies, exemplified by the Akash air defence system, Devnath underscores the imperative for a multi-layered defence approach to address evolving security dynamics.

India's ambitious Project Kusha, aimed at developing a Long-Range Surface-to-Air Missile (LR-SAM) system by 2028-2029, signifies a leap towards self-reliance in defence technology. Drawing inspiration from the acclaimed Israeli 'Iron Dome' system, the indigenous LR-SAM aims to fortify India's defence architecture against a myriad of threats, spanning from conventional aircraft to precision-guided munitions. The recent approval for the acquisition of indigenous variants of the 'Iron Dome' system further underscores India's resolve to bolster its defence capabilities through strategic collaborations. This landmark decision, backed by substantial investment and collaborative efforts with international partners, reflects India's proactive stance in fortifying its national security infrastructure. Russia's steadfast support as India's reliable defence partner is evident in the swift delivery of three S-400 squadrons, with the remaining two expected by year-end. Strategically positioned across India's geographical expanse, these squadrons serve as vital bulwarks against potential threats emanating from both eastern and western borders. Beyond its role as a mere surface-to-air missile system, the S-400 epitomizes a comprehensive defence ecosystem, comprising integrated radars, command centres, and sophisticated missile systems. Its robust architecture, fortified by electronic warfare capabilities, underscores its efficacy in safeguarding Indian airspace against diverse aerial threats.

As India navigates complex geopolitical terrain, investments in cutting-edge defence technologies like the S-400 are imperative to deter potential adversaries and safeguard national interests. The S-400's deployment heralds a new era in India's defence paradigm, underscoring the nation's unwavering commitment to securing its skies and defending its sovereignty. Each launch vehicle has four tubes with anti-aircraft missiles ready to be launched. These missiles are capable of intercepting targets that fly at different distances and altitudes. The operation of guiding and firing these missiles is fully automated, following directives issued by the command-and-control centre. The S-400 missile system is capable of launching four distinct missile types, encompassing the 9M96E, which has a reach of 40 km; 9M96E2 with a reach of 120 km; 48N6, which can target up to 250 km away; and 40N6E, designed for distances up to 400 km.

Two years into the Ukraine war, Europe has no clue for ceasefire

After ratcheting up pressure on Hungary in recent weeks, European leaders have convinced premier Viktor Orbán to stop blocking a crucial extension of aid for Ukraine's war effort. The deal emerged from a meeting of the European Council in Brussels this Thursday, where European Union (EU) heads of government agreed on an aid package in the form of a four-year, €50 billion lifeline to Ukraine.

With the Russia-Ukraine conflict descending into a near-hopeless war of attrition in recent months, support for Kyiv from the United States and Europe has appeared increasingly fragile. In Washington, Ukraine funding is caught in the mire of Republican efforts to exact steep concessions from congressional Democrats and the Biden administration on immigration.

The EU debate also saw Ukraine become a bargaining chip. Orbán's far-right government, which has faced a series of fiscal sanctions from Brussels for its attacks on civil society and the judiciary, has been desperate for leverage over EU planners in its efforts to unwind frozen EU funds destined for Hungary as part of the bloc's recent stimulus packages.

The European Council had last met to discuss Ukraine funding in December, when Hungary blocked an agreement. This came despite the body's move to free up €10 billion for Budapest, nominally on the grounds that Orbán had made progress in acceding to EU demands for liberal political reforms as EU officials alleged, although it was not hard to see geopolitical priorities trumping concerns about rule of law.

However, this olive branch from the European

Commission only served to clear the Hungarian veto during a vote on granting Ukraine candidacy status for EU membership. Orbán left the room during the final tally, effectively abstaining from a vote that would otherwise have been vetoed by the opposition of a single member state.

In the lead-up to this Thursday's meeting, EU officials had threatened drastic retaliatory measures against Hungary if it persisted in blocking a new European aid package requiring unanimous approval. According to the Financial Times, Commission officials were drawing up plans to provoke a run on the Hungarian currency, the forint.

Orbán at first dismissed what he called "blackmail" from Brussels, but those threats appear to have been successful. The Hungarian premier retreated to the less ambitious demand that an annual vote be held on the Ukraine funding package. In the final agreement that emerged on Thursday, this was reduced to an annual debate with the possibility for a substantive review after two years.

The EU's securing of Ukraine funding should be cause for relief. There is much to be said about the deeper causes that made Russia's full-fledged invasion possible, but Ukraine's war (since 2014, and especially since it caught the full attention of Europe and the United States from February 2022) is categorically defensive, preventing a re-ordering of borders by Russian tanks. The aid that has already been delivered has helped prevent the collapse of Ukraine in the face of a foreign invasion. Securing a financing package over four years will insulate that support from the political vicissitudes of an EU lumbering



from crisis to crisis.

But another round of propping up Ukraine's defenses will not make up for the glaring absence of

DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Harrison Stetler

a serious strategic debate about where this conflict is going and what is to be expected of Europe's investment in it. Instead, there has been much chest thumping and finger wagging — both at Orbán, deemed the EU's own Vladimir Putin, or indeed anyone lured by so-called "Ukraine fatigue."

Publicly, Ukraine's backers have long insisted that only Kyiv will decide the terms and content of negotiations with Russia, whenever they are eventually held. EU powers are by no means obliging in this conflict, even though they have made Ukraine's self-defense into their own national interest. Yet by extending substantial backing they should at least be discussing what can be expected or hoped for from their engagement in the conflict. After two years of interstate war, however, talk about the contours of a possible settlement is nowhere to be found in mainstream coverage and political debate.

"We call on friends and partners of Ukraine to recommit to sustainable long-term support for

Ukraine as a joint European responsibility," five EU heads of government, including German chancellor Olaf Scholz, wrote in a public letter on the eve of the EU Council meeting in Brussels. "Russia doesn't wait for anybody and we need to act now. If Ukraine loses, the long-term consequences and costs will be much higher for all of us."

The aid package secured on Thursday is no doubt crucial for helping Ukraine to not lose this conflict. European — and possibly US — aid will help check further Russian advances, but it's been largely unable to fundamentally tip the scales of the conflict. Today, it's increasingly unclear just what a Ukrainian victory could look like. As the Ukrainian military's own commander-in-chief, Valery Zaluzhny, told the Economist in November, the war has arrived at a "stalemate." Zaluzhny is rumored to be facing a possible removal from command as a result of his souring relationship with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

When I spoke with the veteran French international relations specialist Bertrand Badie this time last winter, he argued that the first year of the war and the failure of Russia's initial blitzkrieg demonstrated the limits of military power for achieving concrete political objectives. One year later, those

observations offer useful lessons about the disappointments of Ukraine's own counteroffensive — and caution for those expecting maximalist results from the current and future aid packages. Since Ukraine's last major successes in late 2022, when Russia's demoralized army retreated from Kharkiv in the northeast or Kherson in the southwest, the conflict has been largely stuck. For months, the reports of Ukraine's offensive, or the occasional Russian counter-maneuvre, have been measured in hundreds of meters of land taken by either side through brutal trench warfare.

The EU's strategic wading is especially jarring given that the bloc may find itself even more isolated as soon as this November. Planners in Brussels could of course hope that institutional inertia in the Pentagon and the State Department will check any Trumpian desire to withdraw US backing for Ukraine (and resolve the conflict in a day, as the former president has said). But these calculations are based on a lot of wishful thinking. Donald Trump's very possible return to power casts serious doubt over continued US support for Ukraine. And Europe is dangerously lacking in partners elsewhere.

After all, wavering US interest and engagement is only one part of the

provincialization of the Russo-Ukrainian War, which is perhaps the greatest advantage that Vladimir Putin has gained since February 2022. In this, Europeans also have themselves to blame. Beyond checking any further Russian advances, an actual settlement advantageous to Ukraine will only come with intense diplomatic pressure from the world beyond Washington or the capitals of Western Europe — just those actors from which Europe has isolated itself even further in the months since Israel launched its own full-scale invasion of Gaza.

This week has really had two funding dramas, which together perfectly encapsulate European incoherence. Before eking out an agreement with Hungary on Ukraine funding, would-be defenders of international law like France, Germany, and the EU have pulled the plug and suspended aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), following allegations from Israel that a handful of its workers had participated in the Hamas-led October 7 attack.

Europe's case for Ukraine has been made in the name of international law, in opposition to a flagrantly illegal land grab by Russia. But those claims fall on deaf ears when people around the world consider the bloc's hollow and muted criticism of Israeli war crimes. The International Court of Justice's hearings on Russia's invasion of Ukraine were hailed by Western leaders; South Africa's own case against Israel for genocide has received prurish and curt replies from European capitals. In a global situation in which they are no longer able to force their desired outcome, Europeans can no longer afford such inconsistencies. (IPA Service)

Manipur: Challenges and controversies in restoring peace

By: Dipak Kurni

Over the last nine months, Manipur has witnessed a distressing miscarriage of justice. Communities have been displaced, numerous lives have been extinguished, and several women have endured unspeakable acts of sexual violence. One can envision the poignant image of the sangai, the renowned dancing deer of Kangleipak (ancient Manipur), and shedding tears in response to these harrowing events.

The attempt to restore normalcy in the state appears perplexing due to its ad hoc nature. Amidst the widening ethnic divide, the most disconcerting aspect is the state's acquiescence to the unchecked influence of the Arambai Tenggol, a radical outfit. These modern-day 'dart-wielding horsemen' have taken it upon themselves to be the guardians of Meitei supremacy, adding an unsettling layer to the unfolding situation. The state's endeavor to reinstate normalcy unfolds in a bewildering, ad hoc manner. Amidst the deepening ethnic divide, a disconcerting development emerges as the state permits the unhindered influence of the Arambai Tenggol, a radical faction. These contemporary 'dart-wielding horsemen' from ancient times have self-proclaimed as the defenders of Meitei supremacy, introducing a troubling dynamic to the ongoing situation.

On the 24th of January, the leader of the group, Koroungba Khuman, convened 37 legislators and two Members of Parliament from the Imphal valley. Under duress, he compelled them to swear an oath in the presence of Manipur's ancient deity, Pakhangba, pledging to 'safeguard Manipur.'

Though not an entirely unprecedented occurrence in the North-East, reminiscent of the vigilantism displayed by the All Assam Students' Union and the United Liberation Front of Asom in their prime, the current wave of reprimand witnessed in the valley is undeniably disconcerting. Certain demands imposed on elected representatives to convey to New Delhi hold merit, such as the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Manipur and the fortification of the border with Myanmar. The latter proposition, although requiring a

reevaluation of the Free Movement Regime, stands as a valid consideration.

Yet, requests like the removal of the Assam Rifles, annulment of the Suspension of Operations (SoO) pact with Kuki militants, and the exclusion of 'alleged' Kuki immigrants from the Scheduled Tribe list are laden with peril. The occurrence of the Kangle Fort incident in such close proximity to a visit by a three-member Union Government team to Imphal adds an extra layer of disquiet. Some well-informed individuals are raising questions about whether the events at Kangle had the tacit approval of the Centre, given its conspicuous silence both in the lead-up to the incident and in the aftermath.

Though initially a localized arrangement, the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with Kuki militants was officially established on August 22, 2008, following due procedures by the Ministry of Home Affairs. The clashes between the Meiteis and Kukis on May 3, 2023, were triggered by these events. The SoO mechanism faces criticism for various reasons, including the allowance for the retention of arms, which are now being wielded against the Meitei community and security forces.

The Union Government must be held accountable for this unacceptable oversight. The historical pattern of ceasefire agreements with militant groups in the North-East reveals a recurring issue where illegal arms are permitted to be retained. This leniency was also extended to the former Bodo Liberation Tigers in Assam, highlighting a pattern of questionable concessions.

On the flip side, it's undeniable that while the Kukis were permitted to keep their arms, post the events of May 3, organizations like Arambai Tenggol and various Meitei groups unabashedly plundered police armories. These very weapons, obtained without restraint, are now wielded to intimidate, injure, and even take the lives of Kukis.

Engaging in a dialogue process, if it contributes to even a modest reduction in violence, is a commendable objective. Consequently, New Delhi should firmly reject any consideration of nullifying an arrangement that has endured for a substantial 15 years. Considerable negotiations, extensive efforts, and dili-

gent bridge-building have been invested in solidifying such agreements. Discretion and adherence to the rule of law should steer any necessary adjustments. Priority should be given to a rearguard action, emphasizing the rigorous enforcement of the Suspension of Operations (SoO) ground rules.

Similarly, the matter of 'illegal' migrants within the Kuki population demands careful consideration. While there may be 'new Kukis,' such as Thadous in Manipur, it's important to recognize that there are also Meiteis who practice Christianity. Hence, it would be erroneous to adopt a simplistic perspective on these issues. In any case, if an National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise with 1951 as the cut-off year is initiated, as proposed by Arambai Tenggol, the issue of illegal migration would naturally be addressed.

The insistence on removing the Assam Rifles from the valley is an absurd demand. If Arambai Tenggol perceives the Assam Rifles as being biased and hence advocates for their expulsion from Manipur, it is likely due to the resolute actions taken by the personnel against insurgent groups based in the valley, such as the United Liberation Front (Koirang), People's Liberation Army (Manipur), and the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak. This collective, known as the Group of Five, primarily comprises individuals from the Meitei community.

Furthermore, it is an established fact that the Assam Rifles has taken decisive actions against Kuki militants. Disparaging remarks about a force that originated as the 'Chachar Levy' in 1835, and has earned the title of the 'Sentinels of the North-East,' are unjustified.

It's disheartening to see a segment of the citizenry clamoring for the removal of a force that has made significant sacrifices for Manipur, especially as the republic marks its 75th year. This sentiment reflects poorly on the nation's commitment to unity and collective well-being. The radicalization embodied by Arambai Tenggol must be curtailed at its inception. The Indian republic cannot afford to be a passive spectator to such a blatant disregard for authority. (The writer can be reached at dipaknews@icloud.com)

Fear of Modi's ED makes Mamata oppose Rahul, deride India in public

By Arun Srivastava

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee seems to be in a pickle. As per political grapevine, nearly 14 more ministers, legislators and senior leaders of her Trinamool Congress are in the waiting list of Narendra Modi-led pre-poll vendetta, to be arrested by the ED over the next two months, well before the Lok Sabha elections.

After the former Jharkhand CM Hemant Sorens' arrest, TMC chief Mamata Banerjee herself had expressed apprehension that more opposition leaders might have to go to jail ahead of the Lok Sabha polls and that in case she too was sent to jail, she would somehow come out of it. She had even said: "All would be put behind bars by way of intimidation. Bear in mind that to win the election, all are being sent to jail." At present, at least five senior leaders and ministers in TMC, including Partha Chatterjee, Jyoti Priya Mallick, Kuntal Ghosh, Manik Bhattacharya and the heavyweight Anubrata Mondal, have been lodged in jail for months. They were arrested in connection with the School Service Commission recruitment scam, ration distribution scam and alleged involvement in cattle smuggling.

The name of Mamata's nephew, Abhishek Banerjee, the de facto number two in the organisation, tops the list of the 14 leaders who are likely to be arrested. ED has already raided the residences and offices of most of these leaders. They are implicated in various cases involving cattle smuggling, coal smuggling, etc. The name of MP and film star Nusrat Jahan also features in the rumours. ED, at the insistence of Modi and Amit Shah, is determined to paralyse TMC, robbing it of its top leaders and faces, just ahead of the Lok Sabha election. Sources maintain that this time the ED will descend on the scene with a huge armed posse and will not deter in using brute force in case any attempt is made to resist their actions.

Of course, Mamata Banerjee has expressed her anger against the political system: "Are we all thieves and they are all saints? They are the biggest of the thieves. Today they are in power and that is why they are roaming around with agencies. Tomorrow they will not be in power and everything will fall

flat." However, critics, academics and intellectuals blame the Bengal CM for the current situation. They look at her jibe at the Congress and especially Rahul Gandhi as her tactics to keep Modi happy. But it does not appear to be yielding any result. Strangely, ED has simply intensified its raids in the last few days. Mamata's desperation to be on the right side of Modi is also construed in her statement made while she was on 48-hour dharna demanding release of funds from Modi. Instead of attacking Modi, she directed her attack at Rahul and Congress. She accused the Congress of wooing the Muslim vote.

She reiterated her pledge not to contest the Lok Sabha election under the INDIA bloc. She said that she would go alone. She accuses Rahul of ignoring her. Incidentally, she did not choose to hide her estrangement from Congress. Instead, she claims it publicly and cautions her workers and cadres against the design of the Congress. From her protest dharna dais, she openly accused Rahul: "They have come to do a programme in Bengal, but did not even inform me as an INDIA member. I got to know through administrative sources. They had called Derek (O'Brien) to request that the rally be allowed to pass through. Why come to Bengal then?" In Jharkhand, Rahul, on the other hand, said: "Mamataji too is saying that she is in the alliance, we too are saying we are in the alliance. Negotiation on seats is under way. It will be resolved." He has preferred to eschew criticism of her upon entering Bengal despite Mamata's attack on Congress and on him.

There is no secret that by targeting the Congress, she intends to convey a message to Modi. This is the impression that the social and political circles nurse. Her attack showed disrespect, in sharp contrast, Rahul has been quite guarded and never speaks ill of Mamata openly. Even Jairam Ramesh, in charge of communications, gave a guarded reply on the Mamata: "She is somewhat upset. This alliance is for the Lok Sabha polls and not the Assembly. The enemy here is the BJP and we all took oath to fight together and defeat this government."

In sharp contrast to Mamata's posture, the Left showed its political maturity and keenness to fight the BJP by saying: "We have not closed the doors nor are we going to take the lead. We have walked the extra mile and joined

Rahul Gandhi's yatra. Now, it is for the Congress to decide whether they want an alliance with us or Mamata. As long as they continue with talks with the Trinamool, we will stay away." Some Bengal CPM leaders including Mohammad Salim were with Rahul Gandhi as his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra when it passed through Murshidabad.

Banerjee has been persistently following in the footsteps of Modi in attacking Congress, ever since the latter's leaders did not ask the state president Adhir Choudhary to shut mouth. The keenness of Congress to have an alliance with the TMC is also manifest in Sonia Gandhi deciding to meet Mamata to sort out the seat sharing. However, it appears that Banerjee is more obstinate on this issue than even the Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav. Mamata isn't unaware of the electoral potential of the INDIA bloc and the danger it has been posing to BJP and especially to Modi, but she has been throwing tantrums. Her remarks are getting wide publicity in other states too posing a danger to INDIA bloc's integrity.

While almost all the opposition leaders have criticised Modi for his wrong remark on Nehru inside the parliament, Mamata has preferred to maintain silence. This latest incident has further put a question mark on her true intent. Quoting an Independence Day speech by Nehru from the ramparts of the Red Fort, Modi said: "Nehru had said 'We do not work as hard the Europeans, Japanese, Chinese, Russians or the Americans. Do not think that these communities became prosperous by some magic. They have achieved this by hardwork and smartness.'" "He (Nehru) is giving a certificate to those people to belittle Indians. This shows that Nehru ji's thinking about Indians was that they are lazy and of low intelligence. He did not trust their potential. Former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi did not think differently either."

In a strident attack, the Congress replied: "Modi being who he is, thinks he is being clever but actually demeans the office he holds. Megalomania and Nephrobia are a toxic mix that is leading to the Murder Of Democracy in India". There is no denying that Modi was at his "nonsensical worst" while delivering his speech in the Lok Sabha on Monday that the party described as "low-grade". (IPA Service)

Pakistan election: No matter who wins, the army will rule the roost

By: Mohammad Taqi

On Tuesday, January 30, 1962, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, a former prime minister of Pakistan, was arrested from his Karachi residence on ambiguous charges of anti-state activities, under the Security of Pakistan Act. His real crime, however, was opposing General Ayub Khan's martial law regime. Sixty-two years later, on the same day and date last week, another ex-PM, Imran Khan was sentenced to a 10-year jail term, on a flimsy charge of leaking state secrets by making a diplomatic cable or cipher public. The French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr's famous phrase, "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" or "the more things change, the more they stay the same", has perhaps never rung truer.

Like Suhrawardy, who at the time of that arrest had already been disqualified from electoral politics through the martial law regime's Elective Bodies Disqualification Order (EBDO), Imran Khan too was barred from elections last year and remains imprisoned after a conviction on corruption charges. That's where the similarities between Suhrawardy and Imran Khan end though. Suhrawardy was an intellectual and political giant who stood firmly for parliamentary democracy, a pluralist nation state, and refused to endorse military rule. Imran Khan, on the other hand, is an authoritarian demagogue who was handpicked, groomed, installed into the high office, and sustained there by the army till they fell out.

In addition to imposing martial law four times, the Pakistan army has ruled indirectly for most of the country's existence. To that end, the junta has manipulated the political process by creating or co-opting what it deemed 'patriotic' and pliant individuals and parties. The army's chosen politicians, however, have invariably spun out of its orbit like Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and some even locked horns with the brass, like Nawaz Sharif.

They all ultimately paid the price for standing up to the army. And Imran Khan's fate was not going to be any different. Chairman Mao Zedong had famously said that "the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party". The gist of Pakistan's perennial civil-military imbalance is that those wielding the guns clearly believe that no political party – including the assorted king's parties that they sired themselves – should ever be allowed to command the gun.

So when in late 2021, then PM Imran Khan tried to assert himself and insisted on retaining his closest ally Lt. General Faiz Hameed in place as the director general of the ISI, the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa stonewalled him. Never mind that General Bajwa had himself presided over Imran Khan's installation into high office in an arrangement called the hybrid regime. By that time Imran Khan had already been losing the confidence and support of the military establishment, largely due to a horrifying mismanagement of the economy and shoddy governance.

The generals who were rightly getting blamed for imposing and sustaining the disastrous Imran Khan project, decided to change horses. The opposition political parties saw the army's proclamation that it would stay politically neutral, as a nod to lunge at Imran Khan. In April 2022, a rainbow coalition called the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), which included parties like the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) and Jamaat-e-Ulama-e-Islam, supported by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), ousted Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) party's government through a no-confidence vote in the National Assembly. PMLN's Shehbaz Sharif became the PDM government's PM.

Imran Khan, however, trained his guns on General Bajwa, holding him responsible for his downfall. He also tried unsuccessfully to forestall General Asim Munir – whom he had removed as the DG ISI – becoming the new COAS. While this escalated tensions between Imran Khan and the brass, the latter remained rather restrained. But all hell broke loose when on May 9, 2023, the PTI leaders and workers rioted against military installations after Imran Khan's arrest. Imran Khan seemed to have calculated that with pockets of support within the army, judiciary, and general public, he could bring down the army chief through a coterie of generals allied with him and also upstage the PDM government. It was a monumental miscalculation and misreading of the army's discipline and unity of command.

The army cracked its whip and thousands of PTI cadres and leaders were arrested. Imran Khan himself was rearrested and has remained incarcerated since. Scores of PTI leaders were forced to repent and pledge allegiance to the army publicly and quit the party. Independent political groupings and even a new party were carved out of the PTI. Imran Khan went from being the army's darling to its detested demon. But he remained popular with his cult-like followers, something which worried the brass deeply. The PDM government's own dismal economic performance, lacklustre leadership like Shehbaz

Sharif and total subservience to the junta, didn't exactly capture the public imagination. The generals and the PDM, which virtually served as the hybrid regime on steroids, tried every trick in the book to buy more time to manage Imran Khan.

A vitiated political environment
The outgoing PM Shehbaz Sharif had the National Assembly dissolved a couple of days before its term ended, which pushed the due date for fresh elections to 90 instead of 60 days. The PDM appointed the army's chosen minions to run the caretaker government, stacking the executive and administrative deck against Imran Khan. A scheduled change of guard in the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SCP) deprived Imran Khan of his patrons in the judiciary as well. The army, which through its allied judges had shielded Imran Khan in the past in assorted legal cases, now deployed the administrative and lower courts machinery to expedite proceedings against him.

On the other hand, the former three-time PM Nawaz Sharif, whom the army had gotten convicted and disqualified from politics, and was living in self-exile in London, returned and got those verdicts reversed. While the charges against Sharif were trumped-up and politically-motivated, the relief coming their way was also seen as a political rapprochement between the PML-N and the army to pave the way for his ascent to the high office for a fourth time. Nawaz Sharif, now bereft of his anti-establishment plank and shouldering the blame for the PDM's abysmal performance, however, needed more time to reconnect with and re-energise his base. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) delayed the polls citing a requirement to redraw the voting districts following an updated census.

While the PMLN, the PPP, and other parties finally got their election campaigns off the ground, the army was simply not ready to leave anything to chance. The brass wanted even the remotest possibility of Imran Khan's electoral victory or even a respectable loss to vanish. And the ECP obliged and stripped the PTI of its iconic election symbol – a cricket bat – on the technical grounds that it had not held intra-party elections. In a country with an abysmal literacy rate and preponderance of rural constituencies, an election symbol carries both brand value and polling-day utility. The ECP's decision was clearly a ploy to undermine both.

The Peshawar high court overruled the ECP decision and restored the PTI's election symbol, only to be overruled by the SCP. The otherwise well-respected Chief Justice of Pakistan Qazi Faez Isa was widely criticised for a verdict that stood on very thin techno-legal ice. Without its leader who had been forced out of the chairmanship due to his legal predicament and an election symbol, the PTI, though not legally banned, was pushed out of the contest as an organised party. A bruised and battered PTI still managed to field a large number of candidates, who were now forced to run as independents and were whimsically given a confusing assortment of election symbols by the ECP. The army, however, was not satisfied still.

A day after the verdict in the cipher case, Imran Khan and his wife were given a 14-year prison term on charges of misappropriating from the Toshka Khana state repository, several gifts he had received while in the office. But two major strikes against Imran Khan in two days were still not enough for the army. Imran Khan and his wife were fined and condemned to seven years in prison, on one of the most ludicrous and sleazy charges in Pakistan's checkered judicial history. The couple was charged with contracting their marriage in violation of an Islamic requirement of a post-divorce waiting period called Iddah before which a woman is not supposed to remarry. The army and its henchmen in the judiciary were plumbing new depths. Whatever the veracity of the allegations might be, the unholy haste with which the kangaroo courts delivered these rapid-fire verdicts points to the army's desire to seal Imran Khan's electoral fate totally and irrevocably.

Through these three verdicts, the army sought to paint Imran Khan as a national security risk, as well as a financially and morally corrupt leader, who not only stands a zero chance in this election but in the foreseeable future as well. There are other legal cases pending against Imran Khan, including those pertaining to the rioting against military installations, which could be expedited, especially, in the unlikely event of the PTI-backed candidates somehow mustering a victory on February 8. In that case, an eventual government reference to the SCP seeking to ban the PTI remains well within the realm of possibility. At the time of this writing, the election campaign has ended in Pakistan, but the crackdown against the PTI workers and hounding of its rump leadership and potential voters continues unabated.

Calls such as from the spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, urging the Pakistani authorities to ensure a free and fair election, are too little and too late. While the pre-polls rigging by keeping the PTI from running as party and crippling its electoral machinery should be enough to

deliver the army's desired verdict, election-day tinkering cannot be ruled out.

Army to have the final say
Assuming that the army has successfully vanquished Imran Khan come February 9, Pakistan will be looking at yet another civilian dispensation beholden to the junta. Nawaz Sharif, seen by many as the frontrunner, had started off by challenging the junta over its misadventures like the Imran Khan project. But along this campaign trail, he chose to hold his silence over the army's disastrous role in political engineering, while castigating the judges responsible for his 2017 ouster. The PMLN, and for that matter, the PPP or any other political party's calculus seems to be that by confronting the army over its political machinations, they risk falling out of favour with the brass. The army, for its part, has always had a penchant for introducing or picking multiple players and factions in the political arena. The tactic is conducive to the army's strategic objective of retaining the ultimate power by coopting the politicians who, in turn, compete for its benefaction.

Samuel Finer has noted in *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* that "politically the armed forces suffer from two crippling weaknesses, which preclude them, save in exceptional cases and for brief periods of time, from running without civilian collaboration and openly in their own name ... one weakness is the armed forces' technical inability to administer any but the most primitive community. The second is their lack of legitimacy: that is to say their lack of moral title to rule".

Pakistan's foremost human rights defender, the late and much-lamented Asma Jahangir had put it much more simply when she stated that the army's generals are dangerous duflers out to ruin Pakistan. And by accounts of General Asim Munir's interactions with the students at home and the Pakistani diaspora in Washington, D.C., Asma Apa was on the dot. One participant of the D.C. meeting described General Munir as an intellectual flyweight who overwhelmed the audience by his half-baked geopolitical views anchored in religious certitude and cliché verses that he misattributed to Pakistan's national poet Allama Iqbal. Be that as it may, General Asim Munir, however, serves the army's institutional imperatives and his sophomoric intellect would matter very little.

What remains of profound concern is that the Pakistan army, which considers itself the final arbiter of patriotism, national interest and the ultimate framer and executor of foreign and national security policies, has used the Imran Khan and PDM hybrid regimes to make a power and governance grab not seen since 1958 when General Ayub Khan imposed the country's first martial law. The army got the PDM government to give constitutional and legal cover to its business enterprises and sweeping powers to its intelligence agencies. The army is much more deeply entrenched today than it was on the eve of the 2018 elections.

While the PMLN and the PPP made no mention of the civil-military relations, foreign policy, the simmering conflict in Balochistan and the disastrous security situation in several Pashtun regions, during the elections campaign, these are realities that would have to be grappled with. The army with its burgeoning business empire, a voracious appetite for budgetary allocations, and now a constitutionally-sanctioned seat at the economic policy table, is more deeply involved than ever in the fiscal affairs as well. Manifestos and rhetoric of the political parties, including the PTI's, however, sounded more like a wish list rather than policy prescriptions for the deep economic crisis that Pakistan is in. No matter who forms the government will be dictated by the army sitting atop the tutelary commanding heights.

History, however, informs us that even the weakest PMs like Muhammad Khan Junejo and Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali ended up having differences with the strongest army dictators, General Ziaul Haq and General Pervez Musharraf, respectively. Nawaz Sharif himself was ousted thrice by the army when he tried to assert his constitutional authority. The power dynamics of the de jure authority and de facto rulers is such that once in the office, the former invariably seeks agency that's due to their moral title. None of this is lost on Imran Khan's political opponents and the army with which they have made a common cause. But they still chose to destroy democracy in order to save it from Imran Khan.

That Imran Khan is a vindictive demagogue who had hounded not just his foes but friends as well and sought to perpetuate himself in the office through undemocratic means, is not moot. But even he should have had a fair judicial trial as well as a fair chance in the court of public opinion. The way the army has manipulated the executive, parliamentary, judicial and electoral machinery to keep Imran Khan out hasn't just undermined those very institutions for here and now; it has set the stage for instability and political chaos for years to come. Pakistan's already dysfunctional democracy has been dealt a near-fatal blow. No matter who wins the elections, it is the 'dangerous duflers' who will rule the roost. (Courtesy: The Wire)

National budget 2024-25 from the urban perspective



By: Ramanath Jha

In the Budget Speech to the Parliament, India's Finance Minister (FM), Nirmala Sitharaman, rolled out the Budget for the financial year 2024-25 on 1 February 2024. Given the imminent national elections expected to be scheduled in the first half of the current year, the scope of the budget got restricted to an interim one, also referred to as 'vote on account'. Such a budget serves the prime purpose of keeping essential operations funded.

The more comprehensive version would have to await the elections and the subsequent formation of a new government that could present the full, unrestrained budget with major financial and policy decisions. In the given background, it was natural for the FM to spend considerable time detailing the achievements of the current national government since it came to power. She also provided a fleeting glimpse of what could come if this government returned to power.

This article recounts and analyses what the Budget asserted regarding cities and what was outlined for them for the future. At the national scale, the FM claimed that there was a 'profound positive transformation' in the Indian economy in the last decade. This fundamental change was a result of, among other factors, structural reforms, pro-people programmes, and the creation of larger opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, the period was marked by a focus on social inclusivity with programmes of housing for all, water for each house, cooking gas for all, bank accounts and financial services for all and free ration for 80 crore Indians. These initiatives resulted in 25 crore people being pulled out of multi-dimensional poverty.

The FM gave specific figures of credit assistance to 78 lakh street vendors, of which 2.3 lakh received credit assis-

tance for the third time. The Skill India Mission trained 1.4 crore youth, upskilled and reskilled 54 lakh youngsters and established 3,000 ITIs (Industrial Training Institutes).

A substantial number of institutions of higher learning were added, comprising 7 IIITs (Indian Institute of Technology), 16 IIITs (Indian Institute of Information Technology), 15 AIITs (All India Institute of Medical Science) and 390 universities.

For the future, the FM also announced 2 crore houses under the PM Awas Yojana. However, there was no clarity about the number of houses that would be taken up under the programme's urban wing. The speech also set a target of 1 crore houses for rooftop solarisation. This will indeed have a sizeable urban component, enabling urban households to avail of 300 units of free electricity every month.

One of the new highlights of the Budget was the mention of housing for middle-classes in cities living in rented housing, slums, chawls, or unauthorised colonies. A new scheme would be launched for this purpose, providing the option of buying or building their own houses. The announcement of an added move towards affordable housing for a much-neglected group is most welcome.

GoI's intent to set up more medical colleges by utilising the existing hospital infrastructure is also a welcome initiative. Hopefully, this will increase health services to more urbanites and partially redress the deficient public expenditure on the health sector. An entirely gender-centric initiative of encouraging vaccination of girls between 9 and 14 years for the prevention of cervical cancer is highly laudable. It will prevent the deaths of thousands of women due to cervical complications.

One of the clear assertions by the FM was with respect to the great thrust this government intends

to provide to the country's already prioritised infrastructure sector. Its outlay is set to increase by 11.1 percent to INR 11,11,111 crores, amounting to 3.4 percent of the GDP. While this outlay is for general infrastructure, there will be huge spillovers for urban settlements that will gain enormously from infrastructure expansion. The aviation sector, almost entirely based in cities, has seen massive expansion.

As the FM states, the number of airports has doubled to 149, with even tier-two and three towns getting new airports. With route expansion, Indian carriers have planned to add 1,000 more aircraft to their existing fleets. City infrastructure will also see the expansion of metro rail systems as the Budget assures support to these systems in the country's larger cities. The government is committed to expanding and strengthening the e-vehicle ecosystem by supporting manufacturing and charging infrastructure. This will stand cities in good stead since most of these will come up in cities. Additionally, e-buses for public transport networks will be encouraged.

The above-cited programmes, including inclusive initiatives of the government of India, skill-building services and educational infrastructure, have decidedly boosted the economy, employment and social justice. A large component of some of these projects was targeted at rural areas. Still, many of them were substantially urban-centric. These will directly underwrite the improvement of certain urban services. There are others where outlays are in sectors that are not entirely urban. However, incidental benefits are expected to positively impact the urban economy, services, and quality of life.

While the budget gave us the status of many of its initiatives, most urban programmes essayed by GoI in the earlier years do not find mention. For instance, the national

budget 2021-22 was heavy on providing for physical and social urban infrastructure. This comprised programmes for universal water supply, city sanitation, complete faecal sludge management and wastewater treatment, source segregation of garbage, and reduction in single-use plastic and air pollution by effectively managing waste from construction and demolition activities.

In the National Budget 2022-23, the FM turned her attention to urban planning and its complete overhaul. She proposed to provide support to the states for urban capacity building. She mooted the modernisation of building bylaws, the implementation of Town Planning Schemes (TPS) and Transit-Oriented Development (TOD). In addition, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) was tasked to improve syllabi and quality and access to urban planning courses in other institutions.

In her 2023-24 budget, the FM continued with municipal reforms and sought to implement them through an incentivisation package for the states and urban local bodies (ULBs). The Budget proposed a fifty-year loan to states provided this was entirely spent on capital expenditure within 2023-24. The states could pick the area of capital expenditure, but part of the amount had to be spent on urban planning reforms and financing reforms in ULBs to make them credit-worthy for municipal bonds.

Given the density of urban projects, an interim budget could not address these issues in detail. It would be welcome if the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs brings out a consolidated report on the impact of these programmes at an appropriate juncture.

While structural reforms referred to in the FM's speech were primarily economic, no substantive reform occurred in municipal governance, finance, or urban planning in the last few years. GoI was hamstringing by the reluctance of the states to undertake urban reforms, and those recommended by it went largely unimplemented. It appears we must wait for the full budget after the national elections. In the context of the enormous significance of cities, GoI will have to find a way to push through the long-pending urban reforms. (Courtesy: ORF)

Cybersecurity concerns amidst rising cyber threats

By: Ripu Baija

The latest Global Data Protection Index (GDPI) reinforces the importance of staying the course when it comes to protecting data in today's digitally transformed world. Navigating the complex terrain of data protection remains a formidable challenge and demands a steadfast commitment to understanding all the risks that can threaten an organization's data.

Concern over cyber threats continues to grow and remains at the top of the list for causes of organizational disruption with 52% of respondents reporting a cyberattack that prevented access to data within the past 12 months. This is the highest percentage in over 5 years.

The monetary impact to organizations is considerable with costs more than doubling over our last report to \$1.4 million on average. The Global Data Protection Index surveyed 1,500 IT and IT security decision makers with 25 percent of APJ respondents from a wide range of public and private industries in September and October 2023 across the globe.

This concern is well founded as 75% of organizations surveyed are worried that their existing data protection measures are unable to cope with ransomware threats. 69% are not very confident that they could reliably recover in the event of a destruc-

tive cyberattack.

Yet despite these perspectives, most organizations (59%) invest more in cyber prevention than cyber recovery.

The balance between prevention and recovery needs to be carefully thought through considering the reality that successful attacks are on the rise. Another recurring red flag is that 81% of organizations believe that the rise in remote workers, fueled by the pandemic and still prevalent today, has increased their exposure to data loss from a cyberattack. This sentiment is also up from 70% in our last research findings.

New insights were also uncovered regarding the use and effectiveness of insurance policies to help mitigate an organization's financial exposure. While 93% of organizations cited the use of ransomware insurance policies, they noted that several conditions could limit coverage.

For example, 57% responded that proof of best practices for cyberthreat prevention was required, 40% indicated some scenarios would void the policy and 40% pointed to the fact that payments to some entities may be restricted by law.

In the end, 85% of organisations had to pay to access their data. So, while insurance policies can be a valid component of a cyber security strategy, organizations must understand their limitations.

In response to these growing threats, organizations are not sitting still when it comes to fortifying their cyber resiliency. Several trends indicate that organizations are becoming more proactive with 50% bringing in professional services to bolster resources, 49% conducting regular cyber recovery testing and 42% having deployed a cyber vault with physical and logical separation from production data.

For the first time, the GDPI probed into the impact of generative AI on both the cyber threat landscape and future data protection requirements. 52% believe that generative AI will provide an advantage to their organization's cyber security posture but 88% also agree generative AI is likely to generate large volumes of new data and increase the value of certain data types which will need to be considered when mapping out their future data protection strategies.

As organisations increasingly turn to public cloud solutions, implement hybrid working models, and experiment with generative AI, the criticality of data protection is more evident than ever. Yet, securing and safeguarding digital assets is becoming a more complex challenge for many. In a landscape continuously threatened by cyberattacks, businesses need to chart a path and stay the course. As someone once said, it's a marathon, not a sprint. (Courtesy: The Pioneer)

Netanyahu however said the war would continue until Israel is completely victorious

Blinken ends latest Mideast mission after new Israeli snub of proposed Gaza ceasefire plan

TEL AVIV, Feb 8: U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken left the Middle East on Thursday with public divisions between the United States and Israel at perhaps their worst level since Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza began in October.

Wrapping up a four-nation Mideast trip - his fifth to the region since the conflict erupted — Blinken was returning to Washington after getting a virtual slap in the face from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who said the war would continue until Israel is completely victorious and appeared to reject outright a response from Hamas to a proposed cease-fire plan. Relations between Israel and its main international ally, the United States, have been tense for months, but Netanyahu's public dismissal of a plan the U.S. says has merit, at least as a starting point for further negotiation, highlighted the divide.

Yet Blinken and other U.S. officials said they remained optimistic that progress could be made on their main goals of improving humanitarian conditions for Palestinians civilians, securing the release of hostages held by Hamas, preparing for a post-conflict Gaza and preventing the war from spreading.

None of those visits resulted in immediate visible successes, but they brought limited but significant improvements in the delivery of humanitarian aid and a weeklong cease-fire in November in which



scores of hostages were released. "Clearly there are things that Hamas sent back that are absolute non-starters," Blinken said of the response the militant group delivered Tuesday to a cease-fire and hostage release proposal that was endorsed last month by Egypt, Qatar, the U.S. and Israel itself.

"But, at the same time, we see space to continue to pursue an agreement," Blinken said late Wednesday. "And these things are always negotiations. It's not flipping a light switch. It's not 'yes' or 'no.' There's invariably back and forth."

Shortly before Blinken spoke, though, Netanyahu took direct aim at the Hamas response, calling it "delusional" and vowing that Israel would fight on to achieve "absolute victory" over the militant group, no matter what.

Compounding Blinken's dilemma, Netanyahu also appeared to dismiss concerns from the U.S. and others about expanding Israel's military operations in southern

Gaza, particularly in Rafah, the area on the Egyptian border to which over a million Palestinians have fled.

"On all of my previous visits here and pretty much every day in between, we have pressed Israel in concrete ways to strengthen civilian protection, to get more assistance to those who need it. And over the past four months, Israel has taken important steps to do just that," he said. "And yet ... the daily toll that its military operations continue to take on innocent civilians remains too high."

Netanyahu also called for the dismantlement of UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, which is the main distributor of international assistance to Gaza, because of its alleged hostility toward Israel and allegations that a dozen of its employees took part in the Oct. 7 Hamas attack that ignited the war.

The U.S. and other donor nations have suspended new assistance to UNRWA pending completion of a

U.N. investigation into the allegations, but Blinken has nonetheless said the agency's role is critical to getting desperately needed humanitarian supplies into Gaza.

Blinken appealed to Netanyahu and other Israelis still reeling from the Hamas attack not to allow vengeance to dictate their continued response. "Israelis were dehumanized in the most horrific way on October 7," he said. "And the hostages have been dehumanized every day since. But that cannot be a license to dehumanize others."

Blinken came to Israel just hours after the receipt of the Hamas counter-proposal to the framework cease-fire agreement put forward late last month. That proposal includes a three-phase plan to de-escalate the conflict. In Qatar on Tuesday, both Qatar's prime minister and Blinken said the proposal had promise as a starting point for further negotiation.

And Blinken talked up Saudi Arabia's interest in normalizing relations with Israel, provided the Gaza war ends and the Palestinians are given a clear, credible and time-bound pathway to an independent state. "We remain determined as well to pursue a diplomatic path to a just and lasting peace, and security for all in the region, and notably for Israel," Blinken said in Tel Aviv.

However, Netanyahu is opposed to the creation of a Palestinian state and has said Israel will maintain open-ended security control over Gaza. (AP)

Pakistan votes in general elections tainted by rigging claims

ISLAMABAD, Feb 8: People in Pakistan on Thursday voted in the general elections in which former prime minister Nawaz Sharif is hoping to secure a record fourth term with the backing of the powerful military amid a crackdown on his rival Imran Khan's party and rising in violence.

Amidst tight security, the polling started at 8:00 AM and will continue without any break till 5:00 PM.

Soon after the voting started, mobile services in Pakistan were suspended due to the "deteriorating security situation", a day after twin terror attacks killed at least 30 people.

The border crossing with Afghanistan and Iran will also remain closed both for cargo and pedestrians on Thursday due to security reasons.

A countrywide public holiday has been declared to enable a total of 128 million registered voters to cast their votes and elect a new government that they hope will stabilise the country's economy.

The counting will start soon after the conclusion of the voting.

Nearly 650,000 security personnel have been deployed across the country as at least 30 people were killed on Wednesday in twin blasts in the restive Balochistan province.

A spokesman of the interior minister told Geo News that precious lives were lost in the recent terrorist attacks.

"So it was decided to suspend the mobile service on the polling day," he said.

Reports showed that phone services were affected in some cities including Karachi and Peshawar. Reacting to the suspension of mobile phone services, independent candidate Mustafa Nawaz Khokhar said that shutting down mobile networks on polling day "is the beginning of election day rigging".

Taking to his X handle, formerly known as Twitter, the former senator said that cutting candidates off from their agents and staff on election day was unacceptable.

"By the time news comes out the election would have been stolen," he added. Internet observatory Net-Blocks said in a post on X that, "Real-time network data show that internet blackouts are now in effect in multiple regions of #Pakistan in addition to mobile network disruptions; the incident comes on election day and follows months of digital censorship targeting the political opposition."

CEC Raja said that elections will be held in a peaceful atmosphere. To a question, he said that he saw the news about the suspension of mobile service on TV because such decisions are taken by the interior ministry, which is responsible for maintaining peace. "We will not interfere because

security is not the responsibility of the Election Commission of Pakistan," he said.

Raja said the Election Commission of Pakistan will not give any instructions to the interior ministry regarding the resumption of services.

"If we ask them to turn mobile services on and a terror incident takes place, who will be responsible?" he questioned.

The CEC maintained that their system doesn't rely on the internet. According to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), a total of 5,121 candidates are in the race for the National Assembly (NA) seats. These include 4,807 male, 312 female and two transgenders.



For the four provincial assemblies, 12,695 candidates are in the field including 12,123 males, 570 women and two transgenders.

A low turnout was generally witnessed in most constituencies after the opening of polls.

In many places, some voters waited outside polling stations where the doors had not opened since the polling staff had not shown up for duty.

At many polling stations, the staff also complained about a shortage of ballot papers and incorrect papers leading to a long delay in the voting process. (PTI)

Iceland volcano erupts north of a nearby settlement



LONDON, Feb 8: Iceland's Meteorological Office says a volcano is erupting in the southwestern part of the country, spewing lava from a three km (1.5 mile) fissure north of the town of Grindavik.

The eruption of the Sylingarfell volcano began at 6 am local time on Thursday, soon after an intense burst of seismic activity. The Met Office said the eruption is in roughly the same location as an earlier one in December.

Icelandic national broadcaster RUV said the nearby Blue Lagoon thermal spa, one of Iceland's biggest tourist attractions, was closed when the eruption began and guests were evacuated to hotels.

Iceland, which sits above a volcanic hot spot in the North Atlantic, averages an eruption every four to five years.

The most disruptive in recent times was the 2010 eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano, which spewed huge clouds of ash into the atmosphere and led to widespread airspace closures over Europe. (AP)

SKorean prez reiterates that Seoul will not seek its own nuclear deterrent

SEOUL, Feb 8: South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol reiterated that the country would not seek its own nuclear deterrent in the face of threats from nuclear-armed North Korea as he vowed further efforts to sharpen nuclear deterrence strategies with ally United States.

In a pre-recorded interview with KBS television that aired on Wednesday night, Yoon insisted that South Korea clearly has the technology to quickly acquire nuclear weapons capabilities if it ever decides to do so. But taking that step isn't a realistic option as it would ruin a trade-dependent economy, he said.

"If we develop nuclear weapons, we will receive various economic sanctions like North Korea does now, and our economy will be dealt a serious blow," Yoon said, while emphasising Seoul's commitment to the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Yoon, a conservative who took office in 2022, has made similar comments before as

he pushed for stronger reassurances from Washington that it would swiftly and decisively use its nuclear capabilities to defend its ally in the event of a North Korean nuclear attack.

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula are at their highest point in years, as North Korean leader Kim Jong Un continues to accelerate his country's weapons tests while issuing provocative threats of nuclear conflict with the South.

South Korea has responded by expanding its combined military exercises with the United States and Japan, and the countries have also been upgrading their nuclear deterrence strategies built around strategic US military assets.

In a fiery speech at North Korea's rubber-stamp parliament last month, Kim declared that the North was abandoning its long-standing objective of reconciliation with the war-divided South and ordered the rewriting of the North Korean constitution to define the South as its most



hostile foreign adversary. Pyongyang's rubber-stamp parliament during a meeting on Wednesday formally abolished laws on economic co-operation with South Korea, according to the North's Korean Central News Agency on Thursday.

Some experts say Kim is seeking to drive up pressure in an election year in South Korea and the United States. There are concerns about a direct provocation in border areas, including the disputed western sea boundary between the Koreas that has been the site of bloody naval skirmishes in past years.

In his interview with KBS,

Yoon described Kim's government as "irrational forces" who are putting further strain on North Korea's broken economy by aggressively expanding the country's collection of nuclear weapons and missiles.

"We need to keep that in mind as we prepare to counter their security threats or provocations, preparing not just for actions based on rational judgments but also actions based on irrational conclusions," Yoon said.

South Korean experts and officials say Kim's aggressive nuclear push despite limited resources has battered an economy already crippled by

decades of mismanagement and US-led sanctions over his nuclear ambitions. In a separate report, KCNA said Kim during an inspection on Wednesday of factories producing foodstuff, paper and basic necessities in a rural eastern region berated officials there for unspecified shortcomings in production.

Yoon said the South was willing to provide economic assistance if the North displays genuine willingness to wind down its nuclear weapons and missile programme.

He said he has no intentions to chase a summit with Kim "if it's just for show", saying that previous meetings between Korean leaders did nothing to stop North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

"The top-down way is not ideal," Yoon said. "We need a bottom-up structure where there are exchanges and discussions between working-level officials to create agendas and prepare (substantial) results, and summits should come after that." (AP)

Papua New Guinea's prime minister becomes the first Pacific leader to address Australia's parliament



SYDNEY, Feb 8: Papua New Guinea Prime Minister James Marape on Thursday became the first Pacific leader to address Australia's parliament, vowing "nothing will come in between our two countries".

The nations announced that Australia will spend AUD 100 million (USD 65.3 million) on Papua New Guinea's internal security, including the development of a police recruiting and investigation training facility and a police barracks.

The speech, Marape's meeting with his Australian counterpart, Anthony Albanese, and the neighbours' release of details of a security pact signed in December, come as Pacific nations deal with China's growing ambitions.

Resource-rich Papua New Guinea has rebuffed overtures from China, which struck a security pact with the Solomon Islands in 2022 that caused worry among some in the region.

Papua New Guinea, which is in a strategically important part of the South Pacific, struggles with tribal violence and civil unrest and wants to increase its police numbers from 6,000 officers to 26,000. Anger over high unemployment and cost of living led to rioting and looting last month in its two biggest cities.

Papua New Guinea and Australia "reaffirmed their commitment to the region's existing security architecture as a key driver of security cooperation", a joint statement between Marape and Albanese said.

Papua New Guinea is a nation of mostly subsistence farmers where some 800 languages are spoken. With 10 million people, it is the most populous South Pacific nation after Australia, which is home to 26 million.

Australia Foreign Minister Penny Wong said Marape's historic speech elevated Australia's relationship with the Pacific.

"We know that China is a great power asserting its interests," she told reporters. "What we are doing is reemphasising our part in the Pacific family and the importance of that engagement."

After last month's civil unrest, a number of Papua New Guinea ministers resigned and an under-pressure Marape may soon face a vote of no confidence.

"We must become a strong country standing on our own two feet, economically independent and strong so we too can help Australia maintain democracy, preserve peace and ensure stability.... in our Pacific," he said in his speech. (AP)

Haiti's PM urges calm as violent protests seek his ouster

PORT-AU-PRINCE (HAITI), Feb 8: Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry urged calm in a public address early on Thursday following three days of violent protests that have paralysed the country demanding his resignation.

The brief speech did little to appease thousands of people angry and frustrated over unrelenting gang violence, deepening poverty and no general elections in sight.

"I think the time has arrived for all to put our heads together to save Haiti, to do things another way in our country," Henry said without offering specifics.

He urged Haitians not to look at the government or at Haiti's National Police as their

adversaries. Those who choose violence, destruction and killing people to take power are "not working in the interests of the Haitian people," he said.

His comments come as thousands of Haitians gathered daily this week in cities and towns across the country to demand that Henry step down, saying they will keep protesting until he leaves. Haiti's legislature is currently empty, after the terms of its last 10 senators expired in January 2023. The country

failed to hold planned elections in 2019 and 2023, and Henry assumed power with the support of the international community following the July 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse.

On Wednesday, police killed five armed environmental protection agents in the capital of Port-au-Prince in a shooting some worry could worsen Haiti's crisis.

Lionel Lizarre, head of a police union known as Synapoha, told The Associated Press that the shooting be-

tween police and agents with Haiti's Security Brigade for Protected Areas occurred in the Laboule community. He claimed that the environmental agents opened fire after police asked them to drop their weapons, prompting officers to shoot.

The environmental division has recently come under scrutiny after its agents in northern Haiti clashed with police.

Henry said Haitians need peace, security, work and the ability to move freely around the country.

"Haitian people need for their children to go to school without fear, because that's what's going to guarantee them a future," he said. (AP)



The satellite will spend at least three years studying the oceans from 420 miles (676 kilometers) up, as well as the atmosphere

NASA climate satellite blasts off to survey oceans and atmosphere of a warming Earth

CAPE CANAVERAL, Feb 8: NASA's newest climate satellite rocketed into orbit on Thursday to survey the world's oceans and atmosphere in never-before-seen detail.

SpaceX launched the Pace satellite on its \$948 million mission before dawn, with the Falcon rocket heading south over the Atlantic to achieve a rare polar orbit.

The satellite will spend at least three years studying the oceans from 420 miles (676 kilometers) up, as well as the atmosphere. It will scan the globe daily with two of the science instruments. A third instrument will take monthly measurements.



"It's going to be an unprecedented view of our home planet," said project scientist Jeremy Werdell.

The observations will help scientists improve hurricane and

other severe weather forecasts, detail Earth's changes as temperatures rise and better predict when harmful algae blooms will happen.

NASA already has more than

two dozen Earth-observing satellites and instruments in orbit. But Pace should give better insights into how atmospheric aerosols like pollutants and volcanic ash and sea life like algae and plankton interact with each other.

"Pace will give us another dimension" to what other satellites observe, said NASA's director of Earth science, Karen St. Germain.

Pace — short for Planckton, Aerosol, Cloud, Ocean Ecosystem — is the most advanced mission ever launched to study ocean biology.

Current Earth-observing satellites can see in seven or eight colors, according to Werdell.

Pace will see in 200 colors that will allow scientists to identify the types of algae in the sea and types of particles in the air.

Scientists expect to start getting data in a month or two.

NASA is collaborating with India on another advanced Earth-observing satellite due to launch this year. Named Nisar, it will use radar to measure the effect of rising temperatures on glaciers and other melting icy surfaces.

NASA's Pace project persevered despite efforts by the Trump administration to cancel it.

"It has been a long, strange trip as they say," Werdell said before the launch. (AP)

Corruption will not be tolerated, says Tripura CM

'In the present day, the state does not allow any acts of violence'

AGARTALA, Feb 8: Tripura chief minister Manik Saha on Thursday said his government will never compromise on any form of corruption, regardless of the person's position.

The CM made the remark after an FIR was lodged against ten individuals, including a former secretary of the Tripura Cricket Council (TCA), on corruption charges.

"Taking inspiration from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, we are running a transparent and corruption-free government in Tripura. We will not tolerate any form of corruption, no matter who is involved. The government will deal with corruption firmly," he said during an event organised by the Tripura Najamuller Dokan Parichalan Samity.

The CM referred to himself as a "junior chowkidar" and emphasised that the government is working to gain the trust of the people by providing assistance



to those in need.

"In the present day, the state does not allow any acts of violence. There was a time when elections were marred by violence and intimidation, but since 2018, the situation has changed significantly. The state now conducts peaceful elections," he said.

"Similar to the prime minister, we also aim to establish Ram

Rajya in Tripura, where the government fulfills its duties sensibly to meet the aspirations of the people.

"If the Public Distribution System (PDS) functions effectively, it will help the government gain the support of the people. The ration shop dealers who distribute food to 18-20 lakh people act as a bridge between the government and the people," he added. Saha also predicted a resounding victory for the NDA under the leadership of Narendra Modi in the upcoming Parliamentary elections.

"The prime minister has said the BJP alone will win 375 Lok Sabha seats in the Parliamentary elections. Considering Modi's performance over the past nine years, from providing free rice to the PM Kisan scheme, nobody knows how many seats the BJP will actually secure... It may even exceed 400," he concluded. (PTI)

Perpetrators involved in killing of former Arunachal MLA identified



ITANAGAR, Feb 8: Arunachal Pradesh Home Minister Bamang Felix on Thursday said police have identified the perpetrators involved in the killing of former MLA Yumsem Matey.

Matey, who represented Khonsa West assembly constituency in Tirap district, was shot dead on December 16 by unknown assailants near the Indo-Myanmar border in Lazu circle of the district. He served as an MLA from 2009 to 2014 on a Congress ticket.

Taking part in the obituary reference in the House, Felix, while strongly condemning the killing, said the perpetrators of the crime were identified the next day and they had come through the porous India-Myanmar international border.

As it was a cross border crime, police recommended the investigation of the case to Police Headquarters (PHQ), Itanagar, he said.

He said the volatile nature of the case forced the PHQ to recommend the case to the home department,

which in turn, recommended the case to the National Investigation Agency (NIA) on December 21.

"The NIA has already started the investigation," the minister said, adding that no one would be spared.

Terming the killing as an attack on the people of the state, the minister said police are providing full cooperation and support to the NIA to deliver justice to Matey. Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein while condemning the killing said peace is a prerequisite for development.

Earlier, Assembly speaker PD Sonu led the House in paying tributes to the former lawmaker.

"The death of Yumsem Matey has created a vacuum. In his death, the state has lost a visionary leader," the speaker said.

Majority of the speakers demanded strong measures against insurgent groups active in the region and strong vigil along the Indo-Myanmar border.

Department of Tirap, Changlang and Longding (DoTCL) Minister Wangki Lowang claimed that the international border was not properly guarded.

He also claimed that insurgents and anti-social elements are having a 'free-hand' in the TCL region.

Citing the killing of former MP Wangcha Rajkumar in 2007 and former MLA Tirong Aboh in 2019 and others by insurgent groups active in the region, Lowang said many women have been widowed and children orphaned.

"I request the Centre through the state government to ensure foolproof security and protection of the citizens," he said.

State RWD minister Honchun Ngandam, MLAs Laism Simai, Gabriel D Wangsu, Chakal Aboh and Tangpho Wangnaw also paid tributes to Matey.

The House observed a two-minute silence as a mark of respect to the departed soul. (PTI)

Arunachal Dy CM presents interim budget for four months



ITANAGAR, Feb 8: Arunachal Pradesh deputy chief minister Chowna Mein presented the state's interim budget on Thursday, which will be valid from April 1 to July 31.

The House later passed the vote on account by voice vote without initiating any discussion.

A full budget for 2024-25 will be presented after the Lok Sabha polls and assembly elections in the state conclude.

Mein, who also holds the finance, planning and investment portfolios, will make a statement on the interim budget on Friday during discussion on the motion of thanks to the Governor's address.

Under Article 116 of the Constitution, a vote on account is presented to meet essential government expenditure for a limited period until the budget is approved. (PTI)

Three insurgents in Assam Rifles net



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 8: The Assam Rifles on Thursday apprehended three individuals stated to be the active cadres of the Kanglei Yaoi Kan-na Lup. (KYKL), an underground outfit demanding the sovereignty of Manipur.

A defense wing statement issued here on Thursday states that upon receiving credible intelligence from sources of likely infiltration along the India-Myanmar Border in Kamjong district, Assam Rifles zeroed in on the individuals in the general area of Z Choro.

The vigilants while detecting suspicious movements challenged the infiltrators.

In the ensuing operation, two of the personnel managed to escape while three were forced to be trapped.

Subsequent interrogation revealed that the individuals had been actively affiliated with KYKL since 2009. The apprehended cadres have been handed over to the concerned police stations.

Notably, the KYKL is demanding the sovereignty of Manipur.

Manipur CM lauds govt's decision to scrap FMR Regime



IMPHAL, Feb 8: Manipur chief minister N Biren Singh on Thursday thanked Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah for scrapping the India-Myanmar Free Movement Regime (FMR) and for their commitment to securing the border.

Earlier in the day, Shah said the Centre has decided to scrap the FMR to ensure the country's internal security and maintain the demographic structure of the Northeastern states.

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

Taking to X, Singh said, "I'm immensely grateful to Hon'ble PM Shri Narendra Modi Ji and Hon'ble HM Shri Amit Shah Ji for their commitment to securing our borders. The decision to scrap the FMR between India and Myanmar, as recommended by the Minister of Home Affairs, India, is crucial for our internal security and the demographic integrity of our North Eastern States."

Arunachal's developmental focus aligned with 'Saptarshi' priorities: Governor

ITANAGAR, Feb 8: Arunachal Pradesh Governor Lt Gen K T Parinaik (Retd) on Thursday said that the government's focus areas of development are well aligned with the 'Saptarshi' development priorities to guide the state during the 'Amrit Kaal', thus providing a blueprint for an empowered and inclusive economy.

Addressing the first day of the Budget Session of the state assembly, the governor said that under Chief Minister Pema Khandu and his 'Team Arunachal', the state has witnessed massive development.

"The government is following the 'Antyodaya' approach to ensure that the benefits of development reach the last mile and the last person. The last eight years have been a never-seen-before era for Arunachal, where the government has made historic, transformational, systemic, and structural changes that have improved the lives of all the citizens, especially benefitting the poor, the women, the youth and the farmers", he said.

The governor said the government had left no stone unturned to make the vision of a "happy, cohesive, and inclusive" society with the generous support provided by the Centre, for all the efforts and priorities.

"We have all been witness to the record pace set in all sectors, whether it is providing ghar, bijli, paani, swachhta, sadak, rail, air and port connectivity to people. Wherever you see, the extreme dedication to the nation and state through 'kartavya' and 'sewa bhaav' of my government is reflected", he said.



From the third largest start-up ecosystem to improved road safety, port and rail traffic, highways, decline in death rate, improved sex ratio and substantial reduction in teacher-pupil ratio our 'Vikas' yatra has gone from strength to strength, Parinaik said.

"Fulfilling the aspirations of the youth, livelihood generation through self-employment opportunities while continuing with our investment in infrastructure for improved connectivity has been and will be the vision of my government for a prosperous and happy Arunachal Pradesh in the Amrit Kaal and becoming a developed state of a developed nation", he added.

Referring to the prudent financial reforms of the state, the governor said that the guiding pillar 'Governance Reforms and Prudent Financial Management' is aligned with the financial sector guiding pillar of the 'Saptarshi'.

The government has ensured that more resources are spent on socially useful and economically productive investments while not defaulting on any commitments in terms of loan repayments, salaries and wages, and pension dues, Parinaik pointed out.

"Our guiding pillar investment in human capital is aligned with the youth power guiding pillar of the 'Saptarshi'. My Government envisions a future with accessible and quality education and learning available for all", the governor said.

He added, "To become Viksit Arunachal, we must become an Aatma Nibhar Arunachal first. That is why this is one of the key strategic pillars of our vision, where key sectors must contribute to make the state self-sufficient."

Parinaik added that the unprecedented progress achieved by the state was due to making substantial investments towards enhancing

connectivity, fostering cultural exchange, boosting tourism and facilitating trade.

"As a result of focused investment in the road sector, in the last 8 years, there has been a 91 per cent increase in length of highways from 1,042 km in 2015-16 to 1,992 km in 2022-23 and 64 per cent increase in overall road length. The road density has increased from 36.65 sq km to 65.99 sq km since 2015-16 and 195 bridges have been built to connect the previously unconnected areas", he said.

The governor added that the state is looking ahead to an additional 2,857 km of national highways, which are slated for construction, with an allocation of Rs 44,000 crore by the Centre.

The Vibrant Village Programme (VVP) is a shining example of synergy and convergence to create infrastructure in the remotest areas of the state, Parinaik said.

"With the motto connectivity to activity to vibrancy in our border areas, 1,452 villages have been systematically mapped, 455 priority villages have been identified for development, and 252 border habitations have been connected through the construction of 2,506 km of roads, to improve ease of living of remote rural communities", he said.

As a result of these interventions, "We have started witnessing the welcome reverse migration in many border area localities. I am confident that sustained focus of the government on the VVP will further promote activity and vibrancy in these areas", Parinaik added. (PTI)

Wahniangleng Reservoir in Meghalaya stone quarry shut down

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 8: The Forest department has cracked down on an illegal stone quarrying operation on top of the Wahniangleng reservoir in Laikynsew, Meghalaya. A closure notice has been served, and the landowner faces potential legal action. Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) Arul G Mathuram confirmed the ac-

tion, stating that an offence report is being prepared for submission to the court. The landowner will be questioned, and anyone else found involved will also face consequences. "No one can export boulders to Bangladesh without proper permits," DFO Mathuram said. The department will investigate if the landowner was involved in illegal transportation.

CM inaugurates Williamnagar Govt College

College was provincialised in 2008 during Donkupar Roy's tenure

HT Correspondent

WILLIAMNAGAR, Feb 8: Meghalaya chief minister, Conrad K Sangma, accompanied by the education minister, Rakkam A Sangma, PHE, Soil and Water Conservation minister, Marcuse N Marak, chief adviser to the govt of Meghalaya and former education minister, Lakhmen Rymbui, Rongjeng MLA, Jim M Sangma and chief secretary, DP Wahlang, inaugurated the new building of Williamnagar Govt College and mini stadium in Williamnagar on February 8.

Speaking on the occasion, the chief minister said that the college was provincialised in 2008 when Donkupar Roy was the chief minister of the state.

In 2018 and 2019, the govt had a discussion with the finance and planning departments to improve the infrastructural development in education sector which included Williamnagar Govt College.

He informed the gathering that the govt had spent over ₹ 500 crore in education sector as it has been dedicated to make policies for bringing more opportunities to the youth of the state.

He lauded the former education minister and the principal secretary of education department, DP Wahlang for their decisiveness and fast-tracking the process to ensure that the construction of this college is completed on time.

Through Prime Program and CM Elevate, the CM informed that the govt will provide opportunities to the youth to enable them to start their own projects. Stating that funds have also been



sanctioned to improve the development of sports infrastructures in the state, he made an announcement that track and field for Williamnagar Mini Stadium will soon be sanctioned.

While urging the faculty and the students of Williamnagar Govt. College to be passionate to make the college a center of learning and one of the best colleges in the state, the chief minister assured to bring a memorandum to the cabinet to give science and commerce streams to

Sohra, Williamnagar and Baghmara govt colleges. He also informed that Critical Care Unit along with 50 bedded mother care will soon be started in Williamnagar.

The guest of honour and the education minister, Rakkam A Sangma, in his speech congratulated the people of Williamnagar for getting a Govt college after 50 years of the statehood of Meghalaya. Stating that getting such an institution is a blessing of the God to the people of the region, he urged the faculty and the students of the college to be professionals and sought co-operation of all the stakeholders so that more development can be brought to the region.

The special guest and the minister of PHE, soil and water conservation, housing Marcuse N Marak, lauded the former education minister, Lakhmen Rymbui and former principal secretary of education, DP Wahlang, for their decision to make the dream of the people of East Garo Hills come true.

He also informed that 90% of the Williamnagar mini stadium is already completed and the remaining 10% will also be completed in due course of time.

The others who spoke on the occasion included the chief adviser to the govt and former education minister, Lakhmen Rymbui and Rongjeng MLA, Jim M Sangma.

Earlier, the chief secretary, DP Wahlang, in his welcome address, informed the gathering that ₹ 12 crore had been spent for construction of this college including hostels for both boys and girls.

Crime Branch lodges FIR against 10 for financial irregularities

Former TCA secretary in police net



AGARTALA, Feb 8: An FIR has been lodged against 10 people including former Tripura Cricket Association (TCA) secretary Tapas Ghosh for their alleged involvement in financial irregularities, a senior police officer said on Thursday.

Former TCA vice president Timir Chanda and former treasurer Jaylal Das are also named in the FIR.

"The FIR has been lodged against 10 people including former TCA secretary Tapan Ghosh, former vice president Timir Chanda, former treasurer Jaylal Das after a Special Investigating Team (SIT) found prima facie evidence of financial irregularities against them", Inspector General (IG), Intelligence, L Darlong told PTI.

Three engineers of TCA - Tarun Kumar Das, Arunabha Nath and Rahad Sarkar names were also included in the FIR. Besides, three executives of two Kolkata-based companies which were given the tender of installing floodlights at

MBB stadium and a lifetime member of TCA were named in the FIR.

"The Crime Branch registered the case against the accused persons after a three-member SIT investigated the allegations", Deputy Inspector General (DIG), Intelligence, Krishnendu Chakraborty said when contacted.

"It appeared the offence (financial irregularities) had taken place in installing floodlight at MBB stadium during 2022-23 and 2023-24 FY. Initially, the financial irregularities was ₹ 10 crore but it may increase further", he said.

Asked about the FIR lodged against him, Tapas Ghosh on Thursday claimed he did not receive a copy of the complaint registered by the Crime Branch against him.

"Once I receive the copy of the FIR, I will be able to speak on the allegations brought against me. It is sure a vested interest group is active in TCA to tarnish the image of cricket in our state. I will fight the battle legally", he said. (PTI)

EVM mobile demonstration van flagged off in Kohima

HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, Feb 8: Kohima deputy commissioner and district election officer Kumar Ramnikant flagged off the mobile demonstration van for awareness on usage of EVMs/VVPATs in connection with systematic voters' education and electoral participation programme (SVEEP) activities and the forthcoming Lok Sabha 2024 elections in his premises on Thursday.

Addressing the flagging off programme, Ramnikant said a nationwide awareness programme on EVM) and voter verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) is underway to provide citizens with a first-hand experience of the voting process and to familiarise them with the machines.

He said the awareness programme which is organised ahead of every general election to Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, focuses on imparting knowledge about the basic features of EVMs and VVPATs, elucidating the step-by-step procedure of casting votes, and educating voters on how to verify their choices through the VVPAT slip.

Cong releases 'black paper' to highlight govt's 'failures'

Party flags unemployment, neglect of non-BJP states

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: The Congress on Thursday released a "black paper" to highlight the "failures" of the Modi government and alleged that the last 10 years have been a period of "injustice".

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge released a 54-page "charge sheet", titled "10 saal anyak kaal", against the Centre ahead of the government's tabling in Parliament of a 'white paper' on the "mismanagement" of the economy prior to 2014 aimed at drawing lessons.

"Whenever PM (Narendra) Modi presents his views in Parliament, he hides his failures. At the same time, when we speak about the failures of the government, it is not given importance. Therefore, we thought of bringing out a black paper and tell the public about the failures of the government," Kharge, who was flanked by party leaders Pawan Khera and Syed Naseer Hussain, said at a press conference at his residence here.

In a sharp attack at Prime Minister Modi over his claim that the Congress was creating a narrative to divide the country into north and south, Kharge said those who falsely accuse others of dividing the country and of regionalism, "those liars" do not even remember what they said.

"Modi ji, when you were the chief minister of Gujarat, you used to talk about the tax rights of Gujarat with the UPA government. Then you said that states should get 50 per cent tax. You also said that people of Gujarat pay Rs 48,600 crore tax and get only 2.5 per cent back," Kharge said.

Kharge also alleged that during Modi's chief ministership, he incited violence and said such a person should not talk about south and north divide.



The Congress chief also alleged that there is a "danger to democracy" in the country and accused the BJP of attempting and also toppling elected governments.

"Non-BJP ruled states such as Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh are being discriminated against and neglected. They (Centre) don't release funds and then say we have released the funds but it was not spent. They purposely stall work... this is a big conspiracy of the BJP," he alleged.

Kharge also alleged that the Modi government was "extorting" money through the route of electoral bonds.

"They are using this money to finish democracy. They made 411 MLAs cross over to their side. We had elected governments in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Goa, Manipur and Uttarakhand. You know how governments were made to fall... Their (BJP) job is to finish democracy," he said.

Kharge also claimed that he got abusive calls a few days ago and he has got a case registered in a police station.

"When I was small, we lost so much. Only I was left along with my father in my family. And I have come to this stage at 81. I have been in public life for 53 years. But they target me, defame me, abuse me. A person who is a Scheduled Caste has no one behind him. They want to defame such a person," he said.

Hitting out at the BJP, Kharge said they make a big deal about the president belonging to the Scheduled Caste community or Scheduled Tribe community. "We also made internationally known and well-educated Scheduled Caste person the president. I am not criticising the present president. I know about her contribution," he said.

The "black paper" highlights social, economic and political "injustices" committed during the Modi government's tenure.

"The Modi government's 10 years in power have devastated the country's economy, aggravated unemployment, destroyed the country's agricultural sector, abetted crimes against women and committed grave injustices against minorities in the country," the party alleged in its document.

"The Modi government is silent on price rise... the prices of petrol, diesel and daily essentials has reached record levels," the "Black Paper" said.

Terming the 2016 move of demonetisation as a "blunder", the party said economic effects of the "disastrous demonetisation" seven years ago continue to haunt the country even now.

The black paper also raised issues such as "un-

employment, price rise, farmers' distress, failure to carry out a caste census and injustice to women".

Kharge said the prime minister talks of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi whenever he is asked about price rise. But they (NDA) are ruling now and they should answer what they have done to control inflation, he added.

It was Modi's guarantee to provide two crore jobs every year and ensure MSP to farmers. Now the prime minister should say he could not do it. Instead he has come up with new guarantees.

"The Congress ensured country's independence and in 2024, it will take country out of BJP's 'darkness of injustice'," he said.

The 'black paper' also alleged that India has become "electoral autocracy" and cited the V-Dem institute.

Sharing a link to the black paper, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh recalled that on January 4, 2014, in his press conference lasting about 75 minutes, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had made two far reaching statements that are most relevant today.

"It encapsulates the Black Paper on 10 Saal Anyak Kaal just released by the Congress Party and the so-called 'White Paper' which will be tabled by the Modi government today. Dr Manmohan Singh said: 1. History will be kinder to me. 2. It will be disastrous for the country to have Shri Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister. Both statements have been proved right today."

The party also hit out at the government over the Manipur issue and the border situation with China. (PTI)

Congress brought black paper to hide its black deeds: BJP

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: The BJP on Thursday hit back at the Congress over its 'black paper' against the Modi government, claiming that the opposition party has brought it to hide its "black deeds" and is in pain as it wants action in corruption cases stopped.

"But this will not happen. PM Modi has made it clear that there will be no compromise on the issue of corruption. There is no place for those who have looted (public money). We will expose your black deeds to people," BJP leader Ravi Shankar Prasad said after Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge released a "black paper" to highlight the alleged failures of the central government.

Those who indulged in corruption and were behind scams worth lakhs of crores of rupees are bringing out the black paper, Prasad said wryly, and asserted that the "story of scams" is over and the country is progressing under Modi's leadership.

He said the government has weeded out over accounts of over 10 crore fictitious beneficiaries of government schemes.

India was seen as a fragile economy and identified with "policy paralysis" when the Congress-led UPA was in power, while it is now the fifth largest global economy and its forex reserves and foreign investment are on the rise, Prasad told reporters.

He dismissed the Congress' claim of a rise in price of essential items and unemployment, and cited figures to assert that the Modi government has created a lot of employment and tackled inflation much better than the UPA.

"We will expose the Congress. People are going to give no importance to it," he said.

The Congress 'black paper' highlights issues such as "unemployment, price rise, farmers' distress, failure to carry out a caste census and injustice to women."

Attacking Modi, Kharge said he talks of Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi when asked about price rise but "they are ruling now and they should answer what they have done." (PTI)

'Have resigned from Cong, some things are better left unsaid'

MUMBAI, Feb 8: Senior Mumbai Congress leader and former Maharashtra minister Baba Siddique on Thursday said he has resigned from the party after being associated with it for nearly five decades. He did not cite any reason for his decision to quit the Congress though he said that there is a lot to express but "some things are better left unsaid", in an apparent dig at the party.

This is the second exit of a key city-based leader of the grand old party in a month after former Mumbai Congress chief Milind Deora joined Chief Minister Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena.

A prominent minority face of the Mumbai Congress, Siddique also served as a minister when the Congress-NCP coalition was in power.

His announcement comes days after the Election Commission of India recognised the Ajit Pawar faction as the real National Congress Party (NCP).

There is also speculation that he might join the NCP.

Siddique in a post on X said, "I joined the Indian National Congress party as a young teenager and it has been a significant journey lasting 48 years. Today I resign from the primary membership of the Indian National Congress Party @INCIndia with immediate effect."

He added, "There's a lot I would have liked to express but as they say some things are better left unsaid. I thank everyone who has been a part of this journey."

During the peak of the COVID-19 outbreak, Siddique had earned much praise for arranging highly sought-after medicines for several needy patients.

The politician is also known for his grand 'Ifar' parties which are attended by top Bollywood stars.

His son Zeeshan Siddique is currently a Congress MLA from Bandra (East) in Mumbai. (PTI)

PM Modi hails Manmohan Singh's contribution to democracy

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: Bidding farewell to members retiring from the Rajya Sabha, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday lauded the contribution of his predecessor Manmohan Singh to the House and the country, and said he will be remembered whenever democracy is discussed.

Singh, he noted, came to vote in the Rajya Sabha on a wheelchair to help strengthen democracy.

As he gave his best wishes to the retiring members, he expressed the hope that they will scale new heights after getting educated in this 'eternal university'.

He also hoped that the country and the new generations would benefit from their experience. The Prime Minister said while the Lok Sabha changes every five years and is adorned with a new look, the Rajya Sabha gets a new vitality and energy after every two years, that fills it with an atmosphere of new excitement and enthusiasm.

That is why, he said the farewell every two years in this House is not a farewell, but leaves a priceless legacy with the indelible memories left behind for the new members.

"This House is a symbol of continuity," he noted. Hailing Singh, Modi said, "I would especially like to remember Dr. Manmohan Singh ji. For six times he has been a member of this House and has made a huge contribution to this House with his valuable thoughts."

"As a leader and also as the Leader of the Op-



position, he has made a very big contribution.

"Whenever our democracy will be discussed, he will be one of those few esteemed members whose contribution will always be remembered," Modi said.

The prime minister said Singh coming on a wheelchair to vote in the House was an inspiring example of a member's dedication to his duties.

"I believe he came to impart strength to democracy", Modi said as he conveyed his good wishes for the former prime minister's long and healthy life.

Singh was first elected to the Rajya Sabha in October 1991 after he became the Finance minister. He had six terms in the Rajya Sabha - 1991, 1995, 2001, 2007, 2013 and 2019.

He is currently a member of the Council of States from Rajasthan and his term ends on April 3, 2024.

Singh was Leader of the House in Rajya Sabha from May 2004 to 2014 when he was prime minister. He also remained as Leader of the Opposition in Rajya Sabha from March 21, 1998 to May 21, 2004.

Prime minister Modi also urges current and future MPs of both houses to view the lives of senior, retiring MPs as a guiding light and learn from their conduct in life and from the talents they exhibited in their careers.

Marking the significance of the moment, the prime minister said members who are leaving today had the opportunity to be in both old and the new building and they are leaving bearing witness to the 'Amrit Kaal' and 75 years of the Constitution. Recalling the time of the Covid pandemic when uncertainties loomed large, he lauded the commitment of MPs for not letting any hindrance come in the way of the functioning of the House.

He noted the huge risks undertaken by the Members of Parliament to fulfil their responsibilities. Modi also expressed deep grief for those members who lost their lives to coronavirus, and said the House accepted it with grace and continued to move forward.

Quoting ancient scriptures, the prime minister explained that those who keep good company inculcate similar qualities, and those surrounded by bad company become flawed.

Sixty-eight members of Rajya Sabha are retiring between February and May after completing their term. (PTI)

K'taka CM reaches out to people with mass grievance redressal programme in Bengaluru

BENGALURU, Feb 8: Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Thursday held grievance redressal programme "Janaspandana", reaching out directly to people to address their concerns and issues with promise of speedy solutions, in front of the Vidhana Soudha, the seat of state legislature and secretariat here.

The chief minister had held a similar exercise on November 27 last year at his home office 'Krishna'. In what is billed to be the first such mass grievance redressal programme held on the premises of Vidhana Soudha, department-wise stalls were set up at the venue to help the aggrieved citizens, who came to seek redressal of their issues. Earlier chief ministers have held such events elsewhere like the home office and official residence.

Siddaramaiah said he has instructed officials to dispose of the applications received from the people, who came from different parts of the State, within one month. Speaking to reporters after the Janaspandana programme, he said, 11,000 applications have been received today, and 20,000 people have taken part.

"Concerned DCs (Deputy Com-

missioners) will dispose of applications in a time bound manner. District in-charge Secretaries have been instructed to resolve issues raised in the applications, pertaining to their districts," the CM said.

Noting that about 98 per cent applications received in the first Janaspandana programme have been disposed of, he said officials were instructed to clear them in the same manner this time too.

"If disposal of applications happens in the lower level, people will not come to Bengaluru to resolve their problems. The responsibility lies on DCs and CEOs and SPs," he said. Administration must not be inactive, he further said, adding that "I will direct the officers regarding the same. I will ask them to resolve matters at their level."

The Chief Minister was seen personally meeting the people with grievances, especially those with disabilities, having health issues, elderly, and women. He received applications from them, assuring them of appropriate response at the earliest, while directing officials concerned to address them on priority. (PTI)

Only those elected will rule in democracy: Bhagwant Mann at LDF protest

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann slammed the BJP-led Centre on Thursday for "attacking" federalism and using governors in opposition-ruled states to hinder the governments' work, and stressed that only those who have been elected by people have the right to rule in a democracy.

Speaking at the Left Democratic Front (LDF) protest led by Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan here, Mann said he was forced to come to Jantar Mantar instead of making policies for Punjab.

"We should have been in our secretariats, making policies, but we have come here to seek our rights. It is important to stick together to save the country," he said. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader accused governors in opposition-ruled states of hindering the state governments' work.

"The (Punjab) governor said the Assembly session was illegal, so we had to go to the Supreme Court... The BJP is nowhere in Punjab. It has only two MLAs. Wherever the BJP is not present, the governors act as the opposition," he said.

"Those elected will rule in a democracy. You cannot dictate. You cannot keep sitting on a bill," Mann said. He also mentioned a controversy around the

Chandigarh mayoral polls held on January 30. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept the polls against the Congress-AAP alliance.

Manoj Sonkar of the BJP defeated the AAP's Kuldeep Kumar for the mayor's post, polling 16 votes against his rival's 12. Eight votes were declared invalid. Opposition councillors accused the presiding officer of tampering with the ballot papers, a charge denied by the BJP.

"You must have seen what happened in Chandigarh. They had to count 36 votes and they did a scam of almost 25 per cent votes.... In May, 90 crore votes are going to be counted," Mann said, referring to the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

DMK leader Tiruchi Siva accused the Tamil Nadu governor of interfering in the work of the state government and said, "We have assembled here to make the country realise that we are against the authoritarianism of the Union government headed by the BJP."

"The states are being suppressed, our rights are being usurped," he added.

The DMK leader alleged that governors in opposition-ruled states are indulging in "extra-constitutional, unwarranted activities".

"They are not allowing the state governments to make laws. In Tamil Nadu, the governor does the same and everyone knows what the Kerala governor is doing. Have you ever seen a governor sitting on a dharna on a street?" he asked.

Siva expressed confidence that the opposition will form the government at the Centre following the Lok Sabha polls that are likely to be held in April-May.

"The DMK has two slogans -- state autonomy and abolish governorship. The 2024 election is the only opportunity available to us. Go to the polling booth with the ballot paper in your hand and when you return, the BJP government would have fallen and our alliance would have assumed power. On the next Independence Day, the prime minister of our alliance will hoist the (national) flag at the Red Fort. That day is not far," he asserted. National Conference (NC) president Farooq Abdullah asked why Assembly polls are not being held in Jammu and Kashmir and wondered what was gained from the abrogation of the provisions of Article 370 of the Constitution.

"When they (Centre) abrogated Article 370, they said it was responsible for terrorism. Yesterday, two innocent people were shot dead (in Srinagar)," the for-

mer Jammu and Kashmir chief minister said.

"You have denied us election, which is our right according to the Constitution. Are we not part of India that you have denied us the basic right to govern ourselves? Give us our constitutional right so that we can move forward," he said.

The veteran leader stressed that the opposition is not an enemy of the government.

"If you want a strong India, do not consider the opposition as an enemy. The opposition is essential... Parliament is not meant to be one-sided. None of us who sit in Parliament wants India to fail," he said.

Former Congress leader and Rajya Sabha MP Kapil Sibal talked about the electoral bonds scheme and alleged that the money earned by the BJP through these is being used to destabilise governments in states ruled by opposition parties.

"The BJP has collected around ₹ 5,000 crore through electoral bonds. In the Supreme Court, I asked do you use it for elections? Because an MP cannot spend more than ₹ 95 lakh in an election and an MLA cannot spend more than ₹ 45 lakh.... This fund is used when they have to topple opposition governments," Sibal said. (PTI)

Delhi-Noida borders witness traffic chaos, heavy police force deployed

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: Massive traffic jams were witnessed on the Delhi-Noida borders on Thursday as police put up barricades to check vehicles entering the national capital after a protest called by farmers in Noida and Greater Noida, officials said.

Motorists spent hours in the crawling traffic at the Delhi-Noida link road near Mayapuri Vihar, as police personnel with heavy equipment were on alert to deal with any eventuality in case protesting farmers reached there.

At the border, heavy duty bulldozers, backhoe machines, riot control vehicles and water cannons were parked strategically, the officials said.

According to the Delhi Traffic Police, heavy traffic was also witnessed at DND, Chilla, and Ghazipur borders.

Several farmers' groups in Noida and Greater Noida, who have been on protest since December 2023 demanding hiked compensation and developed plots

against their acquired land, on Thursday gave a call to march towards Parliament to press for their demands. However, they were stopped near Mahamaya Flyover in Noida.

A senior Delhi Police officer said that if needed, the link road near Mayapuri Vihar will be blocked completely.

"As of now, the Uttar Pradesh Police is dealing with them (farmers) and hopefully they will not enter Delhi," he said.

At Sarita Vihar in south Delhi, several vehicles going towards Noida through Kalindi Kunj were stuck in the jam, the officials said. "I am going to Agra and cannot change route now because this is the only way which will take me to the Yamuna Expressway. The traffic is crawling," said Raj Sharma, a commuter.

Heavy traffic jams were also reported on the Delhi-Noida-Direct (DND) Flyway and the Delhi-Meerut expressway, the officials said. (PTI)

Apollo Cancer Centre introduces 'Made in India', CAR-T cell program

First Private Hospital in India to successfully complete CAR T Cell Therapy

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 8: In a ground-breaking development, Apollo Cancer Centres (ACCs) has emerged as the first private hospital group in India to have successfully completed the CAR-T cell program and to further augment it. The group will now provide access to 'Made in India' CAR-T cell therapy, beginning with NexCAR19™ (Axicabtagene autoleucel), for the treatment of B-cell lymphomas and B-acute lymphoblastic leukaemia in patients aged 15 years and above.

CAR-T cell therapies, often known as 'living drugs' involve the extraction of a patient's T-cells (a type of white blood cells whose function is to fight cancer cells) through a process known as Apheresis. These T-cells are then genetically modified by a safe vehicle (viral vector) in a controlled laboratory setting, so that they express modified connectors on their surface called Chimeric Antigen Receptors (CARs). These CARs are specifically designed to recognise a protein which is abnormally expressed on certain cancer cells. They are then multiplied to a desired dose, and infused directly into the patient.

CAR-T cell therapies have gained global recognition for its unparalleled success in transforming the lives of patients with challenging B-cell malignancies. Having treated over 25,000 patients worldwide, have benefited from this therapeutic model. Dr Anupam Chakrapani, Senior Consultant - Haematology



& BMT Specialist, ACC, Kolkata, said, "The successful treatment of three patients using CAR-T Cell therapy at the commercial level, represents a significant leap forward in our fight against B-cell lymphomas and acute lymphoblastic leukaemia. These cases highlight the efficacy and potential of this transformative therapy in providing new hope for patients facing these challenging conditions."

Sharing insights into the success of the program, he further added, "Having successfully treated patients with imported drugs, we are now poised to treat them with the indigenously built therapy."

Dr Rajat Bhattacharyya, Senior Consultant - Pediatric

Haematology, ACC, Kolkata, said, "The successful implementation of CAR-T Cell therapy represents a pivotal moment in the advancement of cancer treatment in India. Treating patients with this revolutionary therapy showcases the potential and efficacy of this transformative approach in addressing challenging B-cell malignancies. This milestone signifies a new chapter in our fight against cancer, offering renewed hope and possibilities to those battling these conditions."

On the occasion, Mr Rana Dasgupta - CEO Eastern Region, ACC Kolkata, Apollo Hospitals Enterprises Limited, said, "Embarking on a pioneering journey, Apollo Cancer Centres has achieved a remarkable feat in the realm of cancer treatment. With successful treatments, our commitment to advancing CAR-T Cell Therapy is unwavering. Being the first private hospital in India to achieve success in this transformative therapy sets a new benchmark, reinforcing our dedication to ground-breaking healthcare. The indigenously built CAR-T treatment, NexCAR19, reflects our commitment to accessible and effective solutions. Apollo Cancer Centres is not just changing the narrative; we're rewriting the possibilities of giving better treatment outcome for cancer patients across India and beyond."

The introduction of CAR-T Cell therapy by Apollo Cancer Centres has been a trailblazer, representing a new era for cancer treatment in the country.

Maharashtra signs MoU with Google for harnessing Artificial Intelligence

PUNE, Feb 8: The Maharashtra government on Thursday signed a Memorandum of Understanding with search engine giant Google to utilize Artificial Intelligence for solutions in sectors like agriculture, healthcare and education.

The MoU was signed at the company's office here in the presence of deputy chief minister Devendra Fadnavis, Sanjay Gupta, country head and vice president, Google India; and state chief secretary Nitin Karer.

"Few weeks back, I met Gupta ji and we had a small talk on how AI is affecting our lives and he informed me that their different centres of excellence are creating different platforms and applications which are not only changing the businesses but the lives of people. I told him about the government's plan to set up a centre of excellence in Nagpur. Here we both thought that this can be a mutually beneficial partnership," Fadnavis said on this occasion.

Technology should be used to "positively affect" governance and power its delivery systems as this can change the people's lives, the deputy CM added.



Google and the state government will work together on seven areas, he said, adding that one of them is "agricultural sustainability."

"Today we are talking about sustainability in every sphere of life but the sustainability issues are much more vital in agriculture. Half our worries in government are about agriculture sustainability. With climate change issues, we have unseasonal rains, we have droughts in same year. It has become a localised phenomena that we need more predictability and

sustainability in the field of agriculture," Fadnavis said.

With the platforms and applications that Google is going to create, sustainability and predictability can be brought in agriculture and agricultural distress can be reduced, he added.

"In the field of start-ups, the collaboration will bring Pune on the global map. With the start-up ecosystem increasing, a lot of technology start-ups are coming up. A lot of start-ups are working in the field of agriculture and they are changing the lives of farmers,"

Fadnavis said.

The government will also collaborate with Google for taking healthcare to "the last man of society," he further said.

"We can create infrastructure but the issue is with human resources. I do not blame the doctors but trained doctors have ample opportunities in cities and they are not ready to go to the interior places, and it is the technology which can bridge the gap. With AI, we can take the quality healthcare to the last man of the society and apply it," he said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi created a technology-based delivery system and now government schemes are reaching the last person in society and 25 crore people have been brought above the poverty line, Fadnavis said, adding that AI applications "will help create an ecosystem."

A release from the company said the Maharashtra government will be able to leverage Google's AI expertise to "unlock new possibilities in land record management, disease detection, urban environment resilience and AI upskilling, among others". (PTI)

30 launches over next 14 months: IN-SPACE

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: India's space regulator IN-SPACE on Thursday said about 30 space launches, including seven by private startups Skyroot and Agnikul, are scheduled in the fourth quarter of 2023-24 and the next fiscal.

The Integrated Launch Manifesto for space launches announced by the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorization Centre (IN-SPACE) include seven launches related to the Gaganyaan mission, two launches each of ISRO's newest rocket - the Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) and the warhorse PSLV developed by an industry consortium. Chennai-based Agnikul Cosmos is scheduled to launch its first 3-D printed rocket AgniBaan-SO1Ed for the fourth quarter of the current fiscal year. The maiden flight of the AgniBaan rocket will be a sub-orbital mission.

The other launches this fiscal year include that of GSLV-F14 to put the INSAT-3DS satellite in orbit to augment weather forecasting, disaster management, and related meteorological services. The third development flight of SSLV is also expected to be by March and it will carry a primary satellite of ISRO and two other payloads, Space Rickshaw and IITMSat, the INSPACE said. Aerospace is expected to carry out four launches of its home-built rocket Vikram-1-1 during the next fiscal while Agnikul Cosmos has lined up two launches of AgniBaan.

In 2024-25 ISRO will undertake three missions each of PSLV and GSLV and seven launches related to the Gaganyaan project, including the test vehicle.

The NewSpace India Limited, the commercial arm of ISRO is expected to carry out four launches of PSLV, one LVM-3 mission and two launches of SSLV. Some start-ups such as Digantara Research & Technology, Dhruvspace, Space Kidz India and academic institutes including IIT-Madras, Manipal Institute of Technology and C V Raman Global University Odisha have lined up launches during the next fiscal. (PTI)

About 3.4 crore older Indians living with mild cognitive impairment, affecting daily lives: Study

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: In India, an estimated 3.4 crore older adults, aged 60 years and above, are living with mild cognitive impairment, affecting their daily lives and activities in some manner, new research has found.

It estimated that 2.4 crore and almost 1 crore older adults are living with mild and major neurocognitive disorders, respectively, impairing faculties like memory, attention, executive function and language, and signifying potential dementia.

Using survey data from nationally representative sample of adults in India, researchers found a higher prevalence of these disorders in the older ones (over 80 years old) and in those with lower levels of education. Prevalence in women and men was found to be comparable and almost equal.

The team also found the prevalence to be higher in rural-living older adults than urban ones, and more in the illiterate than the literate. About 13.4 crore adults in India are estimated to be aged 60 years and above, and are projected to constitute 20 per cent of the population by 2050, they said.

For the study, the international team of researchers, led by Johns Hopkins University, US, and including those at St. John's Medical College, Bengaluru, Karnataka, recruited almost 4,100 participants residing in 18 geographically and linguistically diverse states such as Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Delhi, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, among others. The majority of the group was aged 60-79 years.

This study is called the LASI-DAD, Harmonized Diagnostic Assessment of Dementia for the Longitudinal Aging Study in India, and the participants were recruited from the main LASI. They collectively represented 91 per cent of the population, the researchers said in their study published in the journal PLoS ONE.

Portion of Gokulpuri Metro Station collapses, one dies

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: A 53-year-old man died on Thursday when a portion of the Gokulpuri Metro Station on the Pink Line in northeast Delhi collapsed, police said.

The man was on his scooter when he came under the debris of the collapsed wall of the elevated station platform.

The deceased was identified as Vinod Kumar by police, a resident of Shaheed Bhagat Singh Colony of nearby Karawal Nagar area. According to police, four more people sustained injuries in the incident and are undergoing treatment at GTB Hospital in Dilshad Garden. Two motor cycles and two scooters were damaged in the collapse.

The incident took place at 11 am when a boundary wall (East-end side) of the elevated platform and part of a slab fell on the road below, according to a police of-

ficer. Some portion of the slab is still hanging.

The Pink Line metro runs between Majlis Park and Shiv Vihar metro stations.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (northeast Delhi) Joy Tirkey said as the Gokulpuri Police Station is located next to the metro station, the local staff including the Station House Officer rushed to the spot soon after the incident.

"Four persons were injured due to the collapse. Our staff with the help of locals and officials of fire departments pulled them out of the debris and rushed to their GTB hospital," Tirkey had earlier said.

Tirkey said that about 40-50 metres of the wall along with the slab collapsed.

Several video clips of the incident shot on mobile phones by passersby also emerged on the

social media, showing policemen removing the rubble of the collapsed portion from road and part of a ledge hanging precariously.

A Delhi Fire Service (DFS) official said the collapse was reported at 11.10 am and four fire tenders were immediately pressed into service.

Assistant Divisional Officer (DFS) CL Meena said two persons were rescued by the Delhi police while two others were taken out by the fire officials.

He said the area on the road has been cordoned off till the hanging portion of the slab is removed.

A police officer said the metro station has been shut for now. An inspection will be conducted the team of experts before a repair work can be carried out.

A case under relevant sections of law will be registered in this matter, police said. (PTI)

Curative pleas against 2013 judgement recriminalising consensual gay sex infructuous: SC

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: The Supreme Court on Thursday said the curative pleas against the 2013 judgement, which had re-criminalised consensual gay sex in private, have become "infructuous" keeping in mind the subsequent 2018 verdict decriminalising the act.

A five-judge constitution bench, on September 6, 2018, had unanimously decriminalised a part of Section 377 of the IPC, which criminalises consensual unnatural sex, saying it violated the right to equality and "manifestly arbitrary". The pleas were filed by dancer Navtej Singh Johar and others.

Prior to this, a two-judge bench of the Supreme Court, in 2013, had overruled an earlier 2009 Delhi High Court judgment that had decriminalised consensual gay sex in private.

The review pleas against the 2013 judgement were also dismissed and that had led to filing of the curative petitions in 2014.

A five-judge bench comprising Chief Justice DY Chandrachud and justices BR Gavai, Bela M Trivedi, Pankaj Mishra and Manoj Misra on Thursday said the subsequent judgement in the Navtej Singh Johar case by which consensual gay sex



was decriminalised has made these curative petitions infructuous.

"We will say this curative petition became infructuous in view of the constitution bench judgement rendered in Navtej Johar," the CJI observed. The case, seeking decriminalisation of gay sex, has a significantly long legal history.

Initially NGO Naz Foundation in 2001 filed a PIL in the Delhi High Court seeking legalisation of gay sex among consenting adults. The PIL was dismissed. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Govt to file FIR for

I request all MLAs to visit the schools in their areas and put a grade against the uniforms in the schools. If any school gets a 'C' grade, please inform us. We will take action then," he added.

The chief minister said that the government will take it as a mission to rectify the system and will provide good quality uniforms along with hygienic mid-day meals to the students. "This time, we will file FIRs against the irregularities and those involved in it. We will start taking action after Lok Sabha elections," he added.

The issue was raised by AIUDF MLA Rafiqul Islam when BJP legislator Dharmeswar Konwar asked a question regarding irregularities in the mid-day meal scheme. (PTI)

No More India-Myanmar

in Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. Additionally, fence works covering approx 20 km in Manipur have also been approved, and the work will start soon," he had said. Manipur shares around 390 kms of porous border with Myanmar, but only about 10 kms has been fenced so far. In July last year, the state government shared data that around 700 illegal immigrants entered the state. Mizoram has seen an influx of anti-Junta rebels in thousands since the military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021.

According to government estimates, several thousand refugees are living in different parts of Mizoram since the coup. Mizoram shares a 510-km-long porous border with Myanmar.

Manipur chief minister N Biren Singh had also said that several persons from Myanmar tried to enter into his state but returned on seeing the presence of a large number of security personnel. Apart from Manipur and Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh shares a 520-km border with Myanmar while Nagaland shares a 215-km border with the country. On February 3, after meeting Shah, the Manipur chief minister said the Centre is set to take "some important decisions" in the interests of the people of the state. He however, on Thursday thanked Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Amit Shah for scrapping the FMR and for their commitment to secure the border. Manipur has been witnessing sporadic violence. Ethnic violence broke out in Manipur on May 3, 2023 after a tribal solidarity march was organised in the hill districts to protest against the majority Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe status.

Since then, over 200 people have been killed in the continuing violence. While a section of Kukis have demanded a separate administration or separation from the Manipur government, the Meitei groups are dead against it and warned legislators against any such design and asked them to foil such attempts. Meiteis account for about 53 per cent of Manipur's population and live mostly in the Imphal valley, while tribals, which include Nagas and Kukis constitute 40 per cent and reside mainly in the hill districts. The rest belong to other communities. A series of confidence building measures were taken that included the constitution of a judicial inquiry committee, financial aids to the victims and sending additional troops. Shah had visited the state for four consecutive days in his efforts to calm down the warring communities. However, intermittent violence continues. (PTI)

A decisive step, says Himanta

has decided that the Free Movement Regime (FMR) between India and Myanmar be scrapped to ensure the internal security of the country...". The chief minister, in response to Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Choudhury's remark that the BJP government had made the India-Myanmar Free Movement Regime, said the Congress does not seem to recollect contributions of Pandit Nehru.

"The Free Movement Regime with Myanmar had its genesis in 1950 vide Notification no. 4/15/50-F. In fact, the Nehru government allowed 40 km visa-free entry under FMR, which was reduced to 16 km in 2004 and set for scrapping in 2024", Sarma said. Choudhury had also said the government should first resolve the conflict between Kuki and Meitei communities as soon as possible. (PTI)

BJP-led alliance will

During his 1 hour 56 minute speech, Sarma said the three years of his government have "changed the future" of Assam and the entire country was talking about it. The BJP-led NDA won 75 seats in the 2021 assembly polls. While the BJP bagged 60 seats, its allies AGP and UPPL won nine and six seats, respectively. In the opposition camp, the Congress had won 29, AIUDF 16, BPF four and CPI(M) cornered one seat. The Rajior Dal also won a seat. (PTI)

Foundation Day of District

of journalists one should contact committees that exist to safeguard the interest of journalists. The professions of journalists and advocates are challenging job. Senior journalist and adviser of DPCKA, Sanju Bora said, "A positive story and footwork reporting have to be prioritized. As we serve the public, our work should always be beneficial to the society". After the celebration, a general election of DPCKA for the session of 2023-2027 was held, which was conducted by the district information public relation officer (DIPRO), Utpal Dimasa as returning officer and DPCKA advisers Sonju Bora, Dipen Bora as official.

The incumbent president Diganta Teron got 32 votes and was unanimously elected as the new president while defeating contenders Ritish Rongphar (23 votes) and Kiri Rongphar (18 votes). Meanwhile Debojyoti Bora was elected as the new general secretary of DPCKA by winning 23 votes. Bora won with 4 votes and defeated contender Arun Lekhe (19 votes), Denialson Bey (18 votes) and Vivian Longki Rongpi (16 votes). Media persons from across the districts participated in the function.

Construction activities created

Sarma also appealed to the youths to get themselves trained in solar technology so that employment and earning opportunities in the sector do not slip out of their hands. The chief minister said the engineering company will also provide employment opportunities to those who complete the 90-day training at the facility. He said the state government would also set up similar facilities in Nalbari and Jorhat districts.

The state government is committed to providing skill training in various fields and the upcoming Skill University, the construction of which is underway, is a manifestation of that commitment, he said. (PTI)

AAP declares candidates

needs to be done. There is not much time available with us. With the elections approaching, the time for preparations is also reducing," he said. Pathak said the AAP will work hard to contest the three seats in Assam. The state has 14 Lok Sabha constituencies. "We are partners of a mature and sensible alliance. We have full faith in the INDIA bloc that they will accept it. But winning elections is most important. We are beginning preparations for these three seats immediately," he said. Pathak stressed on expediting seat sharing formula in view of the approaching polls. "All things should be expedited. Talks have been going on for months but still there is no result. We are with the INDIA bloc in fighting against the Modi government. All the decisions on alliance should be taken immediately," he stressed.

Earlier, the AAP leaders had said the party was in talks with the Congress over seat sharing in Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat and Goa. AAP convener and Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal has already announced Chaitar Vasava as party candidate from Bharuch seat in Gujarat.

Sources said talks between AAP and Congress have been stalled over seat sharing in Delhi and Punjab. However, the state units of both the parties are not in favour of any alliance in Punjab they said. In Delhi, AAP leaders have remained tight-lipped over seat sharing formula for the Lok Sabha polls. However, sources in the two parties indicate that each side wanted to contest on four of the seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi. Some sources also claimed that Congress was demanding four seats while giving three to AAP including East Delhi, South Delhi and North East Delhi seats. In the Lok Sabha polls in 2014 and 2019, the BJP registered massive victory defeating Congress and AAP candidates on all the seven seats with huge margins. Interestingly, in 2019, the BJP candidates polled more votes than the combined tally of the two parties. (PTI)

Record tourist flow to

immersive programme to honour the cultural legacy and narratives of Kaziranga and its surrounding region, cycling in Kohora, Panpur jeep safari and boat safari in Biswanath Wildlife Division, the official added. (PTI)

Indian economy on road

league of 'Top Five' global economies in just about a decade and the economy has been transformed into a far more resilient avatar amidst a challenging global environment, said the 'White Paper on Indian Economy'.

It regretted that the UPA government, in its quest to maintain high economic growth by any means after the global financial crisis of 2008, severely undermined the macroeconomic foundations. The banking crisis was one of the most important and infamous legacies of the UPA government. "When our government assumed office, the economy was on a road to nowhere, exhibiting tell-tale signs of deep distress emanating from multiple 'wrong turns' in economic policy," said the White Paper which is likely to be debated in the Lok Sabha on Friday. Sitharaman is expected to reply after a four-hour debate.

The finance minister, while presenting the 2024-25 interim budget last week, had said that the economy has been put firmly on a high sustainable growth path with all-round development in the past 10 years of the Modi government. "It is now appropriate to look at where we were then till 2014 and where we are now, only for the purpose of drawing lessons from the mismanagement of those years," Sitharaman had said.

Listing out 15 scams, including coal block allocation, 2G spectrum auction, CWG and Saradha Chit Fund, during the UPA regime, the Paper said these corruption cases had "shaken confidence of the people" in the economy. "Ultimately, what the UPA government bequeathed in 2014 was an unenviable legacy of a structurally weaker economy and a pervasive atmosphere of despondency," the Paper said. The critical issue of defence preparedness was hampered by policy paralysis, it said, adding, "weak leadership and a consistent lack of intent and action resulted in defence underpreparedness". It said the steps taken by the UPA government to deal with the decline in foreign exchange reserves in 2013 was a 'costly solution' and 'reeked of a re-run of 1991 balance of payment crisis'. Under the UPA government in 2013, forex reserves were just enough to finance a little over 6 months of imports, down from 17 months in end-March 2004. To deal with depleting forex reserves, the government came out with Foreign Currency Non-Resident (FCNR(B)) deposit window for NRIs to attract USD deposits at a high premium in August-September 2013.

The redemption of this high-cost dollar debt was due in 2016, which the NDA government fulfilled without disruption. The UPA government failed miserably to facilitate economic activities. Instead the UPA government created hurdles that held back economy, the paper said, adding that in 2014 the NDA government inherited a "deeply damaged" economy. Armed with political and policy stability, the Modi government recognised the need to make tough decisions for the greater economic good, the Paper said.

"Our government, unlike its predecessor, invested in the foundations of the economy along with building a sturdy superstructure. "Looking back at the last ten years, we can say with humility and satisfaction that we have successfully overcome the challenges left behind by the previous government," it added. In the past ten years, the government has revitalised the stagnant financial sector and overhauled the credit ecosystem within the economy, bringing about significant improvements. The reform measures undertaken by the Modi government have significantly elevated the medium-term investment prospects of the economy. "In sum, the progress achieved in the ten years of our government has overcome the malaise and paralysis of the previous ten years of the UPA government. In 2024, confidence and purpose have replaced the diffidence and drift of 2014," the White Paper said. (PTI)

No. ASRLMS/HR/Recruitment/5307/2023-24/29

NOTICE

Engagement of the following professional, on contractual basis in Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission Society (ASRLMS) will be done through **Walk-in Interview**.

Sl. No.	Position	No. of Vacancies
1	PS to State Mission Director (SMD)	1

1. Interested and eligible candidates may walk-in on 21st February, 2024 (Wednesday) along with duly filled prescribed application form, all original certificates/ documents and a set of self- attested copies of the same.

2. For eligibility criteria, age, salary and other terms and conditions, applicants are advised to visit the official website of ASRLMS <https://asrlms.assam.gov.in/portlets/recruitment-career>.

Sd/-

State Mission Director
Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission Society

Janasanyog /DF/2664/23/9-Feb-24

There's a baby on its way: Aditya Dhar, Yami Gautam confirm pregnancy

MUMBAI, Feb 8: Actor Yami Gautam and her filmmaker-husband Aditya Dhar on Thursday confirmed that they are expecting their first child.

Dhar and Gautam shared the news at the trailer launch event of their upcoming film "Article 370", with the director calling the movie a "family affair".

"My brother was there, my wife was there and there is a baby on its way. It was an amazing time, the way the film happened and the way we got to know about the baby," the "Uri: The Surgical Strike" director said.

Gautam praised her husband for always being there by her side during the shoot.

"If you ask me about motherhood, I really don't know what I would have done had Aditya not been there by my side, and Lokesh bhaiya (brother-in-law) and everybody," she said.

Dhar and Gautam met on the sets of "Uri" in 2019 and got married in 2021.

Set against the backdrop of Article 370 abrogation, the film also stars Priyamani. It is produced by Jyoti Deshpande, Aditya and Lokesh Dhar. (PTI)



Anushree Mehta to helm remake of Rajesh Khanna-starrer 'Bawarchi'

MUMBAI, Feb 8: Filmmaker Anushree Mehta of "Mrs Undercover" fame will tackle the remake of Hrishikesh Mukherjee's classic film "Bawarchi", starring Rajesh Khanna.

The project is a part of a three-film collaboration between Jaadugar Films and Sameer Raj Sippy Productions. The two studios will also develop retellings of the Amitabh Bachchan-Jaya Bachchan starrer "Mili" (1975) and Gulzar's 1972 drama "Koshish".

Mehta, who is also producing along with Abir Sengupta through Jaadugar Films, said she is excited and honoured to direct the film, which will be a modern-day retelling of the classic movie.

"When my business partner Abir Sengupta, Sameer Raj Sippy and I decided to join hands to produce these three iconic films, we were clear that we would leave no stone un-

turned in remaking them with utmost love and respect. During our discussion on 'Bawarchi', Abir and Sameer were of the opinion that I should be writing and directing the remake.

"They were convinced that I would be able to tell the story in a manner which would make them proud. We were in sync with our vision and I wholeheartedly agreed to come aboard as the writer-director," the filmmaker said in a statement.

Released in 1972, "Bawarchi" featured late cinema icon Rajesh Khanna and Jaya Bachchan in the lead roles.

The film revolved around The Sharmas, a middle class family desperately looking for a servant and are relieved when an exuberant and multi-talented man, named Raghu (Khanna), takes up the job.

Also starring Asrani,

Harindranath Chattopadhyay, AK Hangal and Durga Khote, "Bawarchi" was a remake of 1966 Bengali film "Galpo Holeo Satti" by Tapan Sinha.

Mehta said she will ensure that the adaptation will feel relatable to the modern audience.

"The idea of retelling a film is to adapt it according to the current times and make it more relatable to the world we live in today—while keeping the soul and purpose of the original intact. Since 'Bawarchi' itself was a remake of a Bengali film, Hrishida in his time recreated it and made it relatable to that era.

"My attempt is going to be with a similar intention, to retell the classic story of 'Bawarchi' in a way that the family audiences of all age groups can watch and enjoy the movie together. I'm aiming to create a wholesome, unforgettable family experience," she added. (PTI)

WE CELEBRATE DIVERSITY: ANKUR TEWARI ON NEW SEASON OF 'COKE STUDIO BHARAT'



NEW DELHI, Feb 8: Music is not like the Olympics where you compete with different countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh, says composer Ankur Tewari, who believes the idea behind Coke Studio Bharat is to celebrate India's diversity.

Tewari serves as the curator of the second season of Coke Studio Bharat, the Indian chapter of the international music franchise of Coke Studio.

Asked about the standing of Coke Studio Bharat in the music scene where Coke Studio Pakistan and Coke Studio Bangla enjoy massive popularity even with Indian listeners, the music composer said it's nice to see the Indian subcontinent shine with musical stories from different countries.

"For me, music is not like the Olympics... It always helps you if a great song comes from your part of the world. It's exciting, it is a good competition... The whole idea is to make the subcontinent shine," Tewari told PTI in an interview.

"We are so close to Pakistan and Bangladesh physically, but we are completely different in a very interesting way. We have to be honest to who we are... It could be apples and oranges but at the same time, it's the same thing. They are telling the story of their lands, and we are trying to tell the story of our land and its diversity," he added.

Tewari said he is in constant touch with fellow curators Xulfi (Pakistan) and Shayan Chowdhury Arnob (Bangladesh). According to the Mumbai-based musician, it's interesting that both Pakistan and Bangladesh have a strong connection with their languages whereas in India, there is a plurality.

"There are probably one-tenth of the number of languages in Pakistan and in Bangladesh, they take pride in one language, Bangla. In India and in Coke Studio Bharat, we celebrate diversity and the regional pride whether it's Karnataka, Gujarat or Kashmir. We take those stories forward which probably you wouldn't end up seeing in other places. But, at the same time, it's exciting to hear music from them." The second chapter of Coke Studio Bharat will be launched on February 9. The first song of the new season will be Magic by Punjabi singer Diljit Dosanjh and Norwegian dance group The Quick Style. (PTI)

Zindagi series 'Abdullahpur Ka Devdas' to premiere on February 26

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: "Abdullahpur Ka Devdas", a show billed as a captivating blend of love, friendship and poetic drama, will air on Zindagi channel on February 26.

Directed by Anjum Shahzad and written by Shahid Dogar, the 13-episode series stars Bilal Abbas, Raza Talish and Sarah Khan. It is produced by Shailja Kejriwal.

Set in a small town, "Abdullahpur Ka Devdas" is the coming-of-age story of Fakhar (Abbas) and Kashif (Talish), two best friends unknowingly in love with the same woman, Gulbano (Khan).

"However, Gulbano's fantasies have been captured by an anonymous poet named Devdas. As the plot progresses, Kashif reveals himself to be Devdas,

becoming the object of Gulbano's desire. Unbeknown to her, the true Devdas is Fakhar," the makers said in a press release.

Shahzad said "Abdullahpur Ka Devdas" is more than just a love story.

"Love and Devdas are two sides of the same coin. Whether it's the classic Devdas or the modern 'Abdullahpur ka Devdas', true love is at the heart of both stories.

"Shailja Kejriwal (Producer, India) was as a key person in making this story happen. Zindagi has been a fantastic platform for cross-cultural storytelling. I am looking forward for valuable feedback from our friends in India," the director said in a statement. The upcoming series delves into the human heart, showcasing how love's

highs can also bring unexpected turns and deceit, said Kejriwal.

"I can't wait for you to experience the captivating storytelling and powerful performances by our talented actors, portraying characters that resonate with the universal ebb and flow of love," she added.

Khan said she had a wonderful experience working on a unique script with a talented bunch of people.

"The director, Anjum Shahzad worked on every minuscule aspect of the show that made me want to portray Gulbano at the maximum capacity. It is incredibly exciting to know its release on Zindagi; Indian audience has always been generous with their love, and I am eagerly anticipating the response to our heartfelt tale," she said. (PTI)

Second Edition of Royal Stag BoomBox - The Original Sound of Generation Large gets underway



HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 8: Celebrating the spirit of 'Living it Large', Seagram's Royal Stag presents the second edition of Royal Stag BoomBox, a one-of-its-kind musical festival where the best-loved melodies of Bollywood meet the pulsating beats of hip-hop. In an exclusive preview in Mumbai on February 7, the brand unveiled what's in store at the second edition of Royal Stag BoomBox.

For many years, music has been a key consumer engagement pillar for the brand. Royal Stag BoomBox audaciously brings together two distinct genres of the music industry, the melody of Bollywood and the gully vibe of Hip-Hop, to create the original sound of today's generation, the Generation Large. This is a tribe that tends to make rather than follow trends; a tribe that is in constant search of soul-

touching experiences. Royal Stag BoomBox intends to stir the imagination of this generation, blending music they have inherited, Bollywood scores, with the genre that speaks to them, Hip Hop.

This cultural movement manifests itself in two unique, engaging formats:

The On-ground format: this format will travel to four of India's biggest youth hubs - Bhubaneswar, Indore, Jaipur and Pune, offering marquee musical performances with interactive Phygital activations, like insta-live sessions, art showcases, AR/VR installations, AI-based engagement, selfie-booths and more. Last year, the festival witnessed a footfall of over 50K across multiple cities generating 180 Mn+ digital views & 13 Mn+ social interactions.

The In-studio format: a unique musical concept featuring three original Melody x

Hip Hop music tracks that will be released as singles and videos across platforms. The 4 original songs from season 1, Pehle Jaisi Baat Nahin Ft. Dino James X Jasleen Royal, Hoodie Ft. Bali X Nikhita Gandhi, Mohabbat Ft. Amit Trivedi X SlowCheeta and Imtihaan Ft. EPR X Neeti Mohan garnered close to 70 Mn+ views across multiple OTT & audio platforms. Kartik Mohindra, CMO, Pernod Ricard India said, "Music and live experiences bring people together and are natural enablers of conviviality. Royal Stag continues to celebrate music as its key youth passion pillar. Carrying forward the brand's 'Live It Large' ethos and youth connect; we are excited for the launch of the second edition of Royal Stag BoomBox. The kind of response and engagement we received for the festival last year was truly overwhelming. This year, the

platform is set to elevate the experience by blending the melodies of Bollywood with the pulsating beats of Hip-hop, along with art and cultural experiences, truly exemplifying the brand philosophy of living it large."

Speaking about the second edition of Royal Stag BoomBox, Ajay Gupte, CEO-South Asia, Wavemaker said, "Wavemaker is thrilled to continue to be a part of the journey of Royal Stag BoomBox. More than just a musical festival, it represents a cultural movement embracing the 'Living It Large' spirit of the brand. Royal Stag BoomBox guarantees an unforgettable blend of swag, emotion, and the vibrant synergy between Bollywood and hip-hop. The beats of this generation will resonate loudly, and we are confident that the second edition will be another massive hit, just like the last one".

Girona and its historic season roll up at Real Madrid with Liga lead at stake

BARCELONA, SPAIN, Feb 8: Little importance was given to Girona's away game at Real Madrid when the Spanish league published its calendar.

But six months and 23 rounds later and Saturday's game at the Santiago Bernabeu promises to decide which side will be in pole position to win the title come May. It is a clash of the league's most trophied club against a minnow that is enjoying an historic season.

Both teams have lost only once

in the league, and Madrid is just two points ahead of second-placed Girona.

Girona's stunning campaign has drawn it comparisons to Leicester City defying all the odds to win the English Premier League in 2016.

For now, Girona coach Michel Sánchez has repeatedly said he hopes his team can keep up its strong play long enough to finish in the top four, which would earn it a Champions League berth.

"A win at the Bernabeu would

be heard around the world," Michel said on Thursday. "To leave there as leaders would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But even if we win at the Bernabeu it does not mean we would be candidates to win the title. There would still be a long way to go and each game is difficult."

This Girona does not sit back in its area and grind out wins. It goes after rivals, regardless of reputation. It has pulled off comebacks and leads the league with 52 goals, four more than Madrid. Just

ask Atletico Madrid, which Girona beat 4-3, or Barcelona, which fell 4-2 to its fellow Catalan club. Girona's only loss came at the hands of Madrid when Jude Bellingham scored once and set up another for a 3-0 result in September.

Despite Madrid outspending Girona by 727 to 52 million euros (\$782 to \$56 million), they are producing similar results and individual numbers by their top players. Bellingham and Girona striker Artem Dovbyk each has a

league-high 14 goals, a mark also shared with Getafe's Borja Mayoral. Girona winger Sávio and Madrid midfielder Toni Kroos have delivered a league-high seven assists.

Girona midfielder Aleix Garcia has completed the second-most passes, just behind Las Palmas midfielder Kirian Rodríguez, with Kroos in third.

Girona is hoping it will have Dovbyk ready to go after he missed last weekend's 0-0 draw with Real Sociedad due to knee

pain. If not, then veteran Cristián Stuani will likely see more time in attack. The 37-year-old Stuani has seven goals in this campaign.

The visitors will also be missing starting defender Daley Blind and midfielder Yangel Herrera. Both will serve suspensions for accumulation of yellow cards.

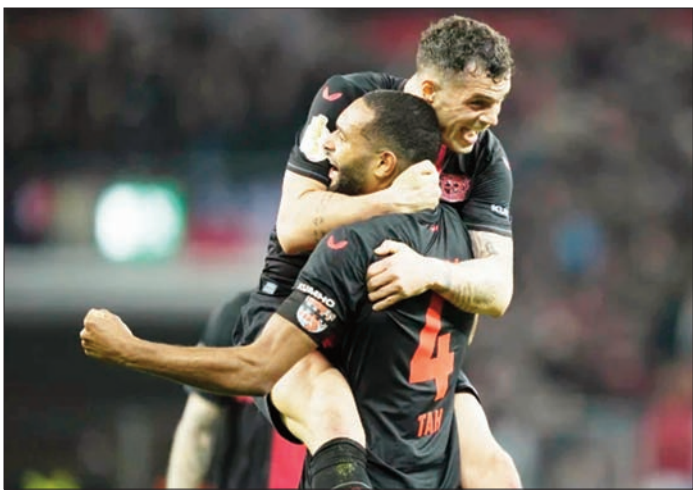
Also, Michel will be in the stands serving the first of a two-game suspension for protesting during the Sociedad game.

"We will see if Dovbyk makes it," Michel said. "We will be miss-

ing important players, but we will be ready to compete Saturday. To arrive to the Bernabeu in these circumstances is a dream come true."

Madrid has doubts in defense where Carlo Ancelotti will have to patch together a backline possibly without any central defenders. David Alaba and Éder Militão ruptured leg ligaments near the start of the season, and Nacho Fernández and Antonio Rudiger are doubtful with minor complaints. (AP)

Alonso and Leverkusen face Bayern Munich in ultimate test of their title bid



DUESSELDORF, GERMANY, Feb 8: It's now or "Neverkussen."

Xabi Alonso has coached Bayer Leverkusen to its best chance in years of finally winning the Bundesliga. The ultimate test comes on Saturday when Leverkusen hosts 11-time defending champion Bayern Munich.

Leverkusen has not lost any of its 30 games in all competitions this season—the only unbeaten team in any of Europe's top five leagues—and leads Bayern by two points in the standings.

Alonso and his players refuse to even talk about the title race—it's still early, they're taking things game by game. Bayern's long reign in German soccer has seen plenty of would-be challengers fall short, not least Borussia Dortmund throwing away its chance on the last day of last season.

And Leverkusen is Germany's great "nearly" team. Five times a Bundesliga runner-up and never a champion, and Champions League runner-up to Real Madrid in 2002. Shaking off the "Neverkussen" nickname will take something special.

Alonso has transformed Leverkusen since taking over what was then a relegation-threatened team in October 2022. His achievements have seen him linked with his old club Liverpool as a potential successor to Jürgen Klopp when the German leaves at the end of the season after nine years in charge. Klopp remains the last non-Bayern coach to win the Bundesliga, with Borussia Dortmund in 2012.

"What Jürgen has done at Liverpool, I have great respect, great admiration for him... but my focus is here at Bayer Leverkusen,"

Alonso said last month after Klopp made his plans public. He's spoken before about how his playing career under some of the best coaches of recent years—Pep Guardiola, Jose Mourinho, Carlo Ancelotti—gave him a wealth of examples to draw on when coaching his own games.

Alonso's team plays a calm, possession-based style which can quickly turn lethal. Full-backs Alejandro Grimaldo and Jeremie Frimpong bring skill and pace to both flanks, and with seven goals and 10 assists in 20 Bundesliga games, Grimaldo is arguably the most influential left back in European soccer this season.

The one big question mark is over the striker position. Victor Boniface has been out for the last month after he was injured while training for the Africa Cup of Nations. In Leverkusen's five games since in the league and cup, neither backup striker Patrik Schick nor new loan signing Borja Iglesias have scored.

As for Bayern, Harry Kane is chasing records in his first season in Germany with 24 goals in 20 league games, but injuries are putting pressure on a thin squad. Goalkeeper Manuel Neuer was out of training this week while left back Alphonso Davies strained a knee ligament last week and forwards Serge Gnabry and Kingsley Coman are both out.

On the positive side, defender Kim Min-jae is back from the Asian Cup after South Korea's semifinal loss to Jordan. Bayern coach Thomas Tuchel is hopeful that midfielder Joshua Kimmich and defender Dayot Upamecano can recover in time to play against Leverkusen. (AP)

Performance in IPL will have greater significance because of T20 WC selection: Moody

CHENNAI, Feb 8: Veteran coach Tom Moody on Thursday said the players' performance in highly-competitive leagues like IPL and ILT20 will have an added heft this time because of the impact it can have on the team selection ahead of the T20 World Cup.

This edition of the marquee ICC event is scheduled to be held jointly in the West Indies and the USA in June and most of the teams, including India, have already finished their T20I assignments.

"The IPL (set to be played between March-May), along with any other T20 tournament, like the ILT20, is important for any player to be performing because every home team is looking at the performances of all their players in these tournaments because of the high-quality cricket in these (leagues)," Moody said during a virtual media interaction facilitated by the Desert Vipers team of the ILT20.

Moody then described how these outings could help players

to secure a berth in the World Cup-bound squads.

"If you are scoring runs, taking wickets and showing consistency, it only puts you in a good position as an individual when it comes to those final tough decisions around the selection table."

"It allows you to continue with that sort of confidence, going into an important (T20) World Cup," Moody added.

Even India head coach Rahul Dravid had expressed a similar opinion recently.

"We might not get many opportunities to play together, so we will have to work around that. We will obviously have the IPL, and you know, everyone will be watching closely to see how some of those guys play and what are the slots we need to fill in the team," Dravid had said after India's three-match home T20I series against Afghanistan last month.

However, Moody was not unmindful of the challenge a new destination like USA can offer to the teams, who otherwise might

be familiar with conditions in the West Indies.

"Many people have played in the Caribbean but what would be presented in the US will be one of many different things."

The former Australian all-rounder said the teams and players will have to adapt quickly to a non-regular cricketing venue like the US.

"Talking about world-class players, they have played in all sorts of conditions and situations. I believe the top players and teams would adapt pretty quickly, whether it's chasing down a total over 200 or even low-scoring ones," he reckoned.

As the discussion veered towards the future of Test cricket in a world of mushrooming T20 leagues, Moody said the International Cricket Council (ICC) should work with various boards to save the traditional format of the game. "It's a balance of both. These leagues are cropping up around the world for a reason, as there is an appetite for T20 cricket." (PTI)



India drawn to meet Sweden in away tie in September

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: India were on Thursday drawn to meet Sweden in an away Davis Cup World Group I tie in September.

The Indian Davis Cup team had blanked Pakistan 4-0 in the World Group I play-offs in Islamabad last week while Sweden lost 1-3 to Brazil at home in the Qualifiers first round. India have never defeated Sweden in five meetings so far but will have a great opportunity to get their

first win as the hosts do not boast of intimidating singles players. The last time India competed against Sweden was in 2005 when India hosted them in Delhi and lost 1-3.

Sweden have a very talented Elias Ymer, who is ranked 160, in their ranks. India have higher-ranked Sumit Nagal (121) and if he is available, it will be an interesting tie.

India captain Rohit Rajpal

seemed happy with the draw, considering that they could have been drawn against Novak Djokovic-led Serbia. "The away ties are tough because surface choice is with the home team. It will depend on what surface they choose to play on. We could have drawn

tougher teams and now we have to make full use of this draw," Rajpal told PTI.

Ymer and his brother Mikael (189) feature in top-200 and are followed by Dragos Nicolae Madaras (256), Karl Frieberg and Leo Borg. They have a top-100 doubles player in Andre Goransson (67).

India have five players in doubles top-100, led by world number one Rohan Bopanna, who though does not play Davis Cup anymore. He is followed by Yuki Bhambri (60), N Sriram Balaji (78), Vijay Sundar Prashanth (80) and Anirudh Chandrasekar (90). (PTI)



FIH Pro League: Indian women aim to turn the tide against USA



BHUBANESWAR, Feb 8: Arresting the free-fall after a hat-trick of defeats will be the top-most agenda of Indian women's hockey team as it gears up to face the United States in its fourth FIH Pro League 2023-24 clash here on Friday.

Having failed to qualify for the Paris Olympics, the Savita Punia-led women's team's performance had gone from bad to worse in recent times.

India lost 1-2 to China, followed by another 1-3 defeat at the hands of The Netherlands.

The hosts lost their third match on the trot against the formidable Australia, who blanked them 3-0. Reflecting on the team's early setbacks, skipper Savita said: "Our initial matches have posed formidable challenges, but we're a resilient team. Each defeat has fuelled our determination to learn, adapt, and come back stronger. The upcoming clash against the USA is an opportunity to showcase our true potential and register our first win in the tournament."

On the flip side, the USA had

a challenging start to the tournament as well, suffering a comprehensive 0-7 defeat against the Netherlands.

Subsequent losses of 0-3 to Australia and 1-3 to China have added to their woes. The American squad, too, will be eager to bounce back in the tournament.

The Indian captain knows the significance of earning the first points in the tournament.

"Both the teams are hungry for victory, and we are fully aware of the significance of securing our first points."

We have analysed our strengths and areas of improvement, and we are ready to implement a strategic approach on the field. Our focus is on playing as a cohesive unit, supporting each other, and executing our game plan effectively."

When it comes to their head-to-head record, the USA hold a statistically advantageous position with 10 victories in 16 encounters, while the Indian team has secured four wins, and two matches ended in draws. (PTI)

Secret to our team's good performance is team bonding: India U19 captain Saharan

BENONI (SOUTH AFRICA), Feb 8: The camaraderie in the dressing room has played a significant role in Indian team's dominant run in the U19 World Cup, skipper Uday Sharan said on Thursday and vowed to bring the trophy back home. Defending champions India have not lost a single match in the tournament. They have logged big-margin victories and were not tested till they bumped into hosts South Africa in the semifinals in which they scored a narrow two-wicket win.

India have been a force to reckon with in the Under-19 World Cup, reaching the title clash seven times in last nine editions. "It is a dream for all of us to win this tournament. Everyone gets only one Under-19 World Cup and we want to repeat the history. We also want to register our names in history. We are focused on giving our best," Saharan told PTI-Bhasha in an interview.

"I would like to tell the countrymen to continue supporting us

like this. We promise to give everything to bring the Cup back."

India's power-packed performance in the tournament was highlighted by three 200-plus run margin wins.

"The secret to our team's good performance is team bonding. The atmosphere in the dressing room is very friendly. Everyone trusts each other and is ready to help each other. That is why the performance graph has been consistently good," said Saharan, who spent his early days in Sri Ganganagar before shifting to the border town of Fazilka in Punjab.

"We are not focusing on rival team, we are concentrating on our own game. We have made a match-by-match strategy and are taking every match seriously," Saharan, who has scored 389 runs in six matches so far, said.

Asked if the Indian colt would have revenge on their minds if they play against Australia since the senior team had lost to them in the ODI World Cup final last

year, Saharan said, "I am not thinking anything like that."

"We are focusing on our game and we have to give our best. We are playing according to the match conditions. Every match is important because it is the World Cup and all the teams are good."

A lot of stalwarts in the senior national team have emerged from the Under-19 World Cup like Mohammad Kaif, Virat Kohli, Shubman Gill and Ravindra Jadeja.

Saharan refused comparisons with these stars, saying he won't take pressure of legacy.

"I never think about it. I don't think about the past. I just think about how I can give my best for the team and how to get the best out of the team."

Chasing a target of 245 runs in the semi-final against South Africa, Saharan pulled the team out of trouble after it had lost four wickets for just 32 runs.

Saharan pulled the team out of pits with a record 171-run partnership for the fifth wicket with Sachin Dhas (96).



"My father has taught me to play it as long as possible. I chose to be the finisher and I will try to fulfil the responsibility till the end, to take the team to victory."

"I don't have to do anything different. Anyway, I remain calm even if match in a tight spot. It is important to keep the mind working and I feel that I am doing right now and will do the same in future also."

"Shubman Gill is also from

Prajwal Dev gets wild card entry for Bengaluru Open

BENGALURU, Feb 8: Prajwal Dev, who was recently named in India's Davis Cup squad as a reserve, was on Thursday handed a wild card entry into the singles main draw of the Bengaluru Open, an ATP Challenger event starting February 12.

The 27-year Dev had competed in Bengaluru Open last year also but had fallen in the first round.

However he is coming into the fresh season on the back of a decent show in 2023 in which he ended a runner-up at the ITF 15k event in Thailand and also reached the semi-finals in three other tournaments.

"I would like to thank KSLTA for the wonderful opportunity to play in the main draw. I am privileged to receive the wild card and I am looking forward to the tournament. Hopefully, I can do well."

I am coming off a good week in Chennai and hopefully I continue with that," said Prajwal, currently ranked 611 in ATP rankings.

"Expectation is there and I am hopeful I will live up to that," he said.

The KSLTA will soon announce more main draw wild cards for the tournament which will conclude on February 18.

"Prajwal has the potential to break into top-500 soon and we want to give him an opportunity to achieve the feat at the earliest. He is a very talented player, and support at right time is what a player needs. Our endeavour is to support local talent," said Sunil Yajaman, the Tournament Director.

"We are delighted to give this opportunity to Prajwal. Hopefully he will make full use of it," Yajaman further added. (PTI)

Khelo India University Games powerful platform for intellectually and physically balanced youth: CM

Logo, mascot, jersey and theme song launched

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 8: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday unveiled the logo for the 4th Khelo India University Games Ashtalakshmi at a glittering function held at Karmabir Nabin Chandra Bordoloi Indoor stadium at Sarusajai Sports complex here this evening.

It may be noted that Guwahati and other Northeast states is hosting the games from February 19 where athletes from several universities across the nation are participating for 20 events. 16 of the events will be played in Guwahati where as other four events will be held in other Northeastern states. The games will continue upto February 29.

In the same programme, Sarma along Union minister of state for youth affairs and sports Nisith Pramanik launched the mascot, the theme song, the jersey and the torch of the game.

Speaking on the occasion, Sarma said that Khelo India University Games is a powerful platform to showcase the intellectually and physically balanced youth potential of the country. He thanked Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union youth affairs and sports minister Anurag Thakur for allowing Northeast to host the games. He said that the



world-class sports infrastructure in Guwahati will help the five thousand sports persons to showcase their sporting acumen. He also said that the sporting events will provide a platform for university athletes from across the country

to compete with the best and get noticed at the bigger platform.

The chief minister said that Assam has the experience of holding sports events like National Games, South Asian Games, and other international sports events. Therefore, state government is confident to host the Khelo India University Games impressively and with grand success. He also said that the event will showcase the spirit of unity in diversities.

The Khelo India University Games - Ashtalakshmi 2023 will feature an array of sporting disciplines including Athletics, Rugby, Basketball, Volleyball, Swimming, Badminton, Hockey, Fencing, Kabaddi, Football, Tennis, Mallakhamb, Judo, Table Tennis, Boxing, Shooting, Weightlifting, Archery, Wrestling, and Yogasana, the event embodies the essence of unity in diversity.

Union minister of state for youth affairs and sports Nisith Pramanik also spoke on the occasion which was organised by sports youth welfare department. Sports and youth welfare minister Nandita Gorlosa, handloom and textile minister UG Brahma, host of other dignitaries were present on the occasion.

Paris Olympics will be challenging, need to be smarter: Sindhu



NEW DELHI, Feb 8: Set to return after an injury-induced break, two-time Olympic medalist PV Sindhu is aware the road to Paris will be "challenging" and she needs to be "smarter" in her pursuit of coveted gold medal in the French capital.

Former world champion Sindhu has been enduring a lean patch. She has suffered injury setbacks and a dip in form in the last 18 months.

She suffered stress fracture on her left ankle during the successful 2022 CWG campaign and later sustained another injury on left knee during the French Open in October last year, forcing her out for three months.

"I would say, this Olympics is going to be a different experience because the 2016 and 2020 Olympics were very different. Paris will be more challenging but at the same time, I have much more experience and I will have to be much smarter this time," Sindhu told PTI in an interaction.

The 28-year-old from Hyderabad was in Mumbai on Thursday at Great Place To Work's FOR ALL summit.

"In women's circuit, players in the top 10-15 are tough. It is important to be focused and have a strategy so that you can switch to plan B if plan A doesn't work. It is important to stay calm as sometimes you can go blank. It is important to have a strong mindset," she said.

Desperate to find her mojo back after a series of low results, Sindhu parted ways with Korean coach Park Tae-sang early last year.

She trained with Sports Authority of India's (SAI) Vidhi Chaudhary and then Malaysia's former All-England champion Muhammad Hafiz Hashim in July but success continued to elude her.

Then former All England Champion Prakash Padukone reached out to her and soon she shifted her base to Bangalore. She is currently training under Indonesia's Agus Santoso at Prakash Padukone Badminton Academy (PPBA), which operates out of the Padukone-Dravid Centre for Sports Excellence.

"I have a new trainer, physio, nutritionist, coach, and mentor, so everything is very new, and I am happy how they have been supporting me and are helping me from where I am and where I should be in the next couple of months," said Sindhu, who will return to action at the Badminton Asia Team championships in Malaysia from February 13 to 18.

"I am very fortunate to work with Prakash sir because he is such a legend and him being a mentor helps. His training methods and ideas are helping me. As for Agus, I knew him for a long time when he was training our men's players."

"We will have to see how I do, it has been just a month. So things will be good moving forward. I am back to my full fitness and I am looking forward to Asia team championships." Asked if the focus is on fine-tuning strokes and strategising against the top players, Sindhu said: "Definitely yes. After the injury, it is important to focus on physical, mental, and technique, where we focus on a lot of skills. We have been working on every aspect at the moment."

"I have not played tournaments in the last three months, so I will come to know where I am after I start playing tournaments. It has been pretty good so far."

"We have been talking and discussing against all the top 10-15 players in the women's circuit. I think right now Aya Othori, An Se Young, (Akane) Yamaguchi, and Carolina (Marin) are doing well."

"So it is not just one or two players, we need to know how every player is playing and we have been discussing them but it is important to focus on our own skills and technical aspects and also physical aspect," added the current world ranked 11.

Talking about the low phase of her career, Sindhu said: "In 2015, I had a stress fracture injury. I had pain and I played with pain for six months."

"I had just 6-7 months to come back and qualify for Rio Olympics. There were many doubts if I could do it or not. I trusted myself and went with the flow and got a silver in 2016."

"After 4 years, there was Tokyo, but due to Covid, it was postponed. There were expectations and I couldn't go to the finals. I was upset and sad and my coach told me that there is a lot of difference between a bronze and fourth position and that completely changed my mind."

"I had mixed reactions after the semifinal loss. I had tears in my eyes and I didn't know should I be happy or sad that I missed out of a final. The next day I was at the podium, winning the bronze, so it was harder."

"In 2016, the medal was confirmed after I reached finals but in Tokyo, I didn't know if I would win it. It was a hard-earned medal." (PTI)

Indian Army organises Upper Assam T-20 Cup 2024



HT Correspondent

MARGHERITA, Feb 8: The Indian Army is organising the Upper Assam T-20 Cup 2024 under Operation Sadbhavna from February 8 to February 11 at Doomduma Cricket Academy Ground in the Tinsukia district. Eight teams from across Upper Assam will be participating in the tournament.

The opening ceremony of the tournament was held on Thursday, featuring a Pipe Band Display conducted by the Lekhapani Battalion of the Spear Corps of the Indian Army. The guests of honour at the ceremony were Dr. P. J. Deka, President of Doomduma Cricket Association, and Dr. Lateef Khan, Principal of Hoonal Higher Secondary School, Tinsukia.

The Indian Army and Assam Rifles are dedicated to providing the sporting youth of the region with a platform to showcase their skills and perform at the highest levels. This initiative aims to foster a sense of unity and goodwill among the local population.

Complete bowler Bumrah will be best pacer of T20 World Cup: Vernon Philander

JOHANNESBURG, Feb 8: His ability to hold a line, bowl wicket-taking deliveries without leaking runs along with those lethal yorkers make Jasprit Bumrah the most complete bowler in international cricket, says former South African seamer Vernon Philander, who foresees the Indian outperforming all his contemporaries in this year's T20 World Cup in the Americas.

Bumrah on Wednesday became the first Indian pacer to be crowned number one in ICC Test rankings. This was after his magical performance in the second Test against England that yielded nine wickets on a sporting track at Visakhapatnam.

Philander, who has played 64 Tests for South Africa with 225 wickets against his name, said Bumrah doesn't seem to have any chinks in his armour.

"Bumrah is the (most) complete bowler at the moment. He has got magnificent skills and he has also learnt the trade of holding a line and length and that is the reason behind his success at the Test level," Philander told 'PTI Bhasha' in an interview on the sidelines of the SA T20 Tournament here.

"Initially, he wanted to bowl wicket-taking deliveries all the time and leaked runs but now he has learnt consistency," he pointed out.

The T20 World Cup will be held in June across the West Indies and the USA and inaugural champions India would be among the title favourites.

Philander said the team will rely



heavily on Bumrah as he has become the sort of bowler who can never be written off in the shortest format.

"He swings the new ball, brings the stumps into the play and challenges the batters upfront. He is phenomenal with those change-ups and lethal yorkers and that is the skill set you want in the T20 World Cup," he explained.

"I feel he is going to play a massive part in the tournament and perhaps also be the best seamer," said the veteran.

Philander, who is the second fastest ever to reach 50 Test wickets by touching the milestone in just seven games, was also full of praise for Bumrah's pace colleague Mohammed Shami and said that he "uses his seam beautifully".

"...the way he has gone to dominate at the moment is really exciting to see. The plans he had adopted when he came to bowl in South Africa. It is a tough place to bowl and one has to change the mindset from bowling on the flat subcontinental pitches to bowling

here," he said.

Philander said India seem to have cracked the code as far as producing good fast bowling talent is concerned and a share of the credit goes to former captain Virat Kohli's vision.

"Every time India comes here, they seem to be performing better than the previous tour. In the subcontinent, Indian spinners have been winning the games but it's just good to see the Indian team winning in Australia."

"That's a very positive sign for India to produce those sort of bowlers... It is also on the back of great leadership."

"Virat Kohli had been a strong leader who was propelling his bowlers to go and learn and get better," said the pacer, referring to India's historic Test series triumph against Australia in 2018-19 under Kohli.

Philander enjoyed an excellent record against India at home and took 25 wickets in five Tests (2013 and 2018) at an average of 18. Recalling his face-offs against them,

Philander said he considers Kohli the toughest opponent he has ever faced in his career.

"For me Virat has been the toughest batsman because of the way he conducts himself. As a bowler, he never gives you an opportunity to settle. From the pure mindset point of view, Virat is a very strong character and as a batsman, he makes life really difficult for the bowlers," said the 38-year-old.

Asked if players, especially bowlers, will be turned up exhausted during the T20 World Cup as it would be happening just after the IPL, Philander said workload management would be the key.

"...I feel that you have to manage players as it is a big tournament... You want to make sure that those players get game time but the management of pacers will be the key," he said.

He is happy with the good response to SA T20 in South Africa.

"It is a wonderfully organised tournament and the quality of cricket is right up there. South Africa Cricket needed this kind of initiative where young players are getting the chance to rub shoulders with the best in the world," he said.

He could not be a part of the IPL in his playing career but wants to join the extravaganza as a coach or consultant.

"IPL is the one tournament you want to be a part of at one stage. Maybe now as coach or consultant. Hopefully a window will open soon where I can take part and share my knowledge with the young players," he said. (PTI)

Griffon Challenge Women's Cricket: New Star Guwahati in semis

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, Feb 8: New Star Guwahati secured a spot in the semi-finals of the 2nd All Assam Griffon Challenge Women's Cricket Championship in Sivasagar by defeating Goalpara Eleven in a one-sided match on Thursday. The Guwahati team, propelled by two half-centuries from Hiramoni Saikia (64 off 32) and Ruhina Pegu (58 off 26), posted a formidable total of 231 runs in 20 overs, losing only one wicket.

In response, the Goalpara team managed to score only 61/6 in the stipulated 20 overs. Ruhina Pegu, who not only contributed with the bat but also took a wicket, was adjudged the Player of the Match.

Punaram Mili, President of Sivasagar Sports Association, was introduced to the players at the beginning of the match.

On Friday, the first semi-final will take place between Nazira and Golaghat, while Guwahati will clash with Jorhat in the second semi-final.

Accused of rape, Varun withdraws from FIH Pro League, takes urgent leave to fight legal battle

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: Accused of rape under the stringent POCSO act, Arjuna award-winning Indian hockey player Varun Kumar has withdrawn from the FIH Pro League in Bhubaneswar to explore his legal options against the allegation, which he described as a "calculated attempt to extort money" from him.

The 28-year-old has been granted "urgent leave" from national duty by Hockey India after he stated that the incident has taken a toll on his "physical and mental health".

Varun has been booked by the Bengaluru Police after a woman accused the defender 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 Varun in 2018 through Instagram, and the player raped her on multiple occasions prom-

ising her of marriage when she was 17.

In a letter to Hockey India president Dilip Tirkey, which is in possession of PTI, Varun claimed that the complaint against him is false and a misuse of the "state machinery".

"Through media reports I got to know that a false and frivolous case has been filed against me by a girl with whom I was in a relationship previously and the said case has been culminated into an FIR in Bangalore though I have not been contacted by any police official in this regard," Varun's letter, sent on Wednesday to Tirkey, read.

"The aforesaid case is nothing but a calculated attempt to extort money out of me and to tarnish my reputation and image as I'm an accomplished hockey player having played for India and being an Arjuna Awardee and she knows that such a case could hamper my career and image."

Varun, who was with the Indian team in Bhubaneswar for the Pro League matches, said he will fight the allegations legally.

"...in order to avail my legal remedies and legal rights I would require urgent leave from the academy and furthermore given the circumstances, I will unfortunately not be in a position to participate in the Pro League," Varun wrote.

"This incident has taken a toll on my physical and mental health and this is a very tough time for me and my family...being a sports person I have always been taught to fight till the very end and therefore I request your support in these difficult times," he added.

Besides Tirkey, the letter has also been sent to men's team chief coach Craig Fulton and HI secretary general Bholanath Singh. (PTI)

Rehan Ahmed attributes England spinners' success to team environment and Stokes' leadership

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: Exceeding expectations, England's inexperienced spinners have outperformed their seasoned Indian counterparts in the first two Tests, and young Rehan Ahmed attributed it to team environment and Ben Stokes' leadership.

The five-match series is level at 1-1 at the moment but, amazingly enough, spin is one area in which the tourists have emerged winners.

It is quite remarkable that the trio of Ahmed, Tom Hartley and Shoaib Bashir have taken more wickets (33) than the formidable group made up of titans such as Ravichandran Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel and Kuldeep Yadav (23).

"That just shows how great the team environment is," Ahmed, 19, was quoted as saying in BBC.

"Tommy and Bash, you've seen them come in and not be nervous and that's credit to the team."

"The environment and the leadership we have, it does make you kind of forget the players you are playing against - we just focus on



what we need to do."

Even in terms of economy rate, the England spin attack is ahead of the Indians.

With Stokes and Brendon McCullum at the helm, Ahmed cuts a relaxed figure.

"They (Stokes and head coach Brendon McCullum) just don't care about how bad things can go.

It's always about what good you can get out of it."

"So if I bowl four bad balls and get a wicket, that's better than bowling 16 good balls in a row," Ahmed said.

He became the youngest player to play Test cricket for England when he made his debut at 18 years and 126 days old in Karachi

in December 2022, signalling his arrival with a match-turning five-wicket haul in Pakistan's second innings.

According to Ahmed, Stokes' astute man-management skills extends beyond cricket.

A teenage British Asian and a practising Muslim in the Bazball surrounding, Ahmed doesn't face any issue getting time off for Friday prayers, even at the expense of training.

"I remember a time in Abu Dhabi where there was a team day out on a Friday," said Ahmed.

"We had Friday prayers. Obviously me and Bash (Bashir) were there. I messaged Wayne (Wayne Bentley), the team manager, asking if we could miss this day because we needed to pray."

"Stokes messaged me straight away and said 'come to me whenever you want about this kind of stuff, I understand it fully'. And yes he's stuck by his word."

"Every time I pray he is so respectful, very understanding. Everyone is on this tour." (PTI)

Zee's IL T20 gets 46 per cent women viewers, second most watched franchise tournament: BARC data

MUMBAI, Feb 8: With a reach of 161 million views, a staggering 46 per cent of which being women viewers, Zee Entertainment has announced that the DP World ILT20 league continues to be the world's second most watched franchise-based cricket competition.

The tournament garnered an impressive reach of 161 million for its first 18 matches, 56 per cent of the audience being under the age of 30, according to data released by BARC India 2+, TV+OOH, and LIVE+PPL.

The company has reported an uptick of 12 per cent among 15+ urban audiences in India compared to the inaugural edition.

The time spent on the league, which started on January 19 has surged by an impressive 33 per cent among viewers aged 15 and above in urban India. "This substantial increase in viewing duration emphasizes the league's ability to captivate and retain the attention of its audience, contributing to a more immersive and rewarding viewer experience," said league's media rights holder ZEE in a statement.

The tournament with six teams and 34 matches is being played across three venues in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah.

The league's six franchise teams include Abu Dhabi Knight Riders (Kolkata Knight Riders), Desert Vipers (Lancer Capital), Dubai Capitals (GMR), Gulf Giants (Adani Sportsline), MI Emirates (Reliance Industries), and Sharjah Warriors (Capri Global). Some of the world's leading cricketers are taking part in season 2 and they include David Warner, Dasun Shanaka, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Sam Billings, David Willey, Sunil Narine, Andre Russell, Alex Hales, Tom Curran, Rovman Powell, Shimron Hetmyer, James Vince, Ambati Rayudu, Corey Anderson, Dwayne Bravo, Trent Boult, Chris Woakes and Martin Guppitt.

"We are delighted with the response that the second edition of DP World ILT20 has garnered. It is a testament of the league's expanding appeal and a growing fan base across India."

"The event is escalating global enthusiasm for cricket, and we take immense pride in spearheading this

phenomenon," said Rahul Johri, President - Business, South Asia, Zee Entertainment. The star-studded commentary panel of ILT20 include Virender Sehwag, Harbhajan Singh, Rohan Gavaskar, Saba Karim, Nikhil Chopra, Vivek Razdan, Wasim Akram, Waqar Younis and Shoaib Akhtar, Alan Wilkins, Simon Doull, Daren Ganga, Danny Morrison and Niall O'Brien, Natalie Germanos, Anjum Chopra, Reema Malhotra. Cricket fans can watch all the action of the T20 league on Zee's 10 linear TV channels: &Pictures, &Pictures HD, Zee Cinema HD, Zee Anmol Cinema, Zee Zest, Zee Ganga, Zee Cinemalu HD, &Flix, &Flix HD, Zee Zest HD and leading OTT platform ZEE5.

The Indian men's hockey team arrived here on Monday to participate in the Pro League scheduled at the Kalinga Hockey Stadium from February 10 to 16 and Birs Munda Hockey Stadium in Rourkela from February 19 to 25. India narrowly missed out on a podium finish in the previous season, finishing fourth behind the Netherlands, Great Britain, and Belgium. (PTI)