

WORLD
NATION

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- Israeli strikes in Lebanon kill 16, militant rockets kill 1 Israeli
- India's borders totally secure: Rajnath Singh
- 'Hero No. 1' Govinda makes a political comeback

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India, China discuss LAC disengagement



NEW DELHI, March 28: Amid a lingering border row in eastern Ladakh, top diplomats of India and China held a fresh round of talks and both sides agreed to "maintain regular contact" through diplomatic and military channels, with no indication of any breakthrough.

Both sides had an in-depth exchange of views on how to achieve "complete disengagement" and resolve the remaining issues along the Line of Actual Control during the 29th meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC), the Ministry of External Affairs said on Thursday.

The key meeting was held in Beijing on March 27, it said in a statement.

Joint Secretary (East Asia) from the MEA led the Indian delegation. The Chinese delegation was headed by Director General of the Boundary and Oceanic Department of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the statement said.

"In the interim, both sides agreed to maintain regular contact through diplomatic and military channels and on the need to uphold peace and tranquillity on the ground in the border areas in accordance with existing bilateral agreements and protocols," it said.

Meanwhile, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a statement on Thursday said, "Both sides positively evaluated the progress made in the management and control of the situation in the China-India border area, and had a candid and in-depth exchange of views on the ideas of work for the next stage."

The two sides "agreed to focus on the relevant issues on the ground along the border, reach a solution acceptable to both sides as soon as possible, and promote the transition of the border situation into a normalised phase of control (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Two nominations rejected, 36 remain in fray

Notification for 2nd phase of polling in five Assam LS seats issued

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 28: The nomination papers of two candidates, one each from Kaziranga and Sonitpur seats, were found invalid during scrutiny on Thursday.

Altogether 38 contestants have filed nominations for five constituencies which will go to polls in the first phase in the state on April 19.

The papers of the Republican Party of India (Athawale) nominee Faisal Ahmed Majumdar in Kaziranga, and those of independent candidate Mahendra Orang in Sonitpur were rejected, an official source said on Thursday.

The papers of the remaining 36 candidates in all five constituencies were found to be valid. The last date for withdrawal of candidature is March 30.

Kaziranga has the highest number of 11 candidates, followed by nine in Lakhimpur, eight in Sonitpur, five in Jorhat and three in Dibrugarh.

The prominent candidates contesting in the first phase are Union minister



Sarbananda Sonowal, Lok Sabha deputy leader of the opposition and Congress leader Gaurav Gogoi, sitting MPs Topon Gogoi and Pradan Baruah, Rajya Sabha MP Kamakhya Prasad Tasa and BJP MLA Ranjit Dutta.

In the outgoing Lok Sabha, BJP held nine seats, Congress three, AIUDF and

an independent one each from the state.

Meanwhile, the notification for the second phase of polling in five Lok Sabha seats of Assam on April 26 was issued on Thursday.

As per the notification, voting will take place in Nagaon, Darrang-Udalguri, Diphu (ST), Silchar (SC) and

Karimganj during the second phase.

No nominations were filed on Thursday for the five Lok Sabha constituencies, the official said.

The prominent candidates to contest in the second phase are Congress sitting MP Pradyut Bordoloi from Nagaon against BJP's Suresh Bora and AIUDF Aminul Islam while BJP sitting MP Dilip Saikia has been pitted against Congress candidate Madhab Rajbongshi in Darrang-Udalguri.

In Silchar (SC), Assam excise minister Parimal Suklabaidya is the BJP candidate and he will take on Congress youth leader and district general secretary Surjya Kanta Sarkar.

In Karimganj, sitting BJP MP Kripanath Mallah has been given the ticket against Congress candidate Hafez Ahmed Choudhury and AIUDF's Sahabul Islam Choudhury.

In Diphu (ST), the BJP has fielded first-timer Amarsing Tisso against its former MLA and now Congress candidate Joyram Englang. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

HT BRIEFS

Heroin seized

BOKAJAN: Based on secret information the police in Karbi Anglong carried out an operation in Kaliram village on the evening of March 27 under Khakhati police station. During the operation a suspected heroin peddler, identified as Wisalngbou Pamel (24), son of Widoibou Pamel, resident of Langmei village, Tamei police station, Tamenglong district in Manipur was apprehended and 22 identical plastic cases containing heroin was recovered from his bag. The brown coloured powder suspected to be heroin packed in transparent polythene bags weighing a total of 276.90 grams worth ₹ 25 lakh in the international market had been recovered and seized in presence of the independent witnesses.

Ex- EM joins cong

BOKAJAN: Ex- Executive Member (EM) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Longki Timung joined the Congress leaving the BJP in presence of Congress candidate of 6-Diphu (ST) Parliamentary Constituency. In a programme at Bokajan Block Congress Committee (BCC) office by I.N.D.I.A which was INDI Alliance candidate Joyram Englang, the former EM of KAAC Longki Timung joined the Congress leaving the saffron party. Timung was welcomed into the Congress fold by Englang. Timung won the Borjan Member of Autonomous Council election for three consecutive times.

Cong workers join BJP

DIPHU: A large number of Congress workers from Dhanisri and Lumbajong joined the BJP said a press release of BJP, Karbi Anglong District Committee, East. The Congress workers joined the saffron party at Atul Vajpayee Bhawan here in presence of minister of Jayanta Malla Baruah; incumbent MP Horensingh Bey; chief executive member of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, Tuliram Ronghang and others.

UPPL files plaint against Cong over photo of suspended member sleeping with money

GUWAHATI, March 28: BJP ally United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) has lodged a complaint with the Election Commission against Congress Kerala unit and its media platform INC TV for allegedly spreading false news over the viral photo of its one suspended member sleeping with currency notes.

A viral picture purportedly of a suspended UPPL member sleeping with currency notes triggered a controversy in Assam on Wednesday. The opposition grabbed the opportunity and slammed the BJP-led alliance, saying the ruling bloc is "wallowing in the quagmire of corruption".

UPPL filed two identical complaints -- one against Kerala Congress with the Election Commission

of India and the other against INC TV with the Chief Electoral Officer of Assam -- and referred to the posts on X of the two entities.

"The tweet in question falsely claimed that 'Assam BJP's alliance partner UPPL led by BTR's Pramod Boro was found sleeping on stacks of ₹ 500 currency notes'. Such misinformation has the potential to manipulate public opinion, deceive voters and disrupt the integrity of the electoral process," UPPL chief Pramod Boro said in the complaint.

He claimed that the news in question is "absolutely false, fabricated and manufactured", which is circulated with the intent to "malign the image" of the president of the UPPL and the party as well. "The dissemination of (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Kejriwal's ED custody extended till April 1



NEW DELHI, March 28: A court here Thursday extended the Enforcement Directorate custody of chief minister Arvind Kejriwal till April 1 in the excise policy case.

The agency sought seven-day custody of the AAP chief, but the court said he has to be produced

before it on April 1 at 11 am.

The ED had produced him before Rouse Avenue court Special Judge Kavari Baweja as his current six-day custody was ending on Thursday. The ED said in its fresh remand plea that during Kejriwal's custodial interrogation, his state-

ments were recorded over five days but he was "giving evasive replies".

It said statements of three other persons relevant to the case have also been recorded during the remand period.

It said that during the ED custody, Kejriwal was confronted with C Arvind, the then personal secretary to deputy CM Manish Sisodia who was handed over the draft Group of Ministers (GoM) report for the 2021-22 excise policy at the residence of the chief minister.

It said the statement of one of the AAP candidates in the 2022 Goa elections was also recorded during Kejriwal's ED custody. It revealed that the candidate did not have any money and his election expenditure was "taken care of by the AAP Office Delhi only through their associates". The plea said that during the custody, data from the mobile phone (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

AFSPA extended in Arunachal, Nagaland dists

NEW DELHI, March 28: The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, under which an area is declared as "disturbed" for the convenience of security forces, has been extended in three districts of Arunachal Pradesh, eight districts of Nagaland and some other areas for six more months after a review of the law and order situation in these two northeastern states.

The AFSPA gives armed forces personnel, operating in disturbed areas, sweeping powers to search, arrest and to open fire if they deem it necessary for "the maintenance of public order".

An area or district is notified as a disturbed area under the AFSPA to facilitate the operations of the armed forces.

In a notification, the Union home ministry said the central government in exercise of the powers conferred by Section 3 of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 had declared the Tirap, Changlang and Longding districts in Arunachal Pradesh and the areas falling within the jurisdiction of Namsai, Mahadevpur and Chowkham police stations in Namsai district of Arunachal Pradesh, bordering Assam as "disturbed area" on September 26, 2023.

"And whereas a further review of the law and order situation in the state of Arunachal Pradesh has been undertaken. Now, therefore, Tirap, Changlang and Longding districts in Arunachal Pradesh and the areas falling within the jurisdiction of Namsai, Mahadevpur and Chowkham police stations in Namsai district of Arunachal Pradesh, bordering the State of Assam, are declared as 'disturbed area' under Section 3 of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 for a period of six months with effect from 01.04.2024, unless withdrawn earlier," the notification said. In a separate notification, the home ministry also said that the central government in exercise of the powers conferred by AFSPA had declared (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Govt crushed opposition voices while passing CAA: Cong MP

MORIGAON, March 28: Congress MP Pradyut Bordoloi on Thursday alleged that the BJP-led central government had "crushed" the voices of opposition while passing the contentious Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

Addressing a press conference here, he claimed that the fight against the CAA and the communal forces will continue in Assam as well in the entire country.

"The way Chinese had crushed Tiananmen Square protests by running roller over the agitators, in the same way, the BJP government crushed our voices by running their majority roller on our head and passed the CAA in 2019," said Bordoloi, Congress candidate for Nagaon Lok Sabha constituency.

He asserted that all secular people of Assam will support Congress during the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections.

"The fight against CAA and communal forces will go on in the state and rest of India. It was unfortunate that the BJP had formulated the CAA and passed in



Parliament despite strong protest from Congress and Left," Bordoloi said. The Congress MP, who is in a contest to retain his constituency, stressed that the CAA will be "very disastrous" to the state and Assamese identity.

"The blatant violation of secular provisions of the Indian constitution was witnessed during the passage of the

CAA. Now, the people of Assam must decide to vote against BJP to protect Assamese identity," he added.

All India Congress Committee Communications Coordinator (Assam) Mahima Singh slammed the Narendra Modi-led NDA government and alleged that the poor are getting poorer every day, while (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Assam AAP unit alleges police entered party office; police denies charge

GUWAHATI, March 28: Aam Aadmi Party's Assam unit on Thursday alleged that Guwahati Police came inside its party headquarters in an attempt to "scare" party workers, but police officials denied the allegations and said a small security unit has been stationed outside the building. Issuing a press release, AAP state media coordinator Jayanta Kumar Kalita alleged that a team of police personnel, including women constables, entered the party office at around 10 am and were there for about four hours.

"AAP has filed nominations in two Lok Sabha constituencies in the presence of over 10,000 supporters for both candidates. Within 24 hours, the Assam government sent police to our office and tried to scare the workers," he alleged. The party termed the police action as "autocratic", the statement said. When contacted, an official of Dispur Police Station, under whose jurisdiction the AAP state headquarters is located, said that a unit has been stationed in front of the office for the last few days.

"The AAP workers are almost daily holding protests in the locality. That is why we have placed a small unit in front of the premises. However, they did not go inside the office building," he said on condition of anonymity.

AAP has put up candidates from two Lok Sabha seats in Assam -- Sonitpur and Dibrugarh -- out of 14 Lok Sabha constituencies in the state. Both the seats will go for polling in the first phase on April 19. (PTI)

'To compensate for this, the rotating speed of the solid Earth has steadily increased'

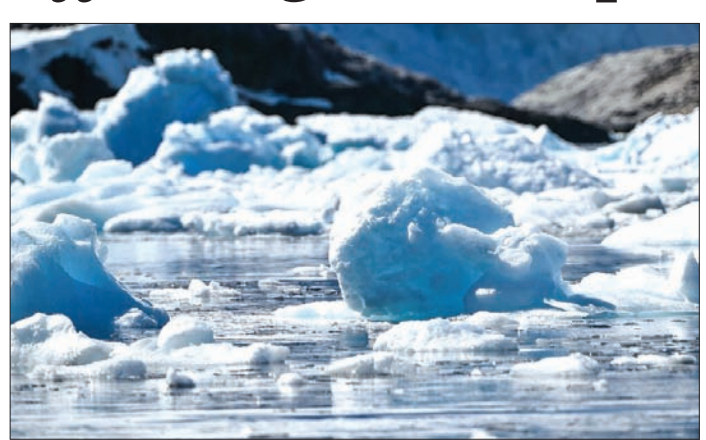
Ice melting in Antarctica slowing Earth's rotation, affecting timekeeping: Study

NEW DELHI, March 28: Ice melting in Greenland and Antarctica, driven by global warming, is affecting timekeeping the world over by slowing down the Earth's rotating speed, according to a new research.

As a result, a second might need to be deducted from the Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) three years later than otherwise, it found.

The study author, Duncan Agnew, explained that because the Earth doesn't always rotate at the same speed, the UTC consists of discontinuities.

Since 1972, all discontinuities have required that a "leap second" be added, because many networked activities like computing and financial markets require the consistent, standardised and precise timescale pro-



vided by the UTC, he said. Agnew is a geophysicist at Scripps Institution of Oceanography at University of California San Diego, US.

Using mathematical modelling,

Agnew showed that the rate at which the Earth's liquid core rotates -- angular velocity -- has been slowing down. To compensate for this, the rotating speed of the solid Earth

has steadily increased.

The compensatory effect comes from the fact that for a closed system such as the Earth, angular momentum -- the rate at which rotating speed changes -- is a conserved quantity and doesn't change, he explained. His study has been published in the journal Nature. He found that the effect of the solid Earth rotating faster has resulted in fewer leap seconds being needed to be added to the UTC in recent decades. When extrapolated to the future, he predicted that a leap second will need to be deducted from the global primary standard of timekeeping as early as the year 2026.

However, Agnew also found that the increased melting of ice caps in Greenland and Antarctica has slowed down (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Over 600 lawyers write to CJI against 'vested interest group' trying to defame courts

NEW DELHI, March 28: More than 600 lawyers, including senior advocate Harish Salve and Bar Council chairperson Manan Kumar Mishra, have written to the Chief Justice of India, alleging that a "vested interest group" is trying to put pressure on the judiciary and defame courts, especially in cases of corruption involving politicians.

"These tactics are damaging to our courts and threaten our democratic fabric," the lawyers drawn from across the country said in the letter dated March 26.

CJI Chandrachud's leadership is crucial in these "tough times" and the apex court should stand strong, they said, adding it is not the time to maintain dignified silence.

The letter, shared by official sources, targeted a section of lawyers without naming them and alleged that they defend politicians by day and then try to influence judges through the media at night.



This interest group creates false narratives of a supposed better past and golden period of courts, contrasting it with the happenings in the present, the letter said. It claimed that their comments are aimed at influencing courts and embarrassing them for political gains.

Adish Aggarwala, Chetan Mittal, Pinky Anand, Hitesh Jain, Ujjwala Pawar, Uday Holla and Swarupama Chaturvedi are among the signatories to the letter titled "Judiciary Under Threat-Safeguarding Judiciary from Political and Professional

Pressure". Though the lawyers behind the letter have mentioned no specific cases, the development comes at a time when courts are dealing with several high-profile criminal cases of corruption involving opposition leaders.

Opposition parties have accused the central government of targeting their leaders due to its political vendetta, a charge refuted by the ruling BJP. Some parties, whose ranks include some noted lawyers, have joined hands against the recent arrest of Delhi Chief Minister and AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal in the Delhi excise policy-linked money laundering case.

Targeting the critics, the signatories to the letter accused them of suggesting that courts in the past were easier to influence. This shakes the public's trust in courts, they said. "We are writing to you expressing our deepest concern on the manner (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

No change in trade policy with India: Pak

ISLAMABAD, March 28: Pakistan on Thursday clarified that it has no plan to resume trade relations with India which has been "non-existent" since 2019 after the Indian government abrogated Article 370 of the Constitution to revoke the special status of Jammu and Kashmir.

The clarification from Pakistan's Foreign Office comes days after the new Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar said in London that Pakistan will seriously consider restoring trade ties with India that have remained suspended since August 2019.

In August 2019, India suspended Article 370 giving special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir and bifurcated it into centrally-administered Union Territories of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh.

At the weekly briefing here, Foreign Office spokesperson Murtaz Zahra Baloch was asked to comment on reports about the possibility of resumption of trade



ties with India.

"Pakistan-India trade relations have been non-existent since 2019 when India took illegal steps in the illegally occupied Jammu and Kashmir... There is no change in Pakistan's position on it," Baloch said. Foreign minister Dar, during a press conference in London on March 23, highlighted the eager-

ness of Pakistan's business community to resume trade activities with India, indicating a potential shift in diplomatic stance towards its neighbouring nation.

Pakistan downgraded its ties with India after the Indian Parliament suspended Article 370 on August 5, 2019, a decision that Islamabad believed undermined

the environment for holding talks between the neighbours.

Pakistan has been insisting that the onus of improving the ties was on India and urging it to undo its "unilateral" steps in Kashmir as a sort of pre-condition to start the talks.

India has dismissed the suggestion and made it clear to Pakistan that the entire Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh were integral and inalienable parts of the country.

New Delhi has also asserted that the constitutional measures taken by the Indian government to ensure socio-economic development and good governance in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir are matters internal to India.

It has been maintaining that it desires normal neighbourly relations with Pakistan while insisting that the onus is on Islamabad to create an environment that is free of terror and hostility for such an engagement. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

India, China discuss LAC

and management," it said. The 28th meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs was held on November 30 last year. Director-General of the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs of the Foreign Ministry, Hong Liang, and joint secretary of the East Asia Division of Ministry of External Affairs of India, Gourangalal Das, co-chaired the 29th meeting, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in the statement.

Representatives from the foreign affairs, defense, immigration and other departments of the two countries attended the meeting, it said. "Both sides agreed to continue to maintain communication through diplomatic and military channels, improve the mechanism for negotiation and consultation, and hold a new round of corps commander-level talks at an early date. "The two sides agreed to strictly abide by the agreements and guiding principles of the relevant common understandings reached between the two sides, avoid flare-ups in the situation on the ground, and continue to consolidate the previous disengagement outcomes, in a bid to safeguard peace and tranquillity in the border area," the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in the statement.

The eastern Ladakh border standoff erupted on May 5, 2020, following a violent clash in the Pangong Lake area. Ties between the two countries nose-dived significantly following the clash in the Galwan Valley in June 2020 that marked the most serious military conflict between the two sides in decades.

At an event in New Delhi, external affairs minister S Jaishankar on March 11 had said that India remains committed to finding a "fair and reasonable outcome" on this issue but one that is respectful of agreements and recognises the Line of Actual Control. "I think it is in our common interest that we should not have that many forces on the Line of Actual Control. I think it is our common interest that we should observe agreements that we have signed. And, I believe that it is not just in common interest, I believe it is in China's interest as well. This tension that we have seen for the last four years has not served either of us well," he had said. (PTI)

Two nominations rejected

The last date for filing of nominations is April 4, scrutiny on April 5 and the last date for withdrawal of nominations is April 8. Polling for the 14 Sabha constituencies in Assam will be held in the first three phases on April 19, 26 and May 7. Five constituencies each will go to the polls in the first and second phases while in the third phase, polling will be held in four seats. In the first phase, 38 candidates filed their nominations for the Kaziranga, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Sonitpur and Lakhimpur Lok Sabha constituencies. In the outgoing Lok Sabha, BJP held nine seats, Congress three, AIUDF and an independent one from the state. (With inputs from PTI)

UPPL files plaint against

such fake news not only violates the ethical standards of journalism but also undermines the fundamental principles of democracy," said Boro, the chief executive member of Bodoland Territorial Council. He appealed to the Election Commission to investigate the matter promptly and take necessary actions to address the spread of the "fake news" by Kerala Congress and INC TV. "It is imperative to uphold the principles of free and fair elections and prevent the dissemination of false information that could influence electoral outcomes. Safeguarding the truth and ensuring transparency in the electoral process are essential for the credibility of our democratic system," Boro said.

He also urged the Election Department of Assam to conduct a thorough investigation into the matter to ascertain the extent of the misinformation spread by Kerala Congress and INC TV, and to take necessary steps to mitigate its impact on the upcoming elections. Sharing screenshots of the posts of Kerala Congress and INC TV, Boro said his name was mentioned in those without verification.

In a post on X, Boro said, "In its penchant to spread lies and fake news, Congress has stooped so low that they have become a fake news factory and will malign anyone. The people will not be misled by their fake news and false promises and will give them a fitting reply. Congress will be zero in Assam this time."

"In these screenshots, CONgress and @RahulGandhi's Fake News Factory have used my name without even verifying. Have lodged official complaint with Election Commission of Assam and request @ECISVEEP to take strict action against Congress and their fake news social media pages," he added.

Boro said an FIR will also be lodged with Kokrajhar police station over the matter. In the image, Benjamin Basumaty, identified in the photograph as a Village Council Development Committee (VCDC) member of UPPL, is seen sleeping on a bed wearing only a traditional towel with a heap of ₹ 500 denomination notes.

"The photo that has gone viral is five years old. It has been made viral due to political conspiracy. We will find out who has done this," Basumaty told reporters when asked about the picture. He admitted that the photograph was authentic, but claimed that some people had blackmailed him at that time after he was clicked in that pose.

"Five years ago, I had taken a loan of ₹ 3 lakh for some work from my sister. That particular night, some of us were having a party and my partner clicked the photo with the money I had borrowed in a fun moment," he added. The UPPL sought to distance itself from the image, stating that Basumaty has been suspended and removed from the VCDC post. Boro on Wednesday claimed that the Harisingha Block Committee of the party had recommended disciplinary action against Basumaty on January 5 this year and accordingly, he was suspended on January 10 over the photograph. "Additionally, the BTC Government suspended and removed him from the post of VCDC Chairman on 10th February, 2024. I urge all media outlets and social media users to refrain from linking Mr Basumaty with UPPL," he said in a post on X. Boro further said that Basumaty's actions are solely his own responsibility and the party is not accountable for any of his personal acts. (PTI)

Kejriwal's ED custody

of the chief minister's wife have been extracted and were being analysed. "However, data from other four digital devices seized during the search at Kejriwal's premises on March 21 (belonging to Kejriwal) are yet to be extracted as the arrestee (Kejriwal) has sought time in providing password and login credentials after consulting with his lawyers," it said.

The application said the movable and immovable property details, income tax returns (ITRs), and other financial details sought from Kejriwal were yet to be provided by the chief minister, or his family members. The federal probe agency said it had sought the details regarding the appointments made with the chief minister in the online portal in his office. It said the during the interrogation, summonses were issued to senior excise officials in Punjab who were "involved in the arm-twisting of certain (liquor) wholesalers of Delhi." The agency said that when the demand for bribes was not fulfilled, these officials either shut down their factories or did not allow the wholesalers to despatch their goods to Punjab. The plea said the officials concerned sought time on the summonses, citing the hooch tragedy in Sangrur. "The arrestee needs to be interrogated further in the wake of these reasons or findings. Hence, it is imperative in the interest of investigation that seven days' further custodial remand of Arvind Kejriwal may be granted to the Directorate of Enforcement," the plea said. (PTI)

Govt crushed opposition

the rich are becoming richer with every passing day. "The PM promised development for all but it's missing. While 40 per cent of the country's wealth is enjoyed by merely one per cent of the total population, the poor, middle-class and even upper-middle class are increasingly struggling on a daily basis," she added. Singh also raked up the issue of a viral photo of BJP ally United People's Party Liberal's (UPPL) one suspended member sleeping with a bundle of currency notes. "Just yesterday, a viral picture of UPPL leader Benjamin Basumaty sleeping on lavish bundles of cash and also wearing them on his body seized the internet. No wonder, Basumaty is a privileged partner 'in crime' of the BJP," she added. A viral picture of Basumaty, who was suspended from UPPL earlier this year, sleeping with ₹ 500 denomination notes triggered a controversy in Assam on Wednesday. The opposition grabbed the opportunity and slammed the BJP-led alliance, saying the ruling bloc is "wallowing in the quagmire of corruption". (PTI)

Ice melting in Antarctica

the Earth's rotation more rapidly than ever before and therefore, he estimated that the leap second will not need to be deducted until the year 2029. The ice melting was measured by satellite gravity. The findings suggested a possible problem for computer network timing, and thus, changes in the policy of aligning UTC to the Earth's rotation may need to be made earlier than currently planned, Agnew said.

He noted that if the melting of polar ice caps had not recently accelerated, the turning back of the UTC by a leap second would be required three years earlier - in 2026. He also said that global warming and global timekeeping have become "inextricably linked" and may become more so in the future. (PTI)

Over 600 lawyers write to

in which a vested interest group is trying to pressure the judiciary, influence judicial process and defame our courts on the basis of frivolous logic and stale political agendas. "Their antics are vitiating the atmosphere of trust and harmony, which characterises the functioning of the judiciary. Their pressure tactics are most obvious in political cases, particularly those involving political figures accused of corruption. These tactics are damaging to our courts and threaten our democratic fabric," they said. Their antics are vitiating the atmosphere of trust and harmony, which characterises the functioning of the judiciary, they said in their letter to CJI Chandrachud.

The critics have also concocted an entire theory of "bench fixing" which is not just disrespectful and contemptuous but an attack on the honour and dignity of courts, the letter said. "They have also stooped to the level of comparing our courts to those countries where there is no rule of law and accusing our judicial institutions with unfair practices. These aren't just criticisms. They are direct attacks meant to damage the public's trust in our judiciary and threaten the fair application of our laws," it said. These critics have adopted the "my way or the highway" approach at work as they hail the decisions they agree with, but any decision they disagree with, is trashed, smeared and disregarded, they said. "This two-faced behaviour is harmful to the respect a common man should have for our legal system," the letter said and claimed that this cherry picking has been visible in very recent judgments too. "Some elements are trying to influence who the judges are in their cases and spread lies on social media to put pressure on them to decide in a particular way," they alleged in the letter. (PTI)

AFSPA extended in Arunachal

eight districts and 21 police stations in five other districts of Nagaland as 'disturbed area' for a period of six months with effect from October 1, 2023. The home ministry said a further review of the law-and-order situation in Nagaland has been undertaken and after that a decision has been taken to declare as 'disturbed area' under the AFSPA for six more months in eight districts of the state and areas falling under 21 police stations.

The districts where the imposition of 'disturbed area' under the AFSPA will continue are Dimapur, Nuland, Chumoukedima, Mon, Kiphire, Noklak, Phek and Peren districts.

The police stations where the law will be applicable are: Khuzama, Kohima North, Kohima South, Zubza and Kezocha police stations in Kohima district; Mangkolemba, Mokokchung-I, Longtho, Tuli, Longchem and Anaki 'C' police stations in Mokokchung district; Yanglok police station in Longleng district; Bhandari, Champan and Ralan police stations in Wokha district; and Ghatashi, Pughoboto, Sataka, Surubho, Zunheboto and Aghunato police stations in Zunheboto district. Union home minister Amit Shah had earlier said the AFSPA has been removed in 70 per cent areas in the northeastern states even though it is in force in Jammu and Kashmir. On March 26, Shah had said the central government would consider revoking AFSPA in Jammu and Kashmir.

There have been demands from various organisations and individuals in Jammu and Kashmir and northeastern states to revoke the AFSPA. (PTI)

Adani starts USD 1.2 bn copper plant; to boost India's metal production

NEW DELHI, March 28: Billionaire Gautam Adani-led group on Thursday announced the start of the first phase of the world's largest single-location copper manufacturing plant at Mundra in Gujarat, which will help cut India's dependence on imports and aid energy transition.

Kutch Copper, a subsidiary of group's flagship firm Adani Enterprises Ltd, "commissioned the first phase" of USD 1.2 billion "green-field copper refinery by dispatching the maiden batch of cathodes to customers", the company said in a statement.

The first phase of the facility that will produce 0.5 million tonnes a year of refined copper has started operations and full-scale 1 million tonnes capacity is expected by FY29 (March 2029).

India joins China and other nations that are rapidly expanding production of copper, a metal crucial for transition away from fossil fuels. Technologies critical to the energy transition like electric vehicles (EVs), charging infrastructure, solar photovoltaics (PV), wind and batteries, all require copper. "On completion of the second phase, Kutch Copper, with 1 million tonnes per annum, will be the world's largest single-location custom smelter, benchmarking ESG performance standards while leveraging state-of-the-art technology and digitalisation," the statement said.

It will create 2,000 direct and 5,000 indirect employment opportunities.

India's per capita copper consumption is estimated around 0.6 kg compared to the global average of 3.2 kg. India's drive towards clean energy systems, increasing penetration of electric vehicles and a host of associated applications are expected to double the domestic copper demand by 2030.

The Adani Group is investing heavily in energy transition, in which copper will play a vital role. It is expanding into adjacent areas of its current capabilities, which makes the copper business a strategic fit.

"With Kutch Copper commencing operations, the Adani portfolio

of companies is not only entering the metals sector but also driving India's leap towards a sustainable and aatmanirbhar (self-reliant) future," said Gautam Adani, Chairman of the Adani Group. "Our speed of execution in this ambitious, super-sized project underscores our commitment to take India to the forefront of the global copper sector."

He said the domestic copper industry will play a crucial role in achieving the nation's goal of carbon neutrality by 2070. "When (fully) commissioned, our modern smelter will set new benchmarks in copper production, with an enhanced thrust on innovative green technology."

Kutch Copper is working towards establishing Kutch Copper Tubes Limited as part of its forward integration strategy to add copper tubes to its portfolio, the statement said, adding the tubes will cater to applications in air conditioning and refrigeration.

Copper is the third most used industrial metal after steel and aluminium, and its demand is rising on the back of fast-growing renewable energy, telecom, electric vehicles, charging infrastructure, and the development of power transmission and distribution networks. India's copper production has been unable to meet this demand, and domestic supply disruptions have led to a higher dependency on imported copper.

Imports have been consistently on the rise for the past five years. For FY23 (April 2022 to March 2023 fiscal), India imported a record 1,81,000 tonnes of copper, while exports plummeted to a record low of 30,000 tonnes, even lower than the Covid pandemic period, according to the government data. The country is estimated to have consumed 7,50,000 tonnes of copper in FY23 (612 KT in FY22). The number is expected to rise to 1.7 million tonnes by 2027 on the back of huge demand from the green energy industry.

Global demand for copper from solar photovoltaic (PV) installations alone is estimated to double to 2.25 million tonnes in the current decade.

"Market extended gains and almost retested the record high, tracking favourable cues. After the initial uptick, Nifty moved from strength to strength for most of the session. However, a sharp dip in the final hour trimmed the gains," Ajit Mishra, SVP - Technical Research, Religare Broking Ltd.

In Asian markets, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled in the positive territory while Tokyo and Seoul ended lower.

European markets were trading mostly in the green. Wall Street ended higher on Wednesday. The S&P 500 climbed 0.9 per cent to a record 5,248.49 in its first gain since setting its last all-time high on March 21.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth ₹ 2,170.32 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data.

The rupee depreciated 6 paise to settle at 83.39 against the US dollar on Thursday. Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.42 per cent to USD 86.40 a barrel.

The BSE benchmark climbed 526.01 points or 0.73 per cent to settle at 72,996.31 on Wednesday. The NSE Nifty went up by 118.95 points or 0.54 per cent to 22,123.65. Equity markets will remain closed on Friday for 'Good Friday'. (PTI)

Citroën Unveils Basalt Vision

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 28: Citroën has unveiled the first glimpses of its latest creation, the Citroën Basalt Vision. Scheduled to debut in India and South America in the latter half of 2024, this SUV Coupé concept promises to revolutionize the automotive market with its striking design and spacious interior.

Combining elements from various automotive genres, the Basalt Vision epitomizes the fusion of a coupé's fluidity, an elevated SUV's robustness, and a 5-door saloon's spaciousness. Developed collaboratively with local teams, the Basalt aims to bolster Citroën's global footprint alongside its existing lineup, comprising the C3 and C3 Aircross models.

Thierry Koskas, Citroën's CEO, expressed enthusiasm about the Basalt's potential to captivate customers with its innovative design and unparalleled comfort. With production and development rooted in local contexts, the Basalt is poised to resonate strongly with diverse consumer bases, thereby solidifying Citroën's position in key markets.

POCO Unveils POCO C61

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 28: POCO, a frontrunner in technological innovation, has announced the launch of its latest offering, the POCO C61, promising a blend of style, performance, and affordability. Priced at just 6,999, the smartphone aims to redefine expectations in the budget segment while delivering an exceptional user experience. The POCO C61 features a sleek design complemented by a 6.71-inch dot drop display with an impressive 90 Hz refresh rate, ensuring smooth visuals and enhanced responsiveness. Equipped with a convenient side fingerprint sensor and powered by a robust 5000 mAh battery, the device is designed to cater to the diverse needs of modern smartphone users. Himanshu Tandon, Country Head of POCO India, expressed enthusiasm about the launch, emphasizing POCO's commitment to delivering cutting-edge technology at an accessible price point. He highlighted the POCO C61's premium design and standout features, underscoring its potential to set new benchmarks for budget smartphones.

Power, auto and metal stocks witnessed robust demand, even as a depreciating rupee weighed on sentiment, traders said.

Extending its previous day's rally, the 30-share index jumped 655.04 points or 0.90 per cent to settle at 73,651.35. During the day, it zoomed 1,194 points or 1.63 per cent to 74,190.31.

The NSE Nifty climbed 203.25 points or 0.92 per cent to end at 22,326.90. On a weekly basis, the BSE benchmark climbed 819.41 points or 1.12 per cent, and the NSE Nifty advanced 230.15 points or 1.04 per cent.

In the 2023-24 financial year, Sensex jumped 14,659.83 points or 24.85 per cent, while the Nifty soared 4,967.15 points or 28.61 per cent.

"Indian equities closed the day and fiscal year on an optimistic note, with volatility by the end of the session, as buying by retail, DIIs, and FIIs surged across categories. The mid-and small-cap stocks have emerged as frontrunners, rebounding from the initial



sell-off earlier in the month.

"An upgrade in the domestic economy forecast hints at an encouraging outlook for the stock market in FY25. However, the emphasis is on large-cap due to the persisting premium valuations of mid-cap stocks, which could pose a concern on the broad market in the short to medium term," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

Bajaj Finserv was the top gainer in the Sensex chart, rising nearly 4 per cent, followed by Nestle, State Bank of India, Power Grid, Tata Steel, Larsen & Toubro and Mahindra & Mahindra.

Shares of Bajaj Finance and Bajaj Finserv jumped amid media reports that subsidiary Bajaj Housing Finance was planning to go

public.

Nestle, State Bank of India, Power Grid, Tata Steel, Larsen & Toubro and Mahindra & Mahindra were the other major gainers.

In contrast, Tech Mahindra, Axis Bank and Reliance Industries were the laggards.

In the broader market, the BSE midcap gauge jumped 0.62 per cent and smallcap index climbed 0.33 per cent.

All indices ended in the positive territory. Power jumper 1.69 per cent, capital goods rallied 1.54 per cent, utilities (1.29 per cent), auto (1.19 per cent), healthcare (1.18 per cent), industrials (1.12 per cent), commodities (0.95 per cent), consumer discretionary (0.94 per cent) and telecommunication (0.64 per cent).

HDFC Bank partners with Centre for Environment Education and GMC Guwahati gets a Material Recovery Facility



HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 28: HDFC Bank in partnership with Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) and Centre for Environment Education (CEE) inaugurated a Material Recovery Facility (MRF) at Adabari, Guwahati.

One of the main components of the project is the creation of a Swachh Centre - Material Recovery Facility (MRF) at the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) site in ITI, Machkhowa. This MRF will make use of advanced technology to sort waste more effectively and recover valuable resources from mixed waste streams, thus promoting sustainable waste management practices in the city.

An MRF optimises waste sorting to maximise resource recovery. It employs advanced technology to extract value from mixed waste streams, thus promoting sustainable waste management practices.

The MRF, under HDFC Bank Parivartan's 'Rural & Urban Land-

scape: Free of dry & plastic waste' project, has digitally been inaugurated by Ashok Singhal, minister, of housing and urban affairs, govt of Assam with Mrigen Sarania, Mayor, Guwahati, Smita Roy, deputy mayor, Guwahati and Megha Nidhi Dahal IAS; commissioner, Guwahati Municipal Corporation. The project is in partnership with Centre for Environment Education (CEE) and Shrishti Waste Management Services pvt ltd has been appointed the service provider for the MRF.

Mrinal Bora, joint commissioner, GMC, Tulashi Ranjan Kalita, Collector, GMC and Suhel Yasir, assistant commissioner, GMC, along with the ward councillors of GMC Ward Nos 2,3,4,5,6,8 and 9 and other district officials from GMC were present during the digital inauguration. The inaugural event was marked with the presence of Premjit Konwar and Dipankar Talukdar; from HDFC Bank Ltd, Prabhjot Sodhi from CEE and other members

from HDFC Bank, CEE and Shrishti Waste Management Services (SWMS).

Ashok Singhal, acknowledged HDFC Bank and CEE for this systematic process-driven, gender-sensitive, participatory approach to solid waste management. He added 'This systems approach unfolds many aspects of Swachhta, including, improved inclusivity of safaimitras, digital analysis of waste typology, self-driven collection systems, optimization of expenditures apart from generating jobs with better incomes, and integrating the informal sector into the formal workforce.'

Megha Nidhi Dahal IAS highlighted 'With India pioneering to achieve a net zero position by 2070, this collaborative initiative of HDFC Bank and CEE in tandem with governments, private sector, key stakeholders among the waste value chain and the citizens of Guwahati, will play a crucial role in accelerating the city's transition towards the sustainable and

circular economy.'

Nusrat Pathan, Head CSR, HDFC Bank, 'Our effort to promote circular economy and a business model across the waste management value chain through this project includes partnerships with stakeholders and initiatives to educate the community on sustainable practices. This aligns with our commitment to reducing environmental impact and supporting community development.'

Prabhjot Sodhi added 'Establishment and operational efficiencies at the MRF will have manifold benefits across the waste ecosystem. It will not only reduce waste volumes but also result in cost savings, reduced burning of plastics, reduced carbon emissions, and better income for safaimitras.'

The project will enable segregation of all types of dry waste; including plastic that will add value to the waste supply chain. PET, PE, HDPE, LDPE, PVC, PS, and PP waste are mechanically bailed, shredded, etc., and supplied to recyclers (to produce pallets or other materials/ products), cement kilns, road constructions, etc. All processes will follow The Solid Waste Management Rules 2016 & its further amendments. Different types of machinery have been installed for various operations at the MRF; movable weighing bridge, conveyor belt, air blower, shredder, grinder, and bailing machine.

Prior to the digital inauguration, a physical visit to the MRF was made by the Mayor, Guwahati, Mrigen Sarania and GMC officials on March 10. The Mayor gave a comprehensive overview of the MRF's operations, including a tour of the MRF facility and demonstration of the machinery in use. Detailed information about the safety and security systems implemented at the facility was also provided.

This project follows HDFC Bank's successful collaboration with UNDP India to establish a Swachhta Kendra (MRF) in Greater Noida. The Guwahati project aims to replicate this success and establish a replicable model for sustainable waste management.



Bijuli Kalita Medhi, BJP candidate for Guwahati constituency, campaigns for Lok Sabha polls at Kharguli Naam Ghar in Guwahati on Thursday. HT photo

Aptech International Pre School celebrates 6th Annual Day Function

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 28: Aptech International Pre School situated near VIP Road, Borbari in Guwahati recently held its 6th Annual Day Function "Journey Beyond the Stars, Chandrayan-3" to mark the culmination of this scholastic year. The programme was inaugurated by Nimi Borgohain, an eminent psychiatrist & social worker in presence of Franchisee owner Anupama Sikaria and other dignitaries. Principal Komuni Kohli in her speech welcomed all the toddlers, kids and parents and guardian at Annual Day Function.

She informed about the overall development of the toddlers and kids. To mark the 6th Annual Day Function all Students from the school participated in the various programs such as songs, dances, etc. The highlight of the programme was a short play on



Evils of Child Labour. The function was very much appreciated by all the parents as the efforts of the students and teachers could be seen in the performances.

Owner Franchisee Anupama Sikaria said Aptech International Preschool was opened 6 years back in Guwahati on VIP road near Borbari Chowk and 4

batches of students have passed and got admissions in eminent schools in the city. The school is meticulously managed by a team of all women staff who aim to provide quality & holistic education by following stringent guidelines when it comes to ensuring the child's safety, well being and overall personality development.

Police nab two dacoits after hot chase in N Guwahati

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 28: Rangia police arrested two dacoits after a hot chase in Kamrup on Wednesday night.

As per reports, the accused were arrested from Rangia. The suspects, Rana Ali and Siddique Ali were alleged of involvement in numerous robberies across the region.

Their arrest comes after an escape attempt from the scene of a crime in Sila village located in North Guwahati.

Following a tip-off regarding the robbery, police initiated a pursuit to nab them.

After a chase, the suspects were cornered by the Gauripur Police.

The suspects, according to the police, were attempting to flee with stolen cash amounting to Rs 16,000.

Apart from the money, the police also seized a vehicle and various "incriminating" materials from the suspects.

Police said that they are currently collecting further evidence to determine the extent of their "criminal network".



Student puts signature against Citizenship Amendment Act during a signature campaign against Citizenship Amendment Act organized by CAA Birodhi Aikya Mancha in Guwahati. HT photo

IVF baby born at GMCH first time in history

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 28: The Gauhati Medical College and Hospital (GMCH) has achieved a major milestone when a baby conceived through in vitro fertilization (IVF) on Wednesday.

Addressing a press conference GMCH principal Prof. (Dr.) Achyut Chandra Baishya talking to pressmen at G M C H .

Baishya said, "In 2022, we started an infertility clinic at our hospital. On March 27, 2024, a baby girl conceived through IVF was delivered (caesarean) in our hospital. The baby girl weighed 2.6kg. Both mother and baby are in a stable condition."

Meanwhile, the GMCH Superintendent

Dr. Abhijit Sarma said, "At private hospitals, IVF treatment costs around ₹ 5 to 6 lakh, however, we are providing the treatment at a cost of ₹ 70,000. GMCH is the first government-run hospital to provide the treatment in the Northeast region."

The medical authorities informed that IVF treatment is conducted on Wednesday



and Friday every week at the government-run hospital and urged patients who want to undergo IVF to get treatment at the GMCH.

Music producer Ambar Das weaved his magic into the film's music

Music launch of award-winning Assamese film 'Jiya'

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 28: Eagerly anticipated music launch of the Assamese feature film 'Jiya' illuminated the halls of the Gauhati Press Club in Guwahati on March 28, heralding a new era of musical excellence.

Directed by Kenny Basumatary and produced by Sarmistha Chakravorty, 'Jiya' has already garnered significant acclaim, securing four prestigious awards, including the coveted Best Film honor at the recently held Prag Cine Awards. The film's music has already won the Best Singer Male (Angarag Papon Mahanta) and Best Background Score (Ambar Das) awards.

Music Producer Ambar Das weaved his magic into the film's music, infusing it with soul-stirring melodies that captivate the audience's hearts. The music launch showcased Ambar Das's remarkable talent, setting the stage for an unforgettable cinematic journey.

The soundtrack of 'Jiya' boasts a rich blend of emotions and melodies, offering a glimpse into the soul of the film. Among the standout tracks are "Xopun

Xopun Loga," featuring the mesmerizing vocals of Angarag Papon Mahanta and Sarmistha Chakravorty, and "Ei xadhu," a composition sung by Shankuraj Konwar and Sarmistha Chakravorty.

Other notable tracks include "Nuphuta Junak," a soulful rendition by Maitrayee Patar, and "Kothabur Jodi Hool Hoy," a poignant composition voiced by Eepsita Hazarika and Sarmistha Chakravorty. The soundtrack is further elevated by the ethereal track "Udong Bukut," featuring the enchanting vocals of Sarmistha Chakravorty.

Lyrics and composition of "Xopun Xopun Loga" is by Sarmistha Chakravorty. Other credits include Bhaskarjyoti Kalita on flute and Hriday Baba on tabla. Lyrics of "Ei Xadhu" is by Raj Dweep while Navanita Sharma and Ambar Das provided backing vocals. In "Nuphuta Junak", flute is by Bhaskarjyoti Kalita while the lyrics is written by Maitrayee Patar. Lyrics of "Kothabur Jodi Hool Hoy" is by Chandana Pathak while that of "Udong Bukut" is by Thengal Jyoti Swapna and was composed by Anshuman Barua.



The soulful songs are now available across all leading streaming networks, including YouTube and Spotify. Sarmistha Chakravorty, the producer

of 'Jiya', shared her excitement about the film's music, stating: "The music of 'Jiya' has been a labor of love, and we are thrilled to present it to the audience. Each

track is a testament to the dedication and talent of our team, and we hope it resonates deeply with the viewers."

Speaking about the film's music, director Kenny Basumatary expressed his admiration for Ambar Das's exceptional talent, stating: "The music of 'Jiya' adds depth and emotion to the narrative, enhancing the overall cinematic experience."

On drawing inspiration for the music of 'Jiya', music producer Ambar Das remarked: "As the music producer for 'Jiya', I found inspiration in the poignant narrative of a single mother's journey, navigating societal stigma, familial pressures, and her daughter's longing for a father figure. Crafting the music, I aimed to capture the emotional intricacies of her story, infusing each melody with resilience and hope while reflecting the unexpected twists that make the film truly captivating. Collaborating with the talented team, it was a privilege to contribute to bringing this tale to life through music, and I hope the audience finds depth and resonance in the soundtrack."

Audiences can look forward to experiencing the magic of 'Jiya' as it hits theaters on May 17, 2024, promising an unforgettable journey into the heart of Assamese cinema.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Of all possessions a friend is the most precious.
- Herodotus

Two sides of Modi's foreign policy

As India gears up for its upcoming parliamentary elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy achievements and shortcomings come under scrutiny. Over the past decade, Modi has sought to position India as a global leader, emphasizing a shift towards a more open discussion of foreign affairs within the country. While this transparency could foster informed debates and public ownership of foreign policy decisions, recent developments have raised concerns about communal division and a narrowing of India's global identity. Modi's focus on promoting Hindu nationalist objectives abroad marks a departure from India's previous stance as a secular democracy. This shift has strained relationships with neighbouring countries and reshaped India's overseas community, with implications for its influence on global affairs. Divisions along religious lines have emerged, leading to tensions and outbreaks of violence among South Asians in Western countries. Despite these challenges, Modi has maintained India's historical stance of neutrality and independence in global politics. By pursuing alliances with nations across geopolitical divides, India has managed to acquire sophisticated weaponry from the U.S. while also exploring collaborative defense projects with Russia.

Modi's adept handling of these complex relationships has been a significant achievement in Indian foreign policy. However, criticisms abound, particularly regarding the communal division encouraged within the Indian diaspora and India's shift away from its traditional secular identity. Recent disputes, such as the conflict with the Maldives, highlight the potential consequences of India's evolving foreign policy approach. The Maldives' request for the removal of Indian military forces from strategically important islands sparked tensions, revealing the delicate balance India must strike between asserting its regional influence and maintaining diplomatic relations. Moreover, concerns linger about the sustainability of India's alignment with the United States, given its refusal to commit support on key geopolitical objectives and reluctance to join U.S. forces in potential conflicts. While Modi has successfully navigated these complexities thus far, questions remain about the long-term viability of India's foreign policy strategy. Modi's foreign policy tenure has seen both successes and criticisms. While his efforts to position India as a global leader have yielded significant achievements, concerns about communal division and a departure from India's secular values persist. As India prepares for the upcoming elections, the future direction of its foreign policy remains a critical issue for both domestic and international observers.

Furthermore, Modi's emphasis on promoting Hindu nationalist objectives on the global stage has raised eyebrows internationally and strained India's relationships with some countries. This shift in foreign policy strategy has led to increased scrutiny of India's domestic affairs, particularly regarding religious freedom and minority rights. Critics argue that Modi's approach risks undermining India's reputation as a pluralistic and inclusive society, potentially alienating allies and hindering diplomatic efforts. Additionally, concerns have been raised about the impact of India's foreign policy on regional stability, particularly in South Asia. The escalation of tensions with neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan and China, underscores the delicate balance India must strike between asserting its interests and maintaining peace in the region. As Modi seeks re-election, his foreign policy agenda will undoubtedly remain a focal point of debate, with voters assessing both the successes and shortcomings of his approach on the global stage. As India navigates its future on the global stage, the balance between ambition and diplomacy remains paramount.

Hundred years and on - RSS the fortress of nationalism

Ever since the BJP government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) Modi's ideological alma mater began to receive a magnified attention in the media. It was not because the RSS failed to grab media glare previously, but it used to maintain an ideal distance from it. I have known from the facts that the organization illustrated on different occasions that it believes in dialogues with its ideological adversaries to rectify the confusion that has been there in the air on its views and it was hesitant to depend on the media to publicize its agenda. This approach of the Sangh seems to have gained it more meaningful popularity in India and abroad. What made me take a closer view of the RSS was an incident. Besides being curious about the speech delivered by the RSS Chief in his annual address, during the Dussehra days every year, his unexpected visit to a mosque in Delhi had compelled me to study it intensely.

Interestingly, one reason that his visit captured columns in dailies was due to its being an unprecedented event and a rarity by all means. The second reason was that the head of the BJP's ideological mentor visited the mosque when the country was witnessing multiple probes and raids and arrests of PFI activists in various parts of India. And the third reason I think, must have needed the media the most was the statement of Umer Ahmed Ilyasi, the Chief of All India Imam Organization, which is the largest Imam organization in the world. Mohan Bhagwat is "rashtira pita" (father of the nation), said the senior cleric. To which, Bhagwat intervened and said that there is only one father of the nation and also said everyone is "Bharat Ki Santan" (child of the nation). The momentum, the churn his visit and its ideological ramification triggered was immense. Now, being at the brim of a century, the RSS is all set to celebrate its feat.

Passing through a century of its activities of man making and nation building, the RSS seems to have gained

the rare reputation of an organization that has achieved this grand milestone of a century. Politically, it is the Indian National Congress that has crossed a century. But hitting the rough edges of time, it seriously diminished in values and structure.

Significantly moving from what it calls being just a cultural organization to an organizational genius of a colossal entity which gave birth to multiple organizations including the ruling BJP; the RSS deserves to be studied exten-

sively to gain clarity on its ideological moorings. There have been malicious campaigns against its intentions and daring attempts depicted it as a campaigner of hatred. It is really irresponsible to treat any ideology a source of contempt and hatred and chaos until we get into the reality of facts that were intriguingly framed into comically-proportioned narratives.



DEGREE OF THOUGHT
By: M.R.Lalu

sively to gain clarity on its ideological moorings. There have been malicious campaigns against its intentions and daring attempts depicted it as a campaigner of hatred. It is really irresponsible to treat any ideology a source of contempt and hatred and chaos until we get into the reality of facts that were intriguingly framed into comically-proportioned narratives.

Though Dr K B Hedgevar was the founder of RSS, its expansion to this unimaginable magnitude became possible with its second Chief M. S. Golwalkar began to hold the reins. Popularly known as Guruj, Golwalkar is well known for his saintly persona and his book "Bunch of Thoughts" has been considered as its holy text. The RSS has been known for its hard Hindutva stance with patriotic flavor holding its ideological essence attracting millions. It has been under attack on various issues, from the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi to the destruction of Babri Masjid to a lot many issues have been attached to the RSS by its opponents, giving it the status of a cult. Of course it received a clean chit

ingly in practice, the RSS seems to have made considerable attempts to help successive governments when it found the country was faced with grave threats. The appalling onslaught by India's aggressive neighbor China was forewarned by the RSS in its Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha in 1959. Cautioning the government, the highest decision making body of the Sangh said, "...the country should essentially rely on its own strength, if it has to meet any kind of external and internal challenges." The RSS goes on admonishing the government on its stand on Tibet as well. It tells, "The Government in its anxiety to befriend China became totally unmindful of her expansionist designs and even admitted China's claim on Tibet." Bringing the internal security threat alert to the government, the resolution by the APBS concludes, "... alongside invasion on our borders, subversive activities of the Chinese spies and the Communists and other fifth column elements within the country are going on unchecked."

The horror of Sandeshkhali began to cripple the fortunes of a large number of innocent people in West Bengal. But the Sangh foretold how precarious the

state security was as extremist elements were blessed by their masters in politics. Islamic radicalization and the intensity of its horror destabilized Tagore's Bengal. The APBS 2017 expressed grave concern over the influx of Jihadi elements in the state and it warned the state government for its the-atries of being a sympathizer to the disruptive forces, encouraging them by providing an ecosystem for radicalization.

The RSS has a clear vision on the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 as well. An apex body meeting of the RSS appealed to the citizens of the country to know the real purpose of the act, which it said was a prime mover to deliver justice to those minorities who got displaced and persecuted under Islamic rule in the neighboring countries. Its assurance decreed the genuineness of the act which, it promised, would not target any Indian citizen.

Having gone through the resolutions passed by the annual high level meetings of the RSS, one thing was clear, that there is an underlying ideological acceptance between the government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the RSS. While the RSS aspires for Bharatiya resurgence through structural spiritual evolution, the government under Modi seems to materialize this on multiple fronts. His revamping missions of spiritual centers to his Panch Pran call from the ramparts of the Red Fort, all that is executed by the government is in tune with what the RSS strives for fulfillment. This ideological concomitance is reflected in Modi's Make in India initiative which was an ideal hand-in-glove material of the Sangh's Swadeshi movement. Modi's "Vocal for Local" has gone beyond the dry sloganeering of "Swadeshi" as he brought this ideological dictum in true spirit and practice.

Though the RSS is sidelined and criticized for its Hindutva stance on nationalism, an ideal study of the Sangh would reveal certain hard facts about why it survived for a century. Ruling the country for a decade, the Sangh has reasons to plan for a hat-trick, which even the BJP and its leader Narendra Modi understandably accept, would be hard to happen without the RSS cadres toil. (The author is a freelance journalist who can be reached at mr_lalu30@gmail.com)

Why the world is silent about persecution in Balochistan?

By: Saleem Samad

At the onset of the Holy Ramadan month, Muslims all over the world were busy with fasting rituals, and the global protest against the occupation of Balochistan on 27 March 1948 was not heard across the globe.

Balochistan, for 76 years has endured institutionalised persecution and atrocities of Baloch ethnic minorities.

The Baloch people have been living in pain and agony under Pakistan's occupation. The exiled Baloch has taken to social media @Twitter (now X) to remind that Balochistan was forcibly annexed by Pakistan against the will of the people.

Not much has been written and published in the international press. Not enough voice has been raised at any international forum regarding appalling human rights abuses, missing persons, enforced disappearances, extra-judicial deaths, crimes against humanity and genocide committed by state actors - Pakistan security forces.

Before the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, Balochistan consisted of four princely states under the British Raj - Kalat, Lasbela, Kharan and Makran, which is known as Balochistan. Two of these provinces, Lasbela and Kharan, were fiduciary states placed under Khan of Kalat's rule by the British, as was Makran which was a district of Kalat.

The rulers of Kalat State first were under the subject of Mughal emperor Akbar in Delhi and after 1839 to the British.

Only three months before the creation of Pakistan (in August 1947), Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and the first Governor-General of Pakistan had negotiated the freedom of Balochistan under Kalat State from the British.

The series of meetings were held between the Viceroy, the British Crown's representative based in New Delhi, Jinnah and the Khan of Kalat regarding the future relationship with Kalat State and Pakistan.

The parleys ensued in a communique, popularly a Standstill Agreement on 11 August 1947, which stated that: The Government of Pakistan recognised Kalat as an independent sovereign state in treaty relations with the British Government with a status different from that of Indian States.

The ruling Muslim League elites of Pakistan led by Jinnah had a change of heart and unilaterally decided to merge Balochistan with the Pakistan Union on 27 March 1948. The hashtag #27MarchBlackDay is viral on social media.

A Baloch journalist Malik Siraj Akbar remarked, "The Black Day in Balochistan is a reminder of the struggle for freedom and justice that continues to this day."

For decades, exasperated Baloch people have been ferociously protesting the forcible conversion of the Baloch population into a minority in their homeland.

Armed militants of the fiercest Marri and Bugti tribes waged armed struggles and politically challenged the forcible inclusion of the resource-rich province into Pakistan in March 1948.

Pakistan army forcibly occupied the Balochistan capital Quetta, raided the Amar Palace of Mir Sir Ahmad Yar Khan Ahmedzai, Khan of Kalat, who was also the President of the Council of Rulers for the Balochistan States Union and was forced to sign a document of accession to Pakistan.

In 1958, Pakistan military officer Tikka Khan brutally suppressed the first nationalist movement

by the Baloch people and the military commander was dubbed the "Butcher of Balochistan".

After 23 years, the hawkish Lt. Gen. Tikka Khan was rechristened as "Butcher of Bengal" for his role in the genocide in the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war.

The province is vastly rich in natural resources, including oil, gas, copper, and gold. Despite huge deposits of mineral wealth, Balochistan is one of the poorest regions of Pakistan and also the largest province of Pakistan.

"Balochistan is a rich land with poor people because the state has never invested in its development," stated Naela Quadri Baloch, an outspoken human rights defender and a senior member of the Balochistan government in exile.

Today the resources are plundered by the Pakistan junta in collaboration with China, in the name game of the mega debt-trap Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was fiercely resisted by the armed Baloch nationalists.

Amnesty International in a report stated that despite several pledges to resolve the country's crisis of 'disappearances', Pakistan's new civilian government has not yet provided information about hundreds of cases of people believed to be held in secret prisons in undisclosed locations by the military establishment.

International political think tanks say that there is no global support for the Baloch movement for freedom because an independent Balochistan would result in more violence and destabilisation. (The author is an award-winning independent journalist, media rights defender, recipient of the Ashoka Fellowship and Helman-Hammett Award. He could be reached at saleem-samad@hotmail.com; Twitter @saleem-samad)

Arvind Kejriwal was used by BJP in 2011 movement to take on the Congress

By: Arun Kumar Shrivastav

Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and its Chairperson, Arvind Kejriwal, owe their political incarnation to the anti-corruption movement of 2011. The movement's epicentre was Delhi and it brought together intellectuals from diverse fields - bureaucracy, law, teaching, banking, fine and performing arts, sports, films, and social work. Successful people from diverse backgrounds came together to create a political party where the central ideology was eradicating corruption. Barely ten years after AAP's inception, its founder and central figure, Arvind Kejriwal himself, is facing corruption charges while three of his colleagues - Satyendra Jain, Manish Sisodia, and Sanjay Singh - are already in judicial custody for several months.

During the 2011 anti-corruption movement, Manmohan Singh-led UPA government was in power at the Center and Congress' Sheila Dixit in Delhi. When they talked about removing corruption, they meant removing Congress from power. All those who were opposed to Congress, including people in the BJP and Hindutva outfits, lent their weight to the anti-corruption movement. Baba Ramdev's heroics at Ramlila Maidan and his uncontrolled diatribe against Sonia Gandhi would still be fresh in

the memory of many of the readers.

Subsequently, Arvind Kejriwal registered spectacular political wins in the Delhi Assembly elections, 28 seats out of 70 in 2013, then 67 in 2015, and 62 in 2020. This kind of victory is unprecedented in India's political history, where there have always been strong counter-political forces for any party to feel too cosy or comfortable. While AAP's grip over Delhi remained tight, with the civic poll also going in its favour, many of the luminaries in AAP's initial team had deserted the party. Kiran Bedi, Prashant Bhushan, Anand Kumar, Yogender Yadav, and Kumar Vishwas, among many others, either left AAP or created a distance from AAP's day-to-day affairs. This left Arvind Kejriwal with fewer friends who could stand up to the power when the tide turns against him.

But a true Delhiite, Kejriwal has been the typical rough and tough Delhi boy, with a don't-mess-with-me attitude. He had his hands on the pulse of Delhi's people. He knew what would cheer the people and make them fight for him. Others in politics had neither this connection with the Delhi people nor the time to make Delhi their priority.

Now comes the most vital part of what makes Arvind Kejriwal the phenomenon he is. People across Delhi would swear that Kejriwal has delivered on people's expectations like no

one did in the past. A big reason for AAP's political victory, particularly in 2015, was the inflated electricity bills that people received. It was the early days of private distribution of electricity and collection of bills, and in Delhi, power distribution companies of Reliance and Tata were engaged. AAP cashed in on people's frustration over electricity bills that Delhi consumers would think were twice or thrice higher than the actual bills. After coming to power, the AAP government set this right and, in the process, sent strong signals to both profit-seeking industrialists and greedy bureaucrats that the AAP government would not tolerate the exploitation of the people.

While AAP and Kejriwal have been able to rein in greedy elements and transfer the benefits to the people, there was a limit to how much he could do. Then, Kejriwal tried to make a distinction by prioritising education and healthcare. But in the face of Delhi's extreme population density in certain pockets, updating or upgrading existing schools or healthcare infrastructure was possible only to a point. Then, Kejriwal tried giving pensions and monetary help to widows, handicapped people, and so on. Thanks to its strong carder base in Delhi, the AAP government ensured the needy received government benefits.

At this juncture, the Delhi govern-

ment under AAP needed more funds, but, so far, it could not augment existing revenue streams or add new ones. Where will the money come from for AAP's ambitious pro-people initiatives? Liquor is bad but government needs money to do good. Kejriwal's idealism hit the harsh realities of politics and governance.

One can understand his intent when Kejriwal says he cares for Delhi's people. How to get the money to get maximum benefit to the people is a question that makes and breaks governments. All state governments and government bodies face this problem. It is also a universal problem faced by every government in the world. Kejriwal could have used understanding and empathy with other governments and taken a collaborative approach to getting more funds for his state and people.

But once you side with the masses and make a chorus with them, you are likely going to be a rebel than a statesman. Imran Khan's politics in Pakistan serves as an example. Here lies Kejriwal's vulnerability.

A critical area where Kejriwal could have shown his calibre was tackling Delhi's pollution. In 2015, the Chinese capital, Beijing, was in the grip of extreme air pollution; today, it's an example of a complete turnaround. Delhi was another world capital hit by high air and noise pollution; it's still so. (IPA Service)

POST BAG

Stimac unacceptable

Sir/Ma'am

During the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers held in Guwahati, the Indian football team encountered a disheartening setback, enduring a demoralizing 1-2 defeat against Afghanistan. This loss marks the first defeat to Afghanistan in over 15 years, highlighting the struggles of Afghan football, despite being underdogs. It signifies a new low for Indian football, illuminating the pervasive challenges the sport faces within the country.

Igor Stimac's poor team management and coaching are the main reasons one can ask for his dismissal. Even Sparking widespread criticism across the country makes one completely understandable that Stimac performance is unacceptable.

Additionally, the All India Football Federation (AIFF) administrators are also held accountable for the dismal state of Indian football.

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Kejriwal can't be CM

Sir/Ma'am

As far as Arvind Kejriwal is concerned, he will have to stay out of politics for a long time. Aam Aadmi Party leaders may claim that Kejriwal will remain the Chief Minister, but now it will be almost impossible for Kejriwal to remain on the post of Chief Minister. Delhi state holds a special position. Here the Lieutenant Governor has unlimited powers. The Lieutenant Governor comes under the Central Home Department. In such a situation, if Arvind Kejriwal does not resign, it is certain that he will be dismissed in the future. The arrest of Arvind Kejriwal will have an impact on the election campaign of Delhi and Punjab. Aam Aadmi Party is definitely playing the victim card but it has to be repeatedly criticized by the public and will have to give clarification in front. That means the entire opposition is currently on the defensive on the issue of corruption.

In fact, Kejriwal has committed a huge strategic and legal mistake by not responding to ED's nine summonses. He has to bear the brunt of this at the time of Lok Sabha elections. If he had gone to the ED office for questioning in November itself, he would have been arrested today. One does not have to see this day. Even if ED had arrested him in November, he could have got bail after four-five months like it happened in the case of Sanjay Raut. Obviously the leaders of Aam Aadmi Party made serious mistakes in the case of Arvind Kejriwal.

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Kejriwal's arrest gives Opposition a good story to sell, Will the voters buy it?

By: Anita Katyal

Coming soon after the electoral bonds data that revealed the identity of donors and recipients of anonymous political donations, the late-night dramatic arrest of Delhi Chief Minister (CM) and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) supremo Arvind Kejriwal on election eve seemingly has the potential to unite an otherwise disparate group of Opposition parties.

The INDIA (Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance) bloc, however, faces a big challenge ahead. Besides lacking organisational strength and a credible leader who can make a strong case for political vendetta, the Opposition parties have not been seen as a cohesive grouping.

But as a first step post-Kejriwal's arrest, members of the INDIA bloc immediately lined up in his support, coming down heavily on the Modi government for misusing investigative agencies to target Opposition leaders.

They all declared their resolve to set aside their differences and fight this battle unitedly by

launching street protests and taking this issue to the people in their election campaign. An hour ago, Aam Aadmi Party MLA Atishi stated that the "entire INDIA alliance will organise a 'maha rally' at 10 am on 31 March at the Ramlila Maidan."

Even the Congress which was banished from the electoral arena in Delhi by the Kejriwal-led AAP, showed up to express its solidarity with the beleaguered chief minister.

Will the voters buy what a United Opposition offers to sell?

Kejriwal's arrest is not just a setback for the AAP as he is its most powerful and charismatic leader-cum-strategist, but it will also hurt the INDIA bloc as the Delhi CM was being counted as among its chief campaigners. In fact, it is quite evident that Kejriwal's arrest was timed to keep him away from the campaign trail. After the initial declarations of support, the Opposition has to chalk out an action plan to convince the electorate that the Bharatiya Janata Party in general and Prime Minister Narendra



Modi, in particular, are killing democracy in the country by waging an all-out war against the Opposition, and how the Enforcement Directorate, the Income Tax department and the Central Bureau of Investigation, have become handy tools to harass their political adversaries.

While Kejriwal's arrest will predictably be highlighted by the Opposition, especially the AAP, to generate sympathy for him, the charge of political vendetta will be further supplemented by the Congress pointing to how its bank accounts have been frozen

before the upcoming elections.

The electoral bonds data provided by the State Bank of India will also be publicised to show how the Modi government doled out contracts to companies who made hefty donations to the BJP, while others were virtually coerced into buying the bonds after investigative agencies swooped in on them.

The Opposition believes it has a good story to sell. But it's too early to say if the voters will buy it. The BJP is unlikely to sit back and allow the Opposition to set the agenda. There is bound to be

a pushback by the saffron party which has a consummate communicator in the prime minister who will showcase the action against the opposition as a fulfilment of his promise to root out corruption and punish the corrupt. The revelations on the electoral bonds data will be brushed aside on the ground that all political parties benefited from it.

How far will INDIA go for Kejriwal?

Besides facing a popular and credible leader, the Opposition finds itself pitted against a cash-rich, well-oiled organisation which has stitched up alliances with a host of small regional outfits, perfected its caste combinations, and is unapologetic about using Hindu nationalism to polarise the electorate in its favour.

Opposition parties also have to fight the public perception that it will not survive long as a united grouping as its members started squabbling shortly after the INDIA bloc's initial show of solidarity. To make matters worse, it lost two allies – Bihar CM Nitish Kumar and Jayant Chaudhary of the Rashtriya Lok Dal – to the

BJP-led National Democratic Alliance. The Opposition bloc is also bereft of a leader who can prove to be a worthy challenger to Modi.

Seat-sharing talks between the Congress and its allies further brought out the differences in the grouping. These negotiations are still on in Maharashtra, the seat-sharing pact in Bihar has not been sealed yet while West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee has decided to go solo, and in Kerala, the Congress and the Left parties are pitted against each other.

The Congress-AAP alliance is unusual as the two parties have finalised their partnership in Delhi, Haryana, Goa and Gujarat but have decided to go their separate ways in Punjab.

Kejriwal's arrest has provided the Opposition a fresh opportunity to present a united front and to take its message to the voters by waging a relentless battle on the streets. However, there are lurking doubts that the Opposition can deliver on this front, as none of the parties have the capacity or the leadership to counter the BJP agenda at the national

level.

Regional parties like the Trinamool Congress, the DMK or the Rashtriya Janata Dal can, at best, drum up some support in their respective states. Here again, there is no clarity on whether Kejriwal's arrest and its larger implications for the national polity will resonate with the people outside Delhi as caste affiliations and local issues generally tend to take centre stage.

Having won two successive assembly polls in the national Capital, it is expected that the AAP will make an impact in Delhi but the protesting party cadres may find it difficult to keep up the fight for the next few weeks as the Delhi Lok Sabha polls are to be held only in the fourth phase. Similarly, the AAP could face an uphill task in garnering sympathy for Kejriwal beyond the national capital due to its limited presence across the country.

The party will be dependent on the INDIA bloc parties to pitch in but the question is: how far will they go for Kejriwal once their initial enthusiasm wanes? (Courtesy: The Quint)

Sexual harassment is rampant in Southeast Asia's male-dominated conservation sector

By: Hường Thiên

During a 2020 field trip to a rural area in Vietnam, Hoa, then working for a conservation-focused nonprofit, visited local authorities to discuss forest management. Vietnamese law requires local authorities to approve foreign-funded projects, so these types of informal meetings are crucial to a project's success.

Hoa was accompanied by three male colleagues, but during the event, she recalls, she was singled out to propose a toast with the village leader. He put his arm around her shoulder, which she said made her feel uncomfortable. Despite her unease, she had to conceal her discomfort and drink with him.

To her dismay, Hoa noticed that he behaved similarly toward other female colleagues from the region, who appeared accustomed to such behaviour. None of her colleagues offered to drink on her behalf, which is often a gesture of support for female colleagues in such situations.

Later on, her three male colleagues, who were a dozen years her senior, made her even more uncomfortable. She recalls frightening moments when she was taking a shower in a shabby, open-air bathroom, while they made jokes outside. Some of the jokes included comments like, "Do you feel lonely bathing inside all by yourself?"

"It is sickening to just recall the incident," Hoa says. Hoa's visit took place the same year that a law making workplace sexual harassment illegal came into effect in Vietnam. But Hoa remained silent, believing her workplace would be indifferent to the issue.

Conservation workers from around Southeast Asia echo Hoa's sentiments. Despite existing laws against sexual harassment that recognise the rights of victims to seek redress, law enforcement remains far from effective on the ground. Women in the male-dominated conservation sector say they often stay silent in order to continue working. Limited awareness of this issue contributes to the persistence of sexual harassment.

Norms ineffective, low awareness

Once back at the office in Hanoi, Hoa confided to several female colleagues about the incident, but they seemed nonchalant, she says.

"They told me that male colleagues did not have any bad intentions, and that it is normal for colleagues to tease each other," Hoa says. "They told me to just focus on my job." Hoa now works in an international company, where there's clear guidance, training and a reporting mechanism in the event of sexual harassment. Her former workplace still has none of those.

Bianca works closely with Indigenous communities in the Philippines. Though an Anti-Sexual Harassment Act was put in place in 1995, she says she frequently experiences unwanted sexual jokes. These, she says, can come in the middle of trainings or serious discussions at work, and also in informal roundtables with male participants.

"Suddenly, someone might ask why I am single, then they tried to pair me up with a single man in the communities," says Bianca, who is in her mid-30s. "I feel embarrassed. Single men do not get this question."

"Most challenging is when you are a workshop leader. In front of community leaders, you need to find a way not to violate their dignity while keeping your own," she says. Bianca says she's also observed inappropriate behavior toward her female colleagues, who she says don't necessarily associate such actions with sexual harassment. "I grew up in an environment where I understood that some physical touches are wrong. Males in my family respect my boundaries," Bianca says. "But others might grow up in different environments."

Bianca says she tries not to impose meaning on those behaviors by reporting the perpetrators or telling colleagues that she believes they've been harassed. But she says she does take notice and makes sure not to leave these women alone with the perpetrators.

When mentoring women, she says, she tries to put forward a simple definition of harassment: any action that makes a person feel uncomfortable because of their sex or gender, especially women or members of queer communities.

"Sometimes we cannot prove sexual harassment, but we can feel the discomfort," Bianca says. "For example, when we shake hands with male partners, the way some do so may make you very uncomfortable. You might feel goosebumps. In this situation, you should not be alone with the person. I advise women not to second-guess themselves."

Lack of awareness is common even among highly educated women. After a government career in Malaysia, Rufia* moved to the nonprofit sector in her 40s. There, her workplace was mostly female and she received many trainings, including those related to sexual harassment. Only then, she says, did she realise that she'd been sexually harassed many times in her previous job, both as a junior staff member and as a top manager.

"It is sickening to just recall the incident," Rufia says. Rufia's visit took place the same year that a law making workplace sexual harassment illegal came into effect in Vietnam. But Rufia remained silent, believing her workplace would be indifferent to the issue.

Conservation workers from around Southeast Asia echo Rufia's sentiments. Despite existing laws against sexual harassment that recognise the rights of victims to seek redress, law enforcement remains far from effective on the ground. Women in the male-dominated conservation sector say they often stay silent in order to continue working. Limited awareness of this issue contributes to the persistence of sexual harassment.

"I did not know I was on the receiving end of sexual harassment until later."

Silence is the norm

Even when harassment is clearly identified, speaking up against harassers isn't only hard, but sometimes impractical or even impossible. Bianca says women have been so inured to sexual innuendos that they sometimes even laugh back at those jokes. Yet this kind of coping mechanism comes "at the expense of women's self-esteem," she says. Single and young women are particularly vulnerable. "Nobody speaks out, including myself," she says. "We have to choose our own battles. We do not always have the energy and the mental space to deal with that."

In her area of work, most community leaders are men. Choosing to confront harassers would mean failure to defer to them.

"Deference to them is needed, if not, I would be unable to come back and work with them," Bianca says. Anxiety about causing tension in the organization is also a common concern.

"The NGO circle is so small. Reporting and complaining would give others the impression that I am a difficult person to work with," Hoa says.

Despite all that happened, Rufia says she doesn't hold grudges and didn't let any incidents ruin professional relationships, let alone relations with the top management.

"Culturally, there seemed to be no problem for men to be quite suggestive," she says. Malaysia's 2022 Anti-Sexual Harassment Act fails to hold employers accountable for their employees' or clients' conduct while on the job. Furthermore, there's no prohibition against retaliation aimed at the complainant or whistleblower.

"Reporting this might bring tensions in the organisation," Rufia says. Asma Abdullah, an intercultural specialist based in Kuala

Lumpur who's done research on speaking up in the Asian corporate context, says that while society imposes expectations that victims of sexual harassment be brave enough to speak up, many victims feel reluctant to do so for a variety of reasons.

"One can be due to the cultural conditioning of not speaking up in an environment where there is no psychological safety. The Asian work setting [tends] to be more hierarchical than egalitarian and where patriarchy reigns," Abdullah says.

Arimbi Heroopetri, a lawyer based in Jakarta who has experience working with women and environmental issues, says that even though Indonesian law provides a legal basis to categorise an act as sexual harassment, the process of reporting is still fraught with challenges.

"If the victims report the case to the police, the immediate response from the police is to reconcile between the perpetrators and the victims," she says. Kuros (not his real name), a Bruneian environmental advocate, says members of the LGBTQ+ communities are particularly reluctant to report incidents of sexual harassment.

"Perhaps we're already put in the marginalised community and given a bad reputation of 'sexual deviants,'" Kuros says. "We wouldn't want to expose some of our communities out, or else it be proving the false claim about the LGBTQIA to be true. This would put us more in the margins."

Female mentors, male allies

Absent effective application of formal measures against harassment, conservation workers say they've had to come up with their own strategies. Rufia recommends reporting if sexual harassment is persistent, but brushing it off until then.

"That's about how you react. The ball is in your court. They just push the boundary to see how far they can go. But I am firm and clear about my boundary," she says.

Bianca says she advises female colleagues to mentally prepare themselves for the risks of sexual harassment, while reminding them that it isn't their fault and that sexual harassment isn't determined by what they wear or how they act. In her work, she says, she also often seeks to befriend wives of community leaders so that they "see me as one of us."

"I make sure that I am not the only woman in the group when meeting with male community leaders," Bianca says. However, she acknowledges that this fails to address the root of the issue. "I would ask myself: why should we put the burden on women to protect themselves?" she says.

Sheherazade, co-founder of PROGRES, an NGO working on overlooked species and based on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, says women-to-women mentorship in the conservation sector is crucial.

"Empowered women mentorship networks can collectively advocate for better safety and protection for women in the field, and hold organizations/perpetrators accountable," says Sheherazade, who is currently studying for a Ph.D. in environmental sciences and policy at the University of California, Berkeley.

However, Sheherazade says mentorship alone isn't a panacea, because the problem is systemic and rooted in a deeply patriarchal society and lack of representation in the sector. Male colleagues, she says, especially those in positions of authority, can step up by creating both formal and informal social norms that hold other men accountable.

Abdullah, the intercultural specialist, agrees that women shouldn't be left to face these challenges alone. "I think women's issues have to be addressed in a context which include men," she says.

"Women can only be empowered if there are able to enroll men who can speak for them initially," Sheherazade agrees that sexual harassment isn't a problem to be addressed by women alone, but nor is it one that can be solved by men acting as "saviors of women," she says. It's collective work, she says. "It requires transformative change in conservation sectors."

This, she says, means that donors have a responsibility to ensure that the organisations they support have safeguarding policies in place and provide training for all of their staff and partners to "collectively create a safe and inclusive environment at work." (Courtesy: Scroll.in)

China, a 'want-to-be' superpower

By: Kabir Taneja

The first anniversary of the China-brokered détente between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023 passed without much fanfare. The war in Gaza has enveloped almost all regional political and diplomatic capacities across the Persian Gulf, while also highlighting international actors and their core interests amidst this fallout. Beijing has taken a position that is clearly pro-Palestine, in line with its historical standing on the issue, alienating its relations with Israel.

However, in China's state-controlled media, Chinese President Xi Jinping's success in bringing together Riyadh and Tehran was highlighted as an institutional Chinese position to promote peace. In a glowing piece on the anniversary which quoted regional analysts who underscored a sense of fatigue with the West's 'conditional' relations, the Chinese media outlet Xinhua said, "Today, China's advocacy for peace still resonates with Middle East countries."

The war in Gaza has enveloped almost all regional political and diplomatic capacities across the Persian Gulf, while also highlighting international actors and their core interests amidst this fallout.

Beijing's aims

In early 2023, Wang Yi (director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee) gave his endorsement to a plan to set up a new China-backed international mediation organisation headquartered in Hong Kong. According to reports, Algeria, Belarus, Cambodia, Djibouti, Indonesia, Laos, Pakistan, Serbia and Sudan were signatories to the initial statement as a preparatory office was launched. The Chinese establishment hopes to link the mediation initiative to its expansive economic corridor, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The BRI has extensive membership in West Asia as well, with Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE among others being part of China's economic highways. Israel, being heavily reliant on the United States for its security, is not a signatory. However, Israel's embattled Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu aired the fact last year that China had invited him

for a state visit.

China's absence in the Red Sea crisis

The war in Gaza has drawn strong red lines between China and Israel. This raises interesting questions on the exact role Beijing played in the Saudi-Iran détente. The probability of China being pulled into the process by Riyadh and Tehran, rather than actively brokering a deal, remains high. China has also been absent through the crisis in the Red Sea, where predominantly western naval forces have attempted to maintain the free flow of trade in this critical waterway. Contrarily, reports have suggested that Yemen-based Houthis were not targeting Chinese and Russian ships, suggesting a bypass potentially using leverages that Beijing has with its close partner Iran despite Tehran's calls for the Yemeni militia to cease attacks. If so, it shows China's crafty diplomacy was to predominantly protect its own interests and not wade into the crisis as an influential power looking to use its position to broker peace or even a ceasefire. Much of this kind of actual heavy lifting remains at the doorsteps of the White House.

China has also been absent through the crisis in the Red Sea, where predominantly western naval forces have attempted to maintain the free flow of trade in this critical waterway.

This then begs the question. What is China's actual role in the more challenging geopolitical regions such as West Asia? Beijing's support for the Palestinian cause without criticising Hamas practically aligns with the larger Arab posture. This stands against U.S. support for Israel, which is increasingly being criticised for its absolutist nature as the body count in Gaza continues to grow. China's intent for 'mediation' is non-existent in high-stake conflicts and is un-aspirational beyond the strategic aim of showcasing western, and more specifically, American power and influence, as detrimental to both international stability and security.

A push towards 'mediation diplomacy' has been an aspirational design for China on two major fronts. First, it is to position itself as an antithesis to what Beijing sees as decades worth of western interventionist policies, specifically in a re-

gion such as West Asia, where conflict has direct correlation with colonial history. Second, it is to increase its own geopolitical weight as a responsible international actor and power. However, both these aims have been confronted by realities around the war in Gaza as China has taken a clear stance towards the Arab side and has not condemned Hamas by name. Much of the reasoning behind this is to counter long-standing American influence and to take advantage of crevasses in regional diplomacy, specifically by the likes of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which are looking to chart their own paths of strategic autonomy and willing to partner with Beijing despite having close security ties with Washington DC.

In perspective

China seems content with predominantly displacing American hegemony without replacing it. Even a perception of being a 'soft hegemon' in the region will stand starkly against Chinese grandstanding against western policies. This is despite the fact that Beijing utilised the 'war on terror'-era to build closer ties with the U.S. and benefit its own security concerns regarding radicalisation and terrorism narratives around its restive Xinjiang region.

But once again, these were all narrow geostrategic aims. Scholars Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Isaac Kardon have highlighted in their work on how China, for its partner states, is more about their internal security rather than external — that is, prioritising political security of regimes rather than states. Arguably, this could appropriately explain what formalised Chinese mediation would aim for.

The war in Gaza colours Beijing as still being a 'want-to-be' superpower. Being risk averse and having a lack of alternatives to the historical West-centric policies (which it chides as being detrimental to global security and prosperity) makes Beijing stand out as hollow. Other than offering a sizeable cheque book, China still has few answers as substitutes to long-standing geopolitical flashpoints. For now, despite its size, it remains a utilitarian superpower for others to hedge against rather than being an upcoming traditional superpower. (Courtesy: ORF)

Rohingya conundrum: Stateless, helpless and unwanted

By: Bharat Bhushan

Last week, dozens of Rohingya refugees drowned after a wooden boat they were travelling in capsized off Indonesia's Aceh province. About 69 refugees were saved by local fishermen and Indonesian rescue services.

Survivors reported that the boat carried 150 refugees and at least 50 were feared dead. However, those who were rescued faced the wrath of the local residents who did not welcome their arrival.

Indeed, the Rohingya, a Muslim minority from Myanmar persecuted and run out of their homeland, are unwelcome nearly everywhere.

In November 2023, a boat carrying 200 Rohingya refugees was pushed back into the sea by the locals in Aceh. After a military crackdown in 2017, nearly one million Rohingya refugees fled to Bangladesh.

The Rohingya are seen as "foreigners" and designated as "Bengalis" by the majority Buddhist ruling classes of Myanmar. They have been denied citizenship and excluded from any future vision of Myanmar, as the nation grapples with issues of ethnicity, religion and citizenship.

Although the Rohingyas have lived in Myanmar for generations, they are

not recognised as an official ethnic group of the nation.

They are not included in the 135 ethnic groups officially recognised by the government. The Rohingyas have been denied citizenship since 1982, with the UN describing them as the "world's largest stateless population."

Hounded and persecuted, most fled to Bangladesh but they have also found refuge in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines and India.

In Bangladesh most of them live in densely populated camps in Cox's Bazar. To decongest the camps, some have been shifted 60 kilometre away from the mainland to the cyclone-prone Bhasan Char Island in the Bay of Bengal.

Their isolation further reduces their chances of access to basic rights or of finding long-term solution to their plight.

The Rohingyas having made the dangerous sea journey to Bangladesh are once again taking to the sea.

The conditions in the camps have deteriorated over the years.

Few work opportunities, dependence on aid, lack of formal and recognised education for their children and threatened by the violence of criminal gangs in the camps, have pushed many to venture on risky sea journeys in search of safer refuge elsewhere.

Their vulnerability also makes them prime targets for exploitation by traffickers and smugglers.

According to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), 2023 was the deadliest year at sea for the Rohingyas in the nine years since they fled Myanmar – 569 of them died while trying to escape in search of a better future.

The UNHCR noted a qualitative change in those risking death at sea as "66% of those embarking on these deadly journeys" were women and children.

The Rohingyas remaining in Myanmar have increasingly also been caught in the ongoing war between the state's armed forces and the rebel Arakan Army.

Since the beginning of this year, Rohingyas civilians have been killed or injured in the fighting, according to the Rohingyas Human Rights Initiative.

There are reports of the Myanmar Army's forced conscription of young Rohingyas men to fight the Arakan Army. Equally there are reports of the Arakan army using Rohingyas villages in the Rakhine as human shields.

Safe neither at home nor abroad, the Rohingyas are clearly the "nowhere people" of this century – stateless, helpless and unwanted. (Courtesy: The Wire)

The attacks also aim to weaken Ukrainian morale and act as retribution for Ukrainian long-range strikes on Russian soil

Russia perseveres with bombardments of Ukraine in an effort to wear down air defences

KYIV, March 28: Russia fired salvos of drones and missiles overnight at southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, authorities said on Thursday, injuring more than a dozen people as the Kremlin's forces persevered with attritional attacks designed to wear down Ukrainian defences.

Air defence systems intercepted 26 out of 28 Shahed drones, Ukraine's air force said.

Russian forces also launched five missiles overnight, it said. The regular bombardment of Ukraine by the Kremlin's forces during the war has recently gained momentum, with missile barrages of the capital Kyiv and strikes on energy facilities across the country.

The attacks also aim to weaken Ukrainian morale and act as retribution for Ukrainian long-range strikes on Russian soil.

One of Russia's goals is to "deplete Ukraine's inventory of ground-based air defence," according to a recent military assessment published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

That would erode some of



Ukraine's combat ability as it waits on pledged but delayed military support from the West, including ammunition for its artillery and air defences.

"Kyiv is confronted by the threat that an attritional war in the air domain will increasingly favour Russia without adequate support from the US and its allies," the IISS said. "Ukraine's ability to continue to counter Russian air threats and impose costs on the Russian Aerospace Forces remains important to the outcome of the war."

Ukraine is awaiting the delivery of F-16s fighter jets, which will help place pressure on Russia, from its Western partners. Ukrainian pilots have been training in the West for months on how to fly the

warplanes.

Russian President Vladimir Putin warned Ukraine's Western allies against providing air bases in their countries from where the F-16s could launch sorties against the Kremlin's forces, saying those bases would be a "legitimate target."

The F-16s require a high standard of runways and reinforced hangars to protect them when they are on the ground.

Military analysts have said the arrival of potentially dozens of F-16s won't be a game-changer, though Ukrainian officials have welcomed them as an opportunity to hit back at Russia's air dominance.

Putin insisted the F-16s "won't change the situation on the battle-

field."

"We will destroy their warplanes just as we destroy their tanks, armoured vehicles and other equipment, including multiple rocket launchers," Putin said in comments to military pilots during a visit to an air base late Wednesday.

Even so, Putin said, Russia has no intention of starting a war with NATO. He said it was "sheer nonsense" to think that Russia could attack a NATO member country after the Ukraine war.

Authorities in the Mykolaiv region, near the Black Sea in southern Ukraine, said 12 people were injured and six residential buildings were damaged in a Russian strike on the city on Wednesday afternoon with a ballistic missile.

In an overnight attack on the southern Ukraine region of Zaporizhzhia, Shahed drones struck a residential area, lightly injuring two women aged 72 and 74, according to regional Gov. Ivan Fedorov. Rescue services said seven buildings were damaged.

The Black Sea city of Odesa repelled three missile and drone attacks, officials said. (AP)

Israeli strikes in Lebanon kill 16, militant rockets kill 1 Israeli as cross-border violence soars

HEBBARIYE, March 28: A series of Israeli airstrikes in southern Lebanon killed 16 people and a barrage of rockets fired by the militant group Hezbollah killed one Israeli man, making Wednesday the deadliest day in more than five months of fighting along the border.

Since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, concerns have grown about further escalation along the Israel-Lebanon frontier. Tens of thousands of people on both sides have been displaced by the violence.

Wednesday's Israeli strikes targeted a Lebanese Sunni political and militant organization, the Islamic Group, which has joined the Shiite militant group Hezbollah in its fight against Israel. Two Hezbollah fighters were also killed, as was a local commander with the Amal Movement, another Shiite group.

The first Israeli airstrike hit a paramedic center affiliated with the Islamic Group, killing seven of its members in the village of Hebbariye after midnight.

Muheddine Qarhani, head of the Emergency and Relief Corps, told reporters at the scene that the paramedic center had been set up late last year. He said he was surprised a medical group had been targeted.

Israel said it killed an Islamic Group member involved in attacks

against Israel, as well as several other militants.

Maj. Gen. Ori Gordin, the head of the Israeli army's Northern Command, said Israel was operating against the Islamic Group and had struck a "large number of operatives" and was also conducting "very significant strikes" against Hezbollah.

"We are at war. We have been at war for almost half a year now, and it doesn't end with Hezbollah," he told a gathering of commanders.

Hours after the airstrike, Hezbollah claimed responsibility for firing rockets into the northern Israeli city of Kiryat Shmona and a military base. Hezbollah said it was retaliating for the deadly attack on the paramedic center.

Rescue services in Israel said a 25-year-old man was killed when a direct hit sparked a fire in an industrial park in Kiryat Shmona. Footage from the scene showed thick black smoke pouring out of a building.

Another person was lightly injured. Around 30 rockets were launched from Lebanon toward northern Israel, according to the Israeli military.

Nada Khleif was in her small bakery in Hebbariye when the strike heavily damaged her business and a nearby apartment, where two of her relatives were un-

harmd.

"The bakery was my only means of living. It is gone now," she said.

The Lebanese news agency said Israel bombed the village of Teir Harfa after sunset, killing five, and a second strike killed four people as paramedics gathered near a cafe in the coastal town of Naqoura.

Hezbollah's Islamic Health Society said two of its paramedics were killed in Teir Harfa.

The Islamic Risala Scout Association, also a paramedic group, said one of its members was killed in the strike on Naqoura.

The Amal movement of Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri said the strike on Naqoura killed one of its local commanders, identified as Ali Mahdi. Hezbollah said two of its fighters were killed without saying where they were struck.

The near-daily violence has mostly been confined to the area along the border, and international mediators are scrambling to prevent an all-out war. The fighting has killed nine civilians and 11 soldiers in Israel. Nearly 240 Hezbollah fighters and about 40 civilians have died in Lebanon.

Hezbollah began launching rockets toward Israel on Oct. 8, the day after Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel in a surprise attack that sparked the crushing war in Gaza. (AP)

Sri Lankan PM Gunawardena meets Chinese Prez Xi Jinping

COLOMBO, March 28: Chinese President Xi Jinping has assured continuous support to Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena for Sri Lanka's efforts for "political and socioeconomic progress" and also said Beijing will stand for safeguarding the island nation's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

China and Sri Lanka agreed to continue to act under the friendship, peace, mutual respect and fivefold principle in international affairs that do not interfere in the internal affairs of a country during a meeting between Xi and Gunawardena on Wednesday at Great Hall in Beijing, the prime minister's office said in a statement here on Thursday.

"Chinese President assured continuous support of China to Sri Lanka's efforts for political and socioeconomic progress. The Chinese President said that China will always stand for safeguarding independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of Sri Lanka," the statement said.

"It was emphasised that bilateral relations should be based on mutual respect and mutual productivity between the countries, and acting according to that policy would set a good example for both countries," it added.

President Xi assured that China will support the schemes necessary for the development of Sri Lanka as soon as they are presented.

China is willing to work with Sri Lanka to carry forward the spirit of the Rubber-Rice Pact, which is characterised by "independence, self-reliance, unity and mutual support," to consolidate political mutual trust, enhance exchanges of experience in governance, expand practical cooperation, and advance the high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, Xi was quoted as saying in an official press release in Beijing.

Earlier on Tuesday, China and Sri Lanka signed nine new agreements as Prime Minister Gunawardena met his counterpart Chinese Premier Li Qing amid Colombo's efforts to restructure its bankrupt economy but no details about the agreement were made available.

China is Sri Lanka's largest bilateral lender owning 52 per cent of the USD 40 billion external debt when Sri Lanka announced its sovereign default in 2022.

The Chinese assurance comes days after the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which concluded its second review of the USD 2.9 billion bailout with Sri Lanka, said reaching an agreement with the country's commercial creditors, the international bondholders and China Development Bank was the key to achieving debt sustainability. (PTI)

Jaishankar's Malaysia visit provided opportunity to further develop Enhanced Strategic Partnership: MEA

KUALA LUMPUR, March 28: External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's visit to Malaysia and his meetings with the country's top leadership presented an opportunity to reiterate commitment to further develop the bilateral Enhanced Strategic Partnership, an official statement said on Thursday.

Jaishankar was in Kuala Lumpur from March 27 to 28 as part of the last leg of his three-nation tour to Singapore, the Philippines and Malaysia. He called on Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Bin Ibrahim and thanked him for his support in deepening bilateral ties under the India-Malaysia Enhanced Strategic Partnership, India's Ministry of External Affairs said in a statement.

Jaishankar's visit to Malaysia provided an opportunity to reiterate commitment to further develop the Enhanced Strategic Partnership, it said. Anwar gave his commitment to facilitate the establishment of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) branch campus in Malaysia, the official Bernama news agency reported.

The Prime Minister also expressed appreciation to his Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi, for assisting Malaysia when the country was hit by a rice shortage and hoped for further facilitation on importing agricultural produce from India. (PTI)

Cargo ship had engine maintenance in port before it collided with Baltimore bridge: Officials

BALTIMORE, March 28: The cargo ship that lost power and crashed into a bridge in Baltimore underwent "routine engine maintenance" in port beforehand, the U.S. Coast Guard said Wednesday, as divers recovered the bodies of two of six workers who plunged into the water when it collapsed. The others were presumed dead, and officials said search efforts had been exhausted.

Investigators began collecting evidence from the vessel a day after it struck the Francis Scott Key Bridge. The bodies of the two men were located in the morning inside a red pickup submerged in about 25 feet (7.6 meters) of water near the bridge's middle span, Col. Roland L. Butler Jr., superintendent of Maryland State Police, announced at an evening news conference.

He identified the men as Alejandro Hernandez Fuentes, 35, who was from Mexico and living in Baltimore, and Dorian Ronal Castillo Cabrera, 26, who was from Guatemala and living in Dundalk, Maryland.

The victims, who were part of a construction crew fixing potholes on the bridge, were from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, Butler said.

Coast Guard Rear Admiral Shannon Gilreath said at the news conference that authorities were informed that the ship was going to undergo the maintenance.



"As far as the engine goes, we were not informed of any problems with the vessel," he said. The Baltimore region has reeled from the sudden loss of a major transportation link that's part of the highway loop around the city. The disaster also closed the port, which is vital to the city's shipping industry.

National Transportation Safety Board officials boarded the ship to recover information from its electronics and paperwork and to interview the captain and other crew members, NTSB Chair Jennifer Homendy said during a separate news conference. Twenty-three people, including two pilots, were on the ship when it crashed, she said.

The vessel was also carrying 56 containers of hazardous materials including corrosives, flammables and lithium ion batteries, Homendy said. She added that some containers were breached, and

that a sheen on the water from those materials would be handled by authorities.

Marcel Muise, NTSB investigator in charge, laid out a preliminary timeline assembled from the voyage data recorder comprising audio from the bridge and VHF radio ahead of the crash, which federal and state officials have said appeared to be an accident.

The vessel, the Dali, left port at 12:39 a.m. Tuesday and, after it entered the channel, signs of trouble came at about 1:25 a.m. when numerous alarms sounded, according to the NTSB. About a minute later, steering commands and rudder orders were issued, and at 1:26 a.m. and 39 seconds, a pilot made a general radio call for nearby tug boats.

Maryland Transportation Authority data from about the same time shows the pilot association dispatcher called the transportation authority's officer on duty about the blackout, the NTSB said.

Just after 1:27 a.m., the pilot commanded the ship to drop an anchor on the left side of the ship and issued added steering commands. About 20 seconds later, the pilot issued a radio call reporting that the Dali had lost all power approaching the bridge.

At about that time, the state transportation officer on duty radioed two of its units already stationed at each end of the bridge saying to close the bridge to vehicle traffic. They were already there

because of the construction.

Around 1:29 a.m., when the ship was traveling at about 8 mph (13 kph), recordings for about 30 seconds picked up sounds consistent with it colliding with the bridge, the NTSB said. A Transportation Authority dash camera also shows lights on the bridge going out. Muise said experts will review the entire voyage data recording and develop a detailed transcript.

At least eight people initially went into the water when the ship struck the bridge column, and two of them were rescued Tuesday, officials said.

Traffic was still crossing the span as the ship approached, and some vehicles appeared to escape with only seconds to spare. The crash caused the bridge to break and fall into the water within seconds. Authorities had just enough time to stop vehicle traffic. One officer parked sideways across the lanes and planned to drive onto the bridge to alert the construction crew once another officer arrived, but he did not get a chance.

The debris complicated the search for the workers, according to a Homeland Security memo described to The Associated Press by a law enforcement official who was not authorized to discuss details of the document or the investigation and spoke on condition of anonymity. (AP)

Talks resume on bringing Israeli officials to the US to discuss Gaza operation, the White House says



WASHINGTON, March 28: Talks have restarted aimed at bringing top Israeli officials to Washington to discuss potential military operations in Gaza, after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cancelled a planned visit this week because he was angry about the U.S. vote on a U.N. cease-fire resolution, the White House said on Wednesday.

"So we're now working with them to find a convenient date that's obviously going to work for both sides," said press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre.

No date has been finalized yet. One U.S. official said strategic affairs minister Ron Dermer and national security adviser Tzachi Hanegbi would be among the delegation to come to Washington. The official was not authorized to speak publicly about the sensitive discussions and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

An Israeli official said the White House had reached out with the goal of setting a new meeting. The official was not authorized to talk to the media and spoke on condition of anonymity. Netanyahu's office said the prime minister "did not authorize the departure of the delegation to Washington."

The prime minister canceled the trip this week after the U.N. vote to demand a cease-fire in Hamas-run Gaza; the U.S. abstained from the vote but did not veto it. Netanyahu accused the United States of "retreating" from a "principled position" by allowing the resolution to pass without conditioning the cease-fire on the release of hostages held by Hamas.

The delegation to the U.S. was meant to discuss a promised ground invasion

of the southern Gaza city of Rafah, which is overflowing with displaced civilians. Israel has so far rejected American appeals to call off the planned operation.

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant was already in Washington by the time Netanyahu canceled the trip by other officials. Gallant met with Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. The Gaza operation was one of many topics they discussed.

Netanyahu on Wednesday said his decision to cancel was meant to deliver a message to Hamas that international pressure against Israel will not prompt it to end the war without concessions from the militant group, an apparent attempt to smooth over the clash between the allies.

Speaking to visiting Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., Netanyahu said the canceled visit "was a message first and foremost to Hamas: Don't bet on this pressure, it's not going to work."

Netanyahu said the U.S. abstention on the U.N. vote was "very, very bad," and that it "encouraged Hamas to take a hard line and to believe that international pressure will prevent Israel" from achieving its war aims. Israel wants to destroy Hamas' military and governing capabilities and free the hostages taken by the militant group during its Oct. 7 attack against Israel.

The U.S. abstention and Netanyahu's subsequent decision to cancel the delegation represented the strongest public dispute between the two allies since the war in Gaza began. (AP)

Enemies of Pak-China friendship responsible for terror attack that saw five Chinese killed: Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, March 28: Pakistan on Thursday said that the "enemies" of its friendship with China were responsible for the "heinous" terrorist attack which killed five Chinese nationals and vowed to bring the perpetrators to justice.

At least five Chinese nationals, working on the Dasu hydropower project, and the driver of the vehicle they were traveling in were killed on Tuesday when an explosives-packed vehicle rammed into their bus in Shangla district in the troubled Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, in the second suicide attack on the personnel working on the China-backed hydropower project since 2021.

Foreign Office spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch, address-



ing the weekly press briefing, said that Pakistan was in contact with the Chinese government regarding the "heinous attack."

"Pakistan and China are close friends and iron brothers. We have no doubt that the Bisham terror attack was orchestrated by the enemies of Pakistan-China friendship," she said without identifying the enemies. She said Pakistan is "fully

committed to bringing terrorists, and their facilitators and abettors to justice."

"Such despicable attacks further strengthen Pakistan's resolve in combating terrorism in all of its forms and manifestations," the FO spokesperson said.

She said that Pakistan and China would together resolutely act against terrorists and defeat

them.

"Pakistan will continue to work with our Chinese brothers in ensuring the safety and security of Chinese nationals, projects and institutions in Pakistan," she said.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif ordered a thorough joint investigation into the deadly terrorist attack on Chinese nationals after Beijing pressed Islamabad to speed up the hunt for the perpetrators and take effective steps to protect Chinese personnel working in the country.

Thousands of Chinese personnel are working in Pakistan on several projects under the aegis of the USD 60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). (PTI)

US congressional delegation pledges continued defence support for Taiwan

TAIPEI, March 28: A bipartisan US congressional delegation pledged continued support for Taiwan on Thursday; days after Congress approved USD 300 million in military aid for the self-governed island that's claimed by China.

Congress also approved USD 400 million on Saturday to counter the Chinese government's influence in the region, as part of its Defence Appropriations Act.

China regards Taiwan as a breakaway province to be brought under its control, by force if necessary. Beijing sends warships and fighter jets near the island daily, as it ramps up its military pressure.

The United States, like most nations, doesn't recognise Taiwan as a country. However, it is bound by US laws to ensure the island can defend itself and considers all threats to Taiwan as a matter of "grave concern."

The delegation led by Republican Congressman Jack Bergman, who chairs the House Intelligence and Special Operations



Subcommittee, sought to reassure Taiwan's leadership of continued support.

"We will continue to assure our colleagues that the strategic relationship is key for the future security of the region," Bergman said during a meeting with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen.

"This includes a strong Taiwan maritime strategy and how we can work together on shared goals to counter China on their increasingly aggressive actions in the region,"

he said.

Tsai thanked the Biden administration and Congress for helping to bolster Taiwan's self-defence.

"This support will continue to strengthen the Taiwan-US partnership," she said.

The delegation also includes Democratic Representatives Donald Norcross and Jimmy Panetta. The lawmakers arrived in Taiwan on Wednesday and are to stay until Friday.

They also met with Taiwanese Vice President and President-elect William Lai and with Vice President-elect Bi-khim Hsiao. Taiwan's new administration takes office on May 20. China prohibits countries it has diplomatic relations with from having formal exchanges with Taipei and regularly criticises US officials' visits to the island.

A trip by then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in 2022 resulted in China dispatching warships and military aircraft around the island and freezing a series of exchanges, including military communications, with the US.

Beijing and Washington restored military-to-military contacts after a flurry of diplomatic exchanges in recent months culminated in a meeting between the country's presidents in San Francisco in November.

Taiwan has expressed concern in recent months about China's expansion of military bases near the island but says it wants to avoid an escalation in tensions with Beijing. (AP)

Mizoram Congress nominee richest candidate with assets worth over ₹ 3.84 crore

AIZWAL, March 28: Congress nominee Lalbiakzama is the richest among six candidates, who have filed nominations for the lone Lok Sabha seat in Mizoram, as per affidavits filed by them.

The 64-year-old retired Mizoram Police Service (MPS) officer has declared total assets worth over ₹ 3.84 crore as per the affidavit he filed before the Returning Officer.

Of the six candidates in the fray for the Lok Sabha seat in Mizoram, three including ruling Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) nominee Richard Vanlalhmangaiha, are 'crorepati'.

Independent candidate Lalhriatrenga Chhangte is the 'poorest' among the six as he has only movable assets worth ₹ 6.75 lakh.

All six candidates have no pending criminal cases. According to the affidavit filed before the Returning Officer on Wednesday, Lalbiakzama has movable assets worth ₹ 1 crore, while his immovable assets (acquired one agricultural land and two non-agricultural lands) are worth ₹ 2.80 crore.

His wife Laldinglani has only movable assets worth ₹ 4,790 and his three dependents altogether have only movable assets valued at ₹ 7.41 lakh.

Lalbiakzama, a resident of Aizawl's Model Veng, has ₹ 10,000 in cash, while his wife has ₹ 3,500 and his three dependents all together have ₹ 3,500.

His total deposits in two bank accounts are over ₹ 23.5 lakh and his spouse and dependents' bank deposits are ₹ 1 lakh as declared in the affidavit.

Lalbiakzama retired as Mizoram home secretary in February 2020 and his source of income is pension benefits.

With declared total assets worth ₹ 1.82 crore, Mizo National Front (MNF) nominee K Vanlalvena, 54, is the second richest candidate.

He has movable assets worth ₹ 58.36 lakh, while his immovable assets (acquired) are worth ₹ 1.24 crore.

His spouse and two dependents have only movable assets worth ₹ 3.8 lakh.

Vanlalvena has ₹ 13 lakh in cash, while his wife has ₹ 2 lakh.

ZPM nominee Richard Vanlalhmangaiha (46) is the third richest and he has ₹ 97.74 lakh worth of movable assets and ₹ 70 lakh worth of immovable assets.

His declared total assets are worth over ₹ 1.67 crore.

In the affidavit, BJP candidate Vanlalhmuaaka (53) declared that he has only movable assets valued at ₹ 11.3 lakh and People's Conference (PC) party candidate Rita Malsawmi (49) also declared she has only movable assets worth ₹ 16.6 lakh.

Chhangte (59), who has only movable assets worth ₹ 6.75 lakh, declared the movable assets of his wife and two dependents are worth ₹ 1.73 lakh and that of their immovable assets to be worth ₹ 1.9 crore.

Elections to the lone Lok Sabha seat in Mizoram will be held on April 19. (PTI)

Tripura LoP calls on people to defeat members of royal family in LS elections

LoP paid tribute to 3 girls killed by Royal Army in 1949 for opposing tax system

AGARTALA, March 28: Leader of opposition in Tripura Assembly, Jitendra Chowdhury on Thursday alleged that the descendants of those who had exploited the poor indigenous people during the rule of the erstwhile royal family are now on the streets seeking votes by joining hands with the BJP.

They had ruled the northeastern state for 1,400 years largely ignoring the welfare of the poor people and built structures like Ujjayanta Palace (in Agartala) and Neermahal (lake palace), he said after paying tribute to Kumari-Madhuti-Rupashari Debbarma at the CPI(M) headquarters here.

Kumari-Madhuti-Rupashari (Debbarma), three tribal girls were gunned down by the Royal Army for opposing 'Titun System' (tax collection) in Tripura's Khowai district's Padmabil area on March 28, 1949.

Chaudhury claimed the kings remained busy with personal welfare and amusement leaving their



people barely with a piece of cloth, education and food.

"The kings used to send their emissaries to mayals (villages) to collect tax as per their will

through the 'Titun System'. For opposing the tax system, Kumari-Madhuti-Rupashari Debbarma were killed by the Royal army", he said.

Seventy-five years after the shocking incident, their descendants wearing 'alakhalla' (clothing of a distinctive style) and promising thansa (unity among tribals) have joined hands with the BJP and seeking votes in an attempt to bring back exploitation, he claimed without naming Tipra Motha chief Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma, who belongs to the royal family.

Pradyot's sister Kriti Singh Debbarma is contesting from the Tripura East Lok Sabha seat on BJP's lotus symbol.

"The paying tribute to Kumari-Madhuti-Rupashari is not merely a remembrance event observed throughout the state by the party. The people who believe in democratic values must defeat the descendants of the princely regime and its ally BJP in the Parliamentary elections. This will be a true respect to martyrs", he said.

Tripura has two Lok Sabha constituencies - Tripura East and Tripura West. (PTI)

One nomination rejected in Manipur

IMPHAL, March 28: The nomination of a candidate was found invalid during scrutiny on Thursday, while the nominations of 10 candidates have been approved for contesting the Lok Sabha polls in Manipur.

The exact number of candidates who will be contesting the elections for the two seats will be known after the last date of withdrawal of candidates on March 30.

As many as 11 candidates filed their nomination papers for the two Parliamentary seats till the last date of filing nomination papers for candidatures on Wednesday.

The nomination papers were taken up for scrutiny on Thursday at the offices of the RO of the two seats. Thoubal DC is the RO of the Outer Manipur (ST) Parliamentary constituency while Imphal West DC is for the Inner Parliamentary constituency.

The scrutiny for the nomination papers filed by seven candidates for contesting the elections from Inner Manipur Parliamentary constituency was held at the office of the RO at Imphal West DC office.

After minutely examining the nomination papers, the RO rejected the candidature of Ngasepam Nilakanta Singh, who filed his nomination from Universal Family Party (UFP).

Even as he filed his nomination paper as nominee of Manipur People's Party (MPP), the RO accepted the nomination of Rajkumar Somendro Singh alias Kaiku as an independent candidate after scrutiny.

The RO accepted the nomination pa-

pers of other five candidates.

They are Moirangthem Totomshana Nongshaba, who filed his nomination papers as a nominee of Rashtriya Janhit Sangharsh Party (RJSP), Maheshwar Thounaojam of Republican Party of India - Athawale (RPI - A), Thounaojam Basanta Kumar Singh of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Angomcha Bimol Akoijam of Indian National Congress (INC) and Haorungham Sarat Singh who filed his nomination papers as independent candidate.

For the Outer seat, four candidates including two independents filed their nomination papers and the candidatures of all the four candidates were accepted after scrutiny held on Thursday at RO office at Thoubal DC office.

The candidates who cleared the scrutiny today are Alfred Kanngam S Arthur of Indian National Congress (INC), Kachui Timothy Zimik of Naga People's Front (NPF), Alyson Abnonmai and S Kho John who filed their nomination papers as independents.

The last date of withdrawal of candidatures is on March 30.

The polling for the two Parliamentary seats in Manipur will be held in the first and second phase, on April 19 and April 26.

The polling in the Inner seat will be held on April 19 and the Outer seat will be held on April 19 and April 26.

The Inner Manipur Parliamentary constituency has 937,464 electors while Outer Manipur (reserved for scheduled tribes) has 1,022,099 electors. (NNN)

SP injured in stone pelting during scrutiny of nomination in Longding



ITANAGAR, March 28: Violence broke out in Longding district of Arunachal Pradesh on Thursday during scrutiny of nomination papers for the April 19 Assembly polls, in which the superintendent of police sustained injuries, an official said.

A mob resorted to stone pelting after the nomination of Gangdiap Gangsa, National Peoples' Party (NPP) candidate from Pongchou Wakka seat was rejected by the returning officer (RO) on the basis of office of profit, Longding, deputy commissioner (DC) Bekir Nyorak said.

"Longding superintendent of police (SP) Dekio Gumja sustained injuries in his cheek. Security forces fired several rounds in the air to disperse the mob and the situation is normal and under control," the DC said.

Gangsa, who is serving as an assistant mineral development officer (AMDO), had submitted his resignation to the government ahead of the announcement of polls but it was not accepted, Nyorak said.

He filed a case in the Gauhati High Court and the matter is sub-judice.

"His nomination was rejected on the basis that his resignation was not accepted and the case in the High Court is sub-judiced," the deputy commissioner said.

Assembly elections in Arunachal Pradesh will be held simultaneously with Lok Sabha polls. Voting for the 60-member assembly and two Lok Sabha constituencies - Arunachal West and Arunachal East - will be held on April 19.

A total of eight candidates are in the fray for the Arunachal West Lok Sabha constituency where a multi-cornered contest is expected.

Union earth science and food processing industries minister Kiren Rijiju is contesting from the seat on BJP ticket and will face Arunachal Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) president Nabam Tuki and six others.

In the Arunachal East Lok Sabha seat, a total of seven candidates are in the fray.

The ruling BJP has nominated sitting MP Tapir Gao while the Congress has fielded Bosiram Siram.

A total of 195 candidates have filed papers for the 60 assembly constituencies till Wednesday, the last date for filing nominations.

The last date for withdrawal of candidature is March 30.

Counting of votes for Assembly polls would be held on June 2 and for Lok Sabha polls on June 4 respectively.

In the 2019 Arunachal Pradesh Assembly elections, the BJP had bagged 41 seats, JD(U) seven seats, the NPP five seats, the Congress secured four seats, the PPA won one seat and two Independent candidates also won.

The BJP had also won both Lok Sabha seats in the last election. (PTI)

Six cadres of banned outfits arrested in Manipur



IMPHAL, March 28: Six cadres of three different banned outfits have been arrested by Manipur police on with arms and ammunition, police said on Thursday.

The police arrested the six cadres in separate operations in Imphal West district on Wednesday.

Four of them belong to proscribed KCP (Noyon) group. One 9 mm pistol loaded with 10 live rounds in the magazine, two hand grenades, three 7.62 mm live ammunition, one empty INSAS rifle magazine, one car and three mobile phones were seized from their possessions.

The nabbed cadres have been identified as Wahengbam Mathoi Singh (32), Sorenshangbam Bungcha Singh alias Winner (47), Thongam Joynanda Singh alias Boycha (49) and Ak Sanjoy alias Herojit (34), the police also said.

The police accused them of being involved in extortion of money from the general public. A case has been registered against them and further investigation is underway.

One more cadre of the same KCP (Noyon) group was arrested by the police on the same day. He has been identified as Laishram Momo alias Kiran alias Macha Meitei (31).

One hand grenade was recovered from his possession, the police said.

An active cadre of the proscribed outfit PREPAK (Pro) was

also arrested in another operation by the police in the Imphal West district on Wednesday.

The cadre has been identified as Chongtham Ronen Singh (35) and one hand grenade was recovered from his possession.

He was involved in extortion of money from government offices and businessmen, the police further added.

Meanwhile, in the ongoing search operations in the vulnerable and fringe areas of violent affected districts, a combined force of state police commandos and troops of Kumaon Regiment on Thursday recovered a cache of arms and ammunition from Saiton and Sonthong areas of Bishnupur district adjoining Churachandpur district.

The recovered arms and ammunition comprised of one local made pompi RL, two local made single barrels, one SMC carbine with one magazine, 11 hand grenades, two NMM mine bomb, three Pompi shell, two of para shell, one INSAS magazine with six live rounds, one SLR magazine, eight ballistic cartridges live rounds, four grenade launchers, two pata shell cover and one .45mm live rounds.

The items were recovered during the search operation that started from around 8.30 am and lasted till 10am. The seized arms and ammunition were handed over to the Phaobakchao Police Station for necessary action, the police added. (NNN)

Three nominations for Nagaland's LS seat approved

HT Correspondent

DIMA PUR, March 28: Out of the four nominations filed to contest the upcoming elections for the lone Lok Sabha seat in Nagaland, three nomination papers have been found valid.

The nomination papers of Congress's substitute candidate Nagavito were rejected since the party's main candidate's nomination papers were found in order.

The scrutiny of nomination papers was carried out by Nagaland commissioner and returning officer Sushil Kumar Patel in the presence of general observers P Ramesh and Avinash Champawat in Kohima on Thursday.

The nomination papers of National Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) candidate Chumben Murry, Congress candidate Supongmeren Jamir and Independent candidate Hayithung Tunge Lotha were found to be in order and accepted as per the electoral guidelines and eligibility criteria issued by the Election Commission of India, a government release said.

NDPP candidate Murry, independent candidate Lotha and a representative of INC candidate Jamir witnessed the scrutiny proceedings.

Kriti Devi Debbarma files nomination for Tripura East LS constituency

AGARTALA, March 28: Kriti Devi Debbarma, the 'joint candidate' of Tipra Motha and BJP on Thursday submitted her nomination papers for Tripura East Lok Sabha constituency. Accompanied by Tripura chief minister Manik Saha, Tipra Motha chief Pradyot Kishore Debbarma and other senior BJP and Tipra Motha leaders she filed her nomination papers at the Office of the Returning Officer of Tripura East Lok Sabha constituency.

Kriti Devi, sister of Pradyot Kishore Debbarma is married to Yogeshwar Raj Singh of the Rajkot royal family of Chhattisgarh. She changed her surname to Kriti Devi Debbarma by an affidavit before filing her nomination papers as the Tripura East Lok Sabha seat is reserved for Scheduled Tribe candidates.

When contacted, the district magistrate of Dhalai and returning officer (RO), Tripura East Lok Sabha constituency, Saju Vaheed said her ST status is valid because it (ST status) is not changed by marriage even after her marriage as per the ruling of Supreme Court.

"The Tipra Motha-BJP candidate submitted her nomination papers for the Tripura East Lok Sabha constituency as Kriti Devi Debbarma and her ST status stands valid", the Returning Officer said.

Chief Minister Manik Saha claimed that the BJP-Tipra Motha-IPFT combine will both the Lok Sabha seats in Tripura. "Today's huge gathering is the signal that the BJP-Tipra Motha-IPFT combine will win both Lok Sabha seats in Tripura. We are sure of winning the Tripura East Lok Sabha seat by a huge margin", the chief minister told media persons.

Pradyot Debbarma claimed that Kriti Devi Debbarma will win the Lok Sabha elections with a record margin. "Not only Tiprasa people, but people from across all communities joined the rally to mark the filing of nomination papers. Our candidate will win the election with a record margin in the elections," the Tipra Moth chief claimed. The last date for filing of nomination papers for the Tripura East Lok Sabha constituency is April 4 while scrutiny will be done on April 5 and the last date for withdrawal of nomination papers is April 8. (PTI)

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Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh, Nitin Gadkari among star campaigners in Arunachal

Arunachal to go to simultaneous polls on April 19 for 2 Lok Sabha seats, 60 assembly constituencies

ITANAGAR, March 28: Union home minister Amit Shah along with cabinet colleagues Rajnath Singh, Nitin Gadkari, Sarbananda Sonowal, Piyush Goyal and Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma would be star campaigners for the BJP in the Lok Sabha and state assembly elections in Arunachal Pradesh, a party leader said.

Arunachal Pradesh will go to simultaneous polls in the first phase on April 19 for the two Lok Sabha seats and 60 assembly constituencies.

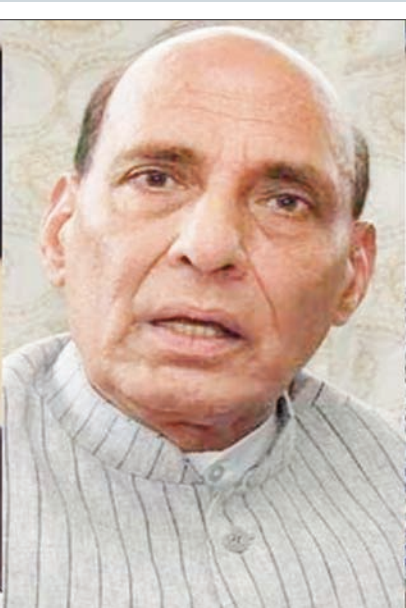
Home minister Amit Shah is likely to address an election rally at Aalo in West Siang district on April 6, party's senior vice president Tarh Tarak told PTI.

"The date will be finalised by the party's central leadership and as of now the party has approved the names of five central ministers and BJP president Jagat Prashad Nadda for campaigning in the state," Tarak said.

Besides Shah, other Central ministers who would campaign for the party include defence minister Rajnath Singh, road transport and highways minister Nitin Gadkari, ports, shipping and waterways and AYUSH minister Sarbananda Sonowal and commerce and industry minister Piyush



Goyal. Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and Assam housing and urban affairs and irrigation minister Ashok Singhal will also join the campaigning trail in the state.



Nagaland's deputy chief minister Yanthungo Patton and tourism minister Temjen Imma Along are also on the star campaigner list for the party.

Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu along with his deputy Chowna



Mein and other cabinet colleagues including BJP state president Biyuram Wahge and other senior leaders, would campaign for the party in various constituencies.

As many as 15 candidates will try their luck for the two Lok Sabha seats in the

state.

A total of eight candidates are contesting from the Arunachal West Lok Sabha seat where a multi-cornered contest is expected.

Union earth science and food processing industries minister Kiren Rijiju is contesting from the seat and will face Arunachal Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) president Nabam Tuki along with six others.

In the Eastern Parliamentary seat, there are a total of seven candidates in the fray.

The ruling BJP has nominated sitting MP Tapir Gao while the Congress has fielded Bosiram Siram.

A total of 195 candidates have filed papers for the 60 assembly constituencies till Wednesday, the last date for filing nominations. Scrutiny of papers was done on Thursday and the last date for withdrawal of nominations is March 30.

Counting of votes for Assembly polls would be held on June 2 and for Lok Sabha polls on June 4 respectively.

In the 2019 assembly elections in the state, the BJP bagged 41 seats, JD(U) won seven seats, the NPP won five seats, the Congress secured four seats, the PPA won one seat and two Independent candidates also won. (PTI)

Extension of special train service for benefit of passengers

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 28: To clear extra rush of passengers, the Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) will continue the services of two pairs of special trains. The Secunderabad - Dibrugarh - Secunderabad train and the Secunderabad - Agartala - Secunderabad train will operate with the existing days of service, timings and stoppages. The service of the Secunderabad - Dibrugarh special train has been extended from April 1 till May 13 to run every Monday. In its return journey the service of the Dibrugarh - Secunderabad special train has been extended from April 4 till May 16 to run every Thursday.

Similarly, the service of the Secunderabad - Agartala train has been extended from April 1 till June 24 to run every Monday. In its return journey the service of the Agartala - Secunderabad special train has been extended from April 5 till June 28 to run every Friday. The additional stoppage at Jalpaiguri Road station provided for both the trains will be continued along with the extension. Moreover, the one way Gorakhpur - Dimapur special train is scheduled for a single trip to depart from Gorakhpur at March 28 to clear the festive rush. The train will arrive at its destination of Dimapur every Saturday. The extension of these train services will benefit passengers on the waiting list of other trains in those routes. The details of stoppages and timings of these trains are available at IRCTC website and social media platforms of NFR. Passengers are requested to verify the details before undertaking their journey.

'Hero No. 1' Govinda makes a political comeback, joins Shinde-led Shiv Sena

MUMBAI, March 28: Bollywood actor Govinda, a mass entertainer of the 1990s who is known for his excellent comic timing and epic dance steps, on Thursday joined the ruling Shiv Sena in Mumbai, making a comeback in politics after a 14-year hiatus.

The former Congress Lok Sabha MP joined the Shiv Sena in the presence of Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde at the time of election season.

Govinda, who gave multiple superhit films in his decades-long career, made a blockbuster entry in electoral politics in 2004. That year, the "Hero No. 1" actor emerged as a "giant killer" when, as the Congress candidate, he defeated BJP stalwart Ram Naik in the Mumbai North Lok Sabha seat.

Shinde welcomed the 60-year-old actor into his party, saying he was a popular figure in all sections of society. Speaking on the occasion, an emotional Govinda, who started his acting career in the 1980s and whose films were mass family entertainers, said after his first stint in politics from 2004 to 2009, he never felt he would again come back to the same field.

"I am back (in politics) after a 14-year-long 'vanvas' (exile)," he remarked.

The veteran actor, whose full name is Govinda Ahuja, said he would work in the art and culture field if given a chance.

Mumbai looks more beautiful and developed since Shinde has



become CM, he remarked after his re-entry into politics, albeit under the banner of a different political party, which comes at a time when the country is in the midst of Lok Sabha polls.

The actor said development of the country under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi was unbelievable.

Shinde, who took over as CM in June 2022, said there is positivity and prosperity in Mumbai and pollution levels are also coming down in the metropolis.

The CM maintained the versatile actor has joined his party without any pre-conditions and rejected suggestions that the entry was linked to elections.

"Govinda stands for progress. He is impressed with Modi's development policies. He wants to do something for the welfare and progress of the film industry. I am sure he will be the link between the government and the film industry. He has joined us without any conditions," Shinde asserted.

"Govinda has ended his vanvas and come to Ram rajya," noted the Shiv Sena leader, whose party is an

ally of the BJP.

"My government is pro-development and pro-people, and he was impressed (with its policies)," the CM said.

Asked whether the actor will be fielded from the Mumbai North-West Lok Sabha seat, Shinde clarified he hadn't put any conditions.

"He just wants to work for the film industry," he said, adding Govinda hasn't joined the party for an election ticket.

Shinde said the Shiv Sena, which heads the governing 'Mahayuti' coalition in the state, will soon release its list of Lok Sabha candidates.

"The Mahayuti is contesting all 48 seats (in Maharashtra). Ours is not a government which runs from home. We are field people and work for the welfare of people," the CM maintained. The ruling coalition consists of the Shiv Sena, the BJP and the NCP led by Ajit Pawar. To a question on NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar) leader Jayant Patil calling Govinda a "flop actor", Shinde emphasised that insulting a film artist amounts to showing disrespect to the entire entertainment industry.

Asked about Shiv Sena leader Vijay Shivtare contesting from the Baramati Lok Sabha seat, the home turf of deputy CM Ajit Pawar in Pune district, Shinde said his colleague has clarified that the party's decision on the matter was final for him and added "I am thankful to him". (PTI)

India's borders totally secure: Rajnath Singh

NEW DELHI, March 28: Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Thursday said India and its borders are "totally secure" and the people of the country should have full faith in the armed forces.

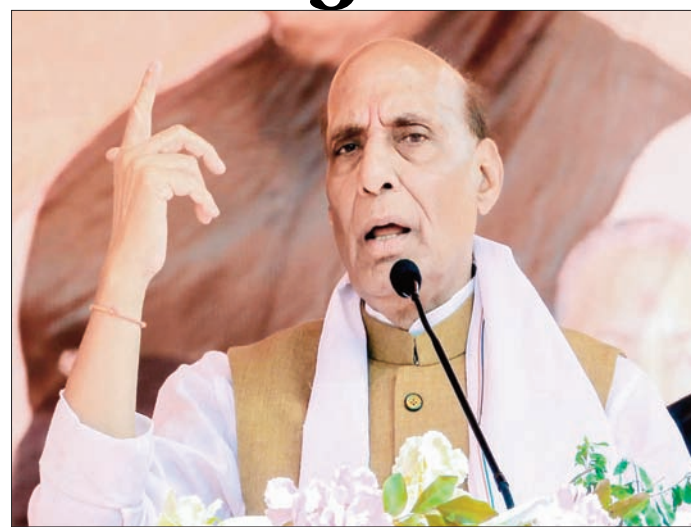
During a fireside chat on the concluding day of the Times Now Summit here, while responding to a question on the criticism of the Agniveer scheme, the minister said such questions have "no standing" and underlined that everyone will accept that the armed forces should have a young profile.

During the event, the Union minister also shared anecdotes from his nearly 50-year-long political journey.

Asked how he reacted to questions raised by many, including members of the opposition, on the India-China border issue, Singh said they never made him uncomfortable.

"In keeping with the country's interests, I tell them (opposition) whatever I can. But in defence, there are many things which have strategic importance and we cannot tell them publicly. We try to steer clear of telling those things, whether it is (about) northern, western or eastern sector," he said.

"I want to assure the people of the country... they should have full faith in our Army and security personnel," the Union minister said. Indian and Chinese troops are



locked in an over three-and-half-year-long confrontation at certain friction points in eastern Ladakh even as the two sides completed disengagement from several areas following extensive diplomatic and military talks.

"Having been the defence minister for five years and home minister before that, I want to assure the people of the country based on what I have seen, understood and assessed that our borders and our country are totally secure," he added.

The eastern Ladakh border standoff erupted on May 5, 2020, following a violent clash in the

Pangong lake area.

The ties between India and China nosedived significantly following the fierce clash in the Galwan Valley in June 2020 that marked the most serious military conflict between the two sides in decades.

As a result of a series of military and diplomatic talks, the two sides completed the disengagement process in 2021 on the north and south banks of the Pangong lake and in the Gogra area.

Singh defended the Agniveer scheme, saying recruiting youths would result in an increased risk-taking spirit and more tech-savvy

armed forces.

"Everyone will accept the fact that there should be youthfulness in the armed forces. Normally, 30-50 years has been the age range of our jawans. But when jawans aged 18-20 will join as Agniveers, then the risk-taking spirit will be a bit higher," he said.

Senior jawans are discharging their responsibilities well, there is no two ways about it, he said.

Today is the age of technology and the Indian youth should also be tech-savvy. Such youths are being recruited under this scheme as Agniveers, he added.

The future of these youths will not be impacted by the scheme. Steps have been taken to secure their future, including making provisions for reservation for Agniveers in paramilitary forces, Singh said.

"And if we see any drawbacks, then we are ready to rectify them," he said.

In June 2022, the Centre rolled out the Agnipath recruitment scheme for short-term induction of personnel into the armed forces with an aim to bring down the age profile of the three services.

The scheme provides for recruiting youngsters in the age bracket of 17 years and a half to 21 years for a four-year period with a provision to retain 25 per cent of them for 15 more years. (PTI)

Cong slams Irani for 'silence' on women's issues, asks her to put forward 10-year 'report card'

NEW DELHI, March 28: The Congress on Thursday accused Union Women and Child Development Minister Smriti Irani of maintaining a silence on key issues related to women and said she should put forward her ministry's 10-year report card before people.

Mahila Congress president Alka Lamba said AICC general secretary Jairam Ramesh had recently posed several questions to Irani, but the minister did not give detailed answers to any of those.

"We had expected that the country's women and child development minister, Smriti Irani, would hold a press conference and present the report card of her department. She kept avoiding this, but now we are determined to hold her accountable," Lamba told a press conference at the Congress headquarters here.

"It is expected that she should hold a press conference and not give answers on Twitter," she said.

Lamba repeated the questions asked by Ramesh.

"Has there been an increase in crimes against women and children in the country? Why was (former Wrestling Federation of India chief) Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh not arrested after an FIR was lodged against him? Six months have passed since the gang-rape of tribal daughters of Manipur, which fast-track court has heard the case and have the accused been punished? In Haryana, does Sandeep Singh remain a minister even after serious allegations of sexual harassment and an FIR against him?"

she asked.

The Mahila Congress chief also asked Irani why did she remain silent when the convicts in the Bilkis Bano case were released by the BJP-led government.

Lamba alleged the involvement of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) IT cell members in a case of gang rape of a Banaras Hindu University (BHU) student and wondered when will the survivor get justice.

"A four-year-old girl has been raped in the country's capital, Delhi. Did Smriti Irani, the National Commission for Women chairperson, the president of (the BJP's) Mahila Morcha go to meet the victim's family?" Lamba asked.

"Smriti Irani, we challenge you -- put the data before the country of those anganwadi workers to whom you gave the Covid-cover insurance," she said.

"The Ministry of Women and Child Development had replied in Parliament that there was no data on the deaths of the anganwadi workers who died during Covid-19. This case also reeks of corruption," Lamba alleged.

The Congress leader also accused Irani of maintaining a silence on the issue of unemployment and reduction in income among women.

"We hope that Smriti Irani will hold a press conference and present the 10-year report card of her department in front of the country and not keep playing Twitter-Twitter," Lamba said. (PTI)

Erode MP, who attempted suicide, dies: Police

ERODE (TN), March 28:

Erode MP A Ganeshamurthi, who allegedly attempted suicide recently, died at a Coimbatore hospital on Thursday morning, sources from his party MDMK and police said.

Expressing shock and grief over his demise, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin said Ganeshamurthi started his political journey in the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and effectively discharged his responsibilities in various capacities including the post of district secretary. Later, he traversed the political path along with Vaiko (MDMK chief).

"His loss has given an inexpressible grief. He was an energetic diplomat. I offer my deepest condolences and

sympathies to the members of the DMK, MDMK, his family and friends," Stalin said in a statement. Vaiko expressed shock over the sudden demise and said he called on Ganeshamurthi's son Kapilan and daughter Tamilpiriya and conveyed his condolences.

According to police, the 77-year-old Ganeshamurthi had allegedly tried to kill himself after consuming some poisonous tablets on March 24 at his home here. He was rushed to a hospital here and later referred to another private institute in Coimbatore.

The Erode Town police has already registered an attempt to suicide case. This will now be altered to a death by suicide case, police said. Hospital authorities handed the

body to the police who took it to the Institute of Road Transport (IRT) Medical College Hospital for autopsy.

After the post-mortem, the body will be taken to Kumaravallu village, 15 km from here, where it will be buried, party sources said.

Ganeshamurthi was elected as an MP on the DMK's rising sun symbol in 2019. He had previously won the Lok Sabha polls from Palani in 1998 and Erode in 2009.

A widower, Ganeshamurthi is survived by a son and a daughter.

"He was a brave and determined leader. There's no iota of truth that Ganeshamurthi made a suicide attempt over not getting a seat to contest Lok Sabha election again,"

Vaiko said while speaking to reporters in Coimbatore.

Recalling his association with the departed leader since his college days in Chennai, Vaiko said both worked hard to develop the party (then DMK).

"The struggles during the student union days are still vivid in my mind... he was in charge of Erode district of DMK and later joined hands with me to launch the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam," the MDMK chief said.

He had served as party treasurer, and was a MLA and MP too, Vaiko said and added that both of them were incarcerated when they were detained under the POTA Act. (PTI)

Height of hypocrisy: Cong hits back at PM over his jibe after lawyers' letter to CJI

NEW DELHI, March 28: The Congress on Thursday hit back at Prime Minister Narendra Modi after his criticism of the party over a lawyers' letter to the chief justice of India against a "vested interest group", saying the PM's brazenness in orchestrating an attack on the judiciary, in the name of defending it, is the "height of hypocrisy".

Earlier in the day, Modi said it is a "vintage Congress culture" to browbeat and bully others, remarks that came in reaction to more than 600 lawyers writing to the Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud, alleging that a "vested interest group" is trying to put pressure on the judiciary and defame courts. Hitting back at the prime minister, Congress general secretary in-charge, communications, Jairam Ramesh said in a post

on X, "The PM's brazenness in orchestrating and coordinating an attack on the judiciary, in the name of defending the judiciary, is the height of hypocrisy!"

"The Supreme Court has delivered body blows to him in recent weeks. The Electoral Bonds Scheme is but one example. The Supreme Court declared them to be unconstitutional -- and it is now proved beyond doubt that they were a blatant instrument of fear, blackmail, and intimidation to force companies to donate to the BJP," he said.

Instead of giving a legal guarantee of minimum support price (MSP), the prime minister has given a legal guarantee to corruption, he alleged.

"All that the Prime Minister has done in the

last ten years is divide, distort, divert, and defame. 140 crore Indians are waiting to give him a befitting reply very soon," Ramesh said.

More than 600 lawyers, including senior advocate Harish Salve and Bar Council chairperson Manan Kumar Mishra, wrote to Chandrachud, alleging that a "vested interest group" is trying to put pressure on the judiciary and defame courts, especially in cases of corruption involving politicians.

In a post on X, Modi said, "To browbeat and bully others is vintage Congress culture. 5 decades ago itself they had called for a 'committed judiciary' - they shamelessly want commitment from others for their selfish interests but desist from any commitment towards the nation." (PTI)

MGNREGS wage rates revised, hikes range between 4-10 % for different states

NEW DELHI, March 28: Wages under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme have been revised, with hikes ranging between four and 10 per cent for different states.

Haryana has the highest wage rate for unskilled workers under the scheme at Rs 374 a day, while Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland have the lowest at Rs 234, according to a notification.

The wage rate in three panchayats of Sikkim -- Gnathang, Lachung and Lachen -- is Rs 374 a day.

The wage revision under the scheme was notified by the Union rural development ministry on March 27 after clearance from the Election Commission as the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is in force for the Lok Sabha polls. The increases have been made on the 2023 wage rates under scheme that is aimed at enhancing livelihood security of households in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

The hike in the wage rate in Goa was highest in the country at Rs 34 and the per day payment now stands at Rs 356 in the state, according to the notification. In Andhra Pradesh, it was increased by Rs 28 a day and the wage rate is now Rs 300.

The increase for Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand was the lowest at Rs 7 and the wage rate in both the states is Rs 237 a day to workers under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS).

The wage rate in West Bengal has been increased to Rs 250 (increase of Rs 13), in Tamil Nadu to Rs 319 (increase of Rs 25), in Telangana to Rs 300 (increase of Rs 28) and in Bihar to Rs 228 (increase of Rs 17). (PTI)

1991 reforms brought by Narasimha Rao, Manmohan, not Cong: Gurcharan Das



NEW DELHI, March 28: It was former prime minister PV Narasimha Rao and the then finance minister Manmohan Singh who brought the economic reforms in 1991, not the Congress party, argued author and commentator Gurcharan Das.

Speaking at the launch of his book, "The Dilemma of an Indian Liberal", on Wednesday, Das said the mistake that India made in 1991, and the one that it continues to make, is its reformers doing the reforms "chupke chupke" and not selling it to the public.

"We were doing reforms chupke chupke. The reason was (Narasimha) Rao, (Manmohan) Singh and people around them had not even convinced their own party (Congress). So it was not the Congress party that did the reforms... In fact, the party got so upset with Rao that they actually voted him out," said Das in his conversation with journalist Shoma Chaudhury.

To buttress his point, Das also gave the example of the former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and how she used to "spend 20 per cent of her time reforming and 80 per cent selling the reforms".

The historic economic reforms of 1991 shifted India's position from a closed and controlled economy to an open and liberalised one. It was brought under the leadership of former PM Narasimha Rao and his finance minister Manmohan Singh in the Congress-led government.

Das further underscored the "sin" of not selling the reforms to the public, and how it continues even today, with no future reformers, including the likes of PM Narendra Modi, doing the needful.

This, the 80-year-old author alleged, is what leads to people in general thinking of reforms as something that makes the "rich richer, and poor poorer".

"None of the future reformers, be it Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh in the UPA years, not even Modi, has actually taken the trouble to sell the reforms which means...people still believe there is no difference between being pro-market and pro-business.

"That is why the Congress party, even today, at the drop of a hat makes a false trade-off between growth and equity," he explained.

The former CEO of Procter & Gamble India also talked about India's democracy, which, he alleged, has "begun to weaken" in contrast to its "robust economy".

He described the whole thing as an "irony" leading to a dilemma.

"When I was growing up we were admired as a country for our wonderful democracy, we were one of the true liberal democracies and we were envied for that. But we were pitied for our economy.

"And today we have a robust economy, which is admired and envied, but our democracy has begun to weaken, we are becoming an illiberal democracy. That is the irony and that is what leads to the dilemma," he concluded.

"The Dilemma of an Indian Liberal", published by Speaking Tiger Books, is currently available for purchase across online and offline stores.

Das's previously authored books include "India Unbound: From Independence to the Global Information Age", "The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma" and his memoir "Another sort of Freedom". (PTI)

Prez asks engineers to develop energy-efficient, differently-abled friendly public infrastructure

NEW DELHI, March 28: President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday asked a group of engineering services officers to develop public infrastructure that is energy-efficient and differently-abled friendly.

She also asked them to be innovative in their approach so that they can effectively deal with emerging challenges.

Murmu was addressing a group of Assistant Executive Engineers (civil, electrical and mechanical) of the Central Public Works Department (2022 and 2023 batches), who had called on the President at the Rashtrapati Bhavan here.

She asked the young officers to practise engineering with a social conscience.

"It is your duty to ensure that the public infrastructure which you design - be it offices, residences or roads - should be accessible to differently-abled citizens and senior citizens. This aspect should become integral to the planning and implementation of projects," Murmu said.

Buildings, roads and other infrastructure that you create should be sustainable, energy-efficient and environment-friendly, the President said.

"You should be innovative in your approach so that you can effectively deal with



emerging challenges," she suggested.

Murmu said, in the age of 3D printing, building technology has undergone a sea change.

"Infrastructure and construction projects can now be made climate-compatible and energy-efficient," she said.

Murmu said "green construction" is the need of the hour.

"Innovative methods of construction have

the potential to transform this sector," the President said.

Murmu also suggested an "enquiry into reasons" for extremely few women joining the service.

"I would like to leave a point to ponder for the decision-makers. I have been told that this service has been attracting extremely few women candidates. This year there is nil representation," she said.

ED created smoke screen of AAP being corrupt, alleges Kejriwal in Delhi court

NEW DELHI, March 28: Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, whose ED custody was extended till April 1, on Thursday himself made submissions in a court here during the hearing in the alleged excise policy case, and alleged that the federal agency's objective is to crush AAP.

Kejriwal also alleged that a smoke screen of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) being corrupt has been created before the nation by the Enforcement Directorate (ED).

The ED produced him in the court of Special Judge Kaveri Baweja and sought a seven-day further custody, arguing that he needed to be confronted with some people linked with the case. The court extended his custodial interrogation till April 1.

Shortly after the proceedings started, the AAP national convener made the submissions in Hindi after obtaining permission from the court even though his lawyers were present there.

"So far, the CBI has filed 31,000 pages in this case in the court and 294 witnesses have been examined in this case. The ED has investi-



gated 162 people and filed a 25,000-page report so far. By combining all these documents and reports, why have I been arrested? My name figures only in four statements," he said in a jam-packed courtroom.

Elaborating on the four statements mentioning his name, Kejriwal said C Arvind, former deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia's secretary, gave a statement. According to it, Sisodia handed over some excise policy-related documents to C Arvind in his (Kejri-

wal's) presence, in the chief minister's official residence.

"He has only stated that Manish Sisodia gave some documents to C Arvind. Madam, several MLAs, ministers and dignitaries come with their secretaries to my house.

"They do side-talks and hand over documents to each other. How do I know who is giving what to whom? Is this statement a sufficient reason to arrest the sitting chief minister?" Kejriwal said.

Giving details of the second statement in which his name ap-

pears, Kejriwal said Magunta Srinivas Reddy is an MP from (Andhra Pradesh chief minister) Jagan Mohan Reddy's party (YSRCP).

"Magunta Srinivas Reddy came to my office at 4.30 pm on March 16, 2021. He had sent an e-mail to my office that he is an MP and wanted to meet me.

"My office gave him an appointment to meet me after 10 days. He came over and said I want to open my family's charitable trust in Delhi. I told him that land does not come under us, it comes under the Lieutenant Governor (LG)," Kejriwal said.

The Delhi chief minister asked Magunta Srinivas Reddy to give him the letter which he will forward to the lieutenant governor.

He said on September 16, 2022, Reddy's house was raided and the ED asked him whether he had met Kejriwal. When Reddy replied in the affirmative, saying his meeting was about seeking land for his family's trust, the ED was "not happy" and later the agency arrested his son in February 2023.

"When the son remains arrested

for five months, the father changes his statement. He changed his statement on July 16, 2023, and his son was released on July 18. Mission accomplished. That means the only mission of the ED was to get me trapped," Kejriwal said.

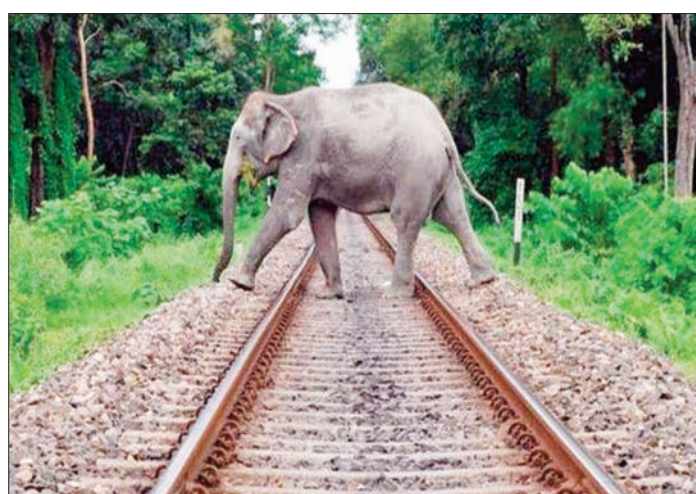
The Delhi chief minister further said Magunta Srinivas Reddy gave three statements to the agency but only one was considered.

"Why the only statement that is against Kejriwal has been included in the 25,000 pages of ED report and the other two statements were not considered? All the three statements should have been brought to the notice of the court, so that it could decide the truth in the case," he said.

About the statement of the third person, Raghav Magunta, the Delhi chief minister said out his total seven statements, six were not against him (Kejriwal). But as soon as he gave the seventh statement against him, Magunta was released from the jail.

"The six statements which are not against me have not been brought on record," the chief minister said. (PTI)

Tribal woman fourth to be killed within two months in wild elephant attacks in Kerala



WAYANAD (KERALA), March 28: A tribal woman was allegedly trampled to death by a wild elephant deep inside a forest area bordering Wayanad and Malappuram districts, police said here on Thursday.

Police said her husband suffered serious injuries in the attack. The couple were attacked when they reportedly went into the forest to collect honey, they said.

The incident occurred in the Parappanpara forests, and authorities came to know of it on Thursday after fellow members of the tribal community informed the police and forest officials.

"The incident happened around five kilometres inside the forest from Meppadi in Wayanad district. Her husband has suffered a major injury to his thigh bone. He is undergoing treatment," a police officer said.

The couple belongs to the Kattunai community, police said, adding that the body of the woman has been taken to a nearby hospital for a postmortem.

This is the fourth death caused by wild elephants in Kerala in the past two months.

A forest watcher, 50-year-old Paul, was trampled to death by a wild elephant while he was on his way to work at Kuruva in Wayanad district on February 16.

A week before that, another Wayanad resident Aji (42), was trampled to death by a radio-collared elephant in Mananthavady in the district, triggering massive protests.

In January, an estate watcher, Lakshmanan (65) was killed by a wild tusker at Tholpetty, also in the same district.

In central Kerala's Idukki district, which is also heavily forested and mountainous but about 330 km away from the northern Kerala district of Wayanad, a woman identi-

fied as Indra Ramakrishnan was killed in an elephant attack in the first week of March.

In another incident of human-wildlife conflict, Prajeesh (36) was mauled by a tiger in December last year near a forest area in Vakeri in Wayanad.

Local residents of both districts have raised the issue of wild animals such as elephants, tigers, bears and wild boars often encroaching upon populated areas, posing a threat to human life and property.

The Kerala government has been seeking to amend the Wildlife (Protection) Act, citing challenges faced by the state in dealing with instances of wild animals encroaching into human settlements.

Meanwhile, the BJP on Thursday criticised Wayanad MP and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and Kerala's Left government for failing to address the increasing incidents of human-wildlife conflict in the hill district.

BJP state President and the party's candidate in the Wayanad Lok Sabha seat K Surendran alleged that both the state government and the sitting MP of the constituency have failed to address the issue of human-wildlife conflict.

Condoling the woman's death, Surendran said in a post on X: "The human-wildlife conflict in Kerala, particularly in Wayanad, is a recurring nightmare. The State Govt led by @pinarayivijayan and the MP @RahulGandhi have failed to address this crisis.

"Is Rahul only interested in votes? The wild elephants came to the town more often than Rahul Gandhi came to Wayanad. He seems indifferent to human lives, enjoying his outstation visits without truly engaging with the plight of the people. It's time for Rahul Gandhi to answer for his negligence," Surendran said. (PTI)

Skyroot tests key rocket motor, hopes to launch satellites soon

NEW DELHI, March 28: Space start-up Skyroot on Thursday said it has test-fired the stage-2 of the Vikram-1 rocket, which is expected to place a satellite in orbit later this year.

The stage-2 of the Vikram-1 launch vehicle, called Kalam-250, is a high-strength carbon composite motor that will carry the rocket from the atmospheric phase to the deep vacuum of outer space, according to a statement issued by the company.

The test-firing of Kalam-250, which took place at the propulsion test bed at the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh, lasted for 85 seconds and recorded a peak sea-level thrust of 186 kilonewtons (kN), which will translate into a fully-expanded vacuum thrust of around 235 kN in flight.

"This is a significant milestone for the Indian space industry, marking the successful test of the largest propulsion system ever designed and manufactured by the Indian private sector, and the first carbon-composite-built motor tested at the ISRO," Pawan Chandana, co-founder and CEO of Hyderabad-based Skyroot Aerospace, said.

"All test parameters are within expected bounds and this achievement takes us another step closer to the upcoming orbital launch of the Vikram-1 rocket," he added.

Kalam-250 is a high-strength carbon composite rocket motor, which uses solid fuel and a high-performance ethylene-propylene-diene terpolymers (EPDM) thermal protection system (TPS).

The stage-2 houses a carbon ablative flex nozzle, along with high-precision electro-mechanical actuators, for thrust vector control of the vehicle, which helps the rocket achieve the desired trajectory.

"In this landmark test, we validated the critical system for the launch -- the flex nozzle control system -- during firing for the first time, making this an important milestone in our journey," Naga Bharath Daka, co-founder and COO of Skyroot, said.

"We have a few more milestones to cross and are focused on achieving them

in the coming months to reach our maiden orbital launch of Vikram-1 in 2024," he said.

The test also had an important contribution from another ISRO centre -- the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC) -- which supplied its proprietary head-mounted safe arm (HMSA), used for the safe operation of the rocket stage, the space start-up said.

The solid propellant in Kalam-250 was processed by Solar Industries at their unique facility in Nagpur. (PTI)

NET scores to be used for PhD admissions from 2024-25: UGC

NEW DELHI, March 28: The National Eligibility Test (NET) scores will be used for PhD admissions from 2024-25 eliminating the need for separate entrance tests conducted by universities and higher education institutions, according to the University Grants Commission.

The NET is conducted twice a year -- June and December. Its scores are currently used to award Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) and as eligibility for appointment as an assistant professor for those with a Master's degree. According to University Grants Commission (UGC) officials, the commission had constituted an expert committee to review the provisions of the exam and based on the panel's recommendations, it has decided that from the academic session 2024-25, the score can be used for admission to PhD programmes.

"Starting from the academic session 2024-2025, universities nationwide will have the opportunity to utilise NET scores for admissions to PhD programmes, replacing the need for separate entrance tests conducted by individual



universities and higher education institutions (HEIs). This marks an important step in streamlining the admission process and enhancing accessibility for aspiring doctoral candidates.

"By leveraging the NET, which is conducted biannually, universities can offer greater flexibility to students, allowing them to utilise their scores from either session to apply for PhD programmes across various institutions," UGC Chairman Jagadeesh Kumar said.

Kumar explained that the initiative is poised to benefit students in numerous ways. "Firstly, it eliminates the need

for students to prepare and appear for multiple entrance tests conducted by different universities, thereby reducing the burden of exam logistics and expenses. Additionally, the biannual administration of the NET provides students with increased opportunities to secure admission to their desired PhD programmes.

"We strongly encourage all universities to adopt NET exam scores for PhD admissions starting from the 2024-2025 academic session. This will undoubtedly contribute to fostering a more conducive environment for academic pursuit and scholarly advancement in our nation," he said.

In an official notification, the UGC said that from June 2024 onwards, the NET candidates will be declared eligible in three categories -- for admission to PhD with JRF and appointment as assistant professor; for admission to PhD without JRF and appointment as assistant professor; for admission to PhD programme only and not for the award of JRF or appointment as assistant professor.

"Result of UGC NET would be declared in percentile along with the marks obtained by a candidate to utilise the marks for admission to PhD. The JRF-qualified students are admitted into the PhD programme based on an interview as per the UGC (Minimum Standards and Procedures for Award of PhD Degree) Regulations, 2022.

"For students who qualify in categories 2 and 3, 70 per cent weightage will be given for test scores and 30 per cent for the interview for admission to PhD programmes. The PhD admission will be based on the combined merit of NET marks and the marks obtained in the interview or viva voce," the notification said. (PTI)

Centre nods road project in Andhra Pradesh tiger corridor UGC mulling JEE-like common counselling using CUET score

NEW DELHI, March 28: The National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) has recommended the use of more than 40 hectares of forest land from the tiger corridor connecting the Nagarjunasagar Srisailem Tiger Reserve (NSTR) and the Sri Venkateswara National Park in Andhra Pradesh for the development of expressways, economic corridors and inter-corridors under the second phase of Bharatmala Pariyojana, according to the minutes of a meeting held last month.

Spread over 3,296.31 square kilometres, the NSTR is the country's largest tiger reserve.

It is contiguous with Telangana's Amrabad tiger reserve and accounts for the largest tiger pop-

ulation (around 72) in the Eastern Ghat landscape.

According to the minutes of the meeting, the length of the road passing through the tiger corridor under the project is about five kilometres. Three tunnels, four minor bridges, seven viaducts and two culverts have been suggested as mitigation structures in the project proposal.

The length of the animal passage is around three kilometres on both sides.

The member-secretary, National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), has informed the NBWL's standing committee that the mitigation measures suggested under the proposal appear to be adequate and therefore, it may be

recommended.

The corridor connecting the NSTR and the Sri Venkateswara National Park, known as the Nagarjunasagar-Sri Venkateswara NP Corridor, passes through forested habitats and includes three protected areas -- the Gundla Brahmeswaram Wildlife Sanctuary, the Sri Lankamalleshwara Wildlife Sanctuary and the Sri Penusila Narasimha Wildlife Sanctuary.

Various state highways (31, 34, 56 and 57) intersect the corridor, highlighting the need for wildlife passageways and appropriate mitigation measures, the environment ministry's "Status of tigers, co-predators and prey in India-2022" report said. (PTI)

NEW DELHI, March 28: The University Grants Commission (UGC) is exploring the idea of conducting a common counselling for undergraduate admissions based on CUET scores on the lines of medical and engineering courses, according to sources.

The UGC has formed a committee with officials from different universities to discuss the idea and five renowned universities have been roped in for a pilot run, they added.

However, there is no clarity on when the idea will be implemented if the committee finds it feasible.

"A panel has been formed to study the idea and the pilot will be conducted internally to study the pros and cons. Such a system will provide a single window for ad-

missions and students can give their choices on a single portal instead of applying separately to universities," a source said.

"Whether or not the idea will take off is not certain right now. It depends on the panel's findings and then we will have stakeholder consultations," the source said.

UGC Chairman M Jagadeesh Kumar declined to comment on the issue.

The commission had earlier said it was contemplating the merger of engineering entrance exam JEE and medical entrance NEET with Common University Entrance Test-Undergraduate (CUET-UG), which was introduced in 2022. However, there has been no development on the plan.

With more than 14.9 lakh regis-

trations, the CUET, the common gateway for undergraduate admissions in all central universities, is now the second biggest entrance exam in the country, surpassing JEE-Main's average registration of nine lakh.

NEET-UG is the biggest entrance test in India with an average of 18 lakh registrations. While JEE-Mains is a Computer-Based Test (CBT) conducted twice a year, NEET is conducted in pen-and-paper mode.

This year, the exam is scheduled to be conducted from May 15 to 31.

The standardised test was introduced in 2022 to streamline admission processes across central, state, deemed and private universities nationwide. (PTI)

Summer, climate change, tropical diseases: Bihar villages battle elephantiasis, kala azar and more

MUZAFFARPUR/GOPALGANJ (BIHAR), March 28: Far from the world of scientists studying climate change, the twin whammies of altered rainfall patterns and rising temperatures are being felt every day in villages such as Sher in Bihar where lymphatic filariasis and other neglected tropical diseases lurk in dank corners.

Climate change, which brings with it floods and droughts, is also leading to more mosquitoes and sandflies and therefore a spike in diseases such as lymphatic filariasis, commonly known as elephantiasis, dengue and visceral leishmaniasis (VL) or kala azar. As the summer sets in, so does the threat of transmission of these diseases with the heat creating fertile breeding grounds for the vectors.

"Climate change is fundamentally altering vector ecology, favouring the survival and reproduction of disease carrying vectors like mosquitoes and sandflies," said Dr Bhupendra Tripathi, a New Delhi-based scientist.

"This phenomenon extends their range and boosts their population densities, thus expanding vector habitats. Consequently, previously unaffected regions are now susceptible to vector-borne diseases such as LF and VL, with instances emerging in places like Uttarakhnad," the MD and deputy director, Infectious Diseases and Vaccine Delivery, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, India Country Office.

Bihar's Sher village is testament that the



fears of scientists and other experts are very real. Walking through the labyrinthine lanes of the village, Kusum Begum is tasked with not just distributing medicines to combat LF, a debilitating disease caused by parasitic worms transmitted to humans through infected mosquitoes, but also increasing awareness.

"Climate change is making our battle against diseases like lymphatic filariasis even more challenging. We must act swiftly to mitigate these threats," Kusum said.

"I tell the villagers that they must wear full sleeves clothes, sleep in mosquito nets and

most importantly ensure that water doesn't accumulate," she said.

Shanti Devi, a community leader in Mugal Biracha village in Gopalganj district, has taken charge of spreading awareness on disease prevention and climate resilience.

"We must arm ourselves with knowledge on protecting against mosquito bites and understand the importance of curbing disease spread. Because we don't know when the situation will worsen," she said.

Bihar is likely to witness hotter summers and scantier rainfall in the next two decades.

This may pose greater health risks with more severe heat waves and an "exponential" rise in vector-borne diseases, according to a recent submission before the state assembly by the Department of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (DEFCC) which cited a report of the Bihar State Pollution Control Board (BSPCB). Underscoring the urgency of addressing the impact of climate change, Parmeshwar Prasad, additional director and Bihar Programme Officer of Lymphatic Filariasis, said India is on way to achieving its target of eradication by 2027 but the challenges are plenty.

"In view of rising temperatures we are recommending and taking action at two levels -- individual and societal," he said.

"At the individual level, we tell people to use mosquito repellents and let fumigation gas come indoors... at the societal level, public should support efforts such as fumigation. We are making all these preparations so that in anticipation of rising temperatures and increased moisture due to climate change, the impact can be minimised." Tripathi added that climate change directly affects the spread and prevalence of neglected tropical diseases (NTD) like LF and VL in different areas of India by influencing vector ecology, geographical expansion, human migration patterns, vector adaptations, and changes in local infrastructure. (PTI)

Student stabbed for not showing answers during Class 10 exam



THANE, March 28: Three students allegedly stabbed their classmate after he refused to show his answer-sheet to them during a written examination of Class 10 in Bhiwandi town of Maharashtra's Thane district, police said on Thursday.

Following the incident that took place on Tuesday at a school after the examination, the injured student was admitted to a local hospital, they said.

"During the SSC exams, the victim refused to show his answer sheet to the accused students during the examination. Enraged by this, the trio caught hold of him as soon as he came out of the exam hall and thrashed him. They also stabbed him, due to which he suffered injuries and was hospitalised," a police official said.

He was later discharged from the hospital, he said.

A case under Indian Penal Code (IPC) section 324 (voluntarily causing hurt by dangerous weapon or means) was registered at the Shanti Nagar police station in Bhiwandi against the three minor accused. (PTI)

UPPL gains momentum with new members ahead of LS elections

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, March 28: People cutting across communities are pouring in to join the ruling United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) ahead of the ensuing Lok Sabha elections, with more than 2500 new members from different political parties, social organisations, and individuals, including BPF, AIUDF, and Congress party, joining the UPPL party in Parbatjhora constituency of Kokrajhar district and Salbari of Baksa district on Thursday.

In Salbari (Baksa), more than 1500 new members representing BPF, Congress parties under the leadership of Afzal Hussain of Salbari formally joined the UPPL party at a grand joining program held at the Bhakumsri Playground in Baksa district amidst the presence of UPPL working president and Rajya Sabha MP, Rungwra Narzary, MCLA Joy Mushahary, and several senior party leaders. The program was conducted by the Salbari district committee of the UPPL party and saw a huge gathering to welcome the newly joined members.

Remarkably, people from different communities and party leaders joining the UPPL party is seen amongst the citizens due to the commendable development works carried out by the government of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) and the unwavering commitment to maintaining peace in the region by Pramod Boro-led UPPL party.



Rajya Sabha MP, Narzary, mentioned that several hundred persons from different political parties and organisations have joined the UPPL party in Salbari, with more thousands of common masses coming forward to join the party across the Bodoland region ahead of the ensuing Lok Sabha elections. He hailed the newly joined members and said that the UPPL party is committed to

working for the all-round development of the citizens.

Narzary noted that the Opposition BPF party has become irrelevant amongst the citizens in the Bodoland region as it failed to address the people during their 17-year reign in BTC. He termed the BPF party as an opportunist party, only seeking power and reign opportunities.

In Parbatjhora, over 1000 individuals and leaders from AIUDF, BPF, and Congress party joined the UPPL at a party program held at the Mahamaya Playground of Kokrajhar district. The newly joined members were offered warm welcome and felicitation by traditional aronai and party muffers by state cabinet minister, Urkhao Gwra Brahma, BTR executive member, Ranjit Basumatary, UPPL vice president, Afjal Haque Sarkar, and several senior party leaders organised by the Parbatjhora district committee of UPPL.

The joining program has been conducted under the banner of promoting peace, prosperity, and development in the region, with participants opting for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and expressing their support for the NDA (UPP, BJP, AGP) candidate, Joyanta Basumatary, in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections for No.1 Kokrajhar Lok Sabha constituency.

Minister Brahma stated that the government of Bodoland Territorial Region under the leadership of Pramod Boro, the CEM of BTR, is rendering services for bringing healthy welfare and development among the citizens of the region. He mentioned that the Bodoland region is now experiencing sustainable development, with people from all sections of society coming forward to extend support to the UPPL party, opting for the UPPL party to achieve a new dimension of better governance.

Nomination papers of all candidates validated for Jorhat LS seat

HT Correspondent
JORHAT, March 28: The nomination papers of five candidates for the 14 Jorhat Lok Sabha seat were found to be valid after scrutiny by the concerned authorities here on Thursday.

A district administration official, while informing on Thursday evening, stated that the papers of the five candidates were found to be valid after scrutiny. Jorhat district commissioner Pulak Mahanta, who is also the returning officer of the 14 Jorhat HPC, has urged all the five candidates to be present at 3.05 pm on March 30 next at Room number 1 of the returning officer's office for symbol allotment.

The five candidates whose papers were found valid are: Gaurav Gogoi (Indian National Congress), Topon Kumar Gogoi (Bharatiya Janata Party), Arun Chandra Handique of Ekam Sanatan Bharat Dal, Raj Kumar Duarah, and Baba Kurmi (Both Independents).

Meanwhile, the General Observer for the 14th Jorhat Lok Sabha constituency, M Satya Sharada Devi (IAS), has urged the candidates to follow all rules and directions of the Election Commission of India (ECI) in order to conduct the polls in a free and fair manner.



Election expenditure observer takes charge

HT Correspondent
NAGAON, March 28: Pachiyappan P (IRS), the observer of election expenditure for the Nagaon parliamentary constituency, arrived in Nagaon in the evening on Wednesday and assumed charge of his office here.

Pachiyappan P also addressed a meeting of the election expenditure monitoring cell held at the conference hall of the District Commissioner's Office on Thursday. The meeting was attended by the nodal officer of the election expenditure monitoring cell, the superintendent of police, Nagaon, the election officer, assistant election officer, and other officials of the expenditure monitoring cell. During the meeting, the observer urged all the officials concerned to conduct a free, fair, and transparent election in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. He also instructed them to inform him in advance if they needed any training in this regard, as stated in an official press note issued on Thursday in Nagaon.

Dihanaam contest held

HT Correspondent
SIVASAGAR, March 28: Over three thousand naamoties (singers) led by Amita Neog Kalita participated in a Dihanaam contest held at Kali Prasad Memorial Hall on Wednesday. Fifteen groups from different places took part in the competition, and the Manokanchan Dihanaam group was adjudged the best. Amiya Neog was conferred the 'Bhakti Saurov Award' in the presence of Akhil Gogoi, MLA, Sivasagar, Samiran Phukan, assistant secretary, AASU, Minakshi Gogoi, Ranu Tamuli, Papori Barua Phukan, Lanti Urang, Anjel Priya Saikia, and Pankaj Chetia.

OBITUARY

Former subject teacher at Sivasagar Bezbaruah HS School, and a leading citizen of the town, Merajul Islam Akhtar (70), passed away recently in a hospital in Dibrugarh. He leaves behind a daughter and other relatives. His demise is mourned by the Bezbaruah HS School Teachers' unit, Amgurihat Yuva Jamat, and other organisations.



Nomination paper of one candidate cancelled

HT Correspondent
TEZPUR, March 28: After thorough scrutiny by the scrutiny team of Sonitpur election district, the nomination paper filed by Independent candidate Mahendra Orang for the first phase of the upcoming general election slated for April 19 was cancelled. Following this, there are now a total of 8 candidates who will contest in the poll. It is to be mentioned here that the first nomination paper was filed by Indian National Congress fielded candidate Premal Ganju on the first day of the nomination filing process, which was on March 22, followed by the nomination paper filed by independent candidate Pradip Bhandari on Tuesday. However, on Wednesday, including BJP's candidate Ranjit Dutta, six others filed their nomination papers. These include Kameswar Swargiary from Voters Party International, Rishiraj Kaundinya from Aam Aadmi Party, Independent candidate Mahendra Orang (whose nomination was cancelled), Raju Deuri from Bodoland People's Front, Md. Alam Ali from Bahujan Maha Party, and Rinky Roy from Gana Suraksha Party.

Nomination papers collected for Diphu parliamentary seat

HT Bureau
DIPHU, March 28: Nomination papers have been gathered by both political parties and Independent candidates vying for the 6 – Diphu (ST) parliamentary constituency, directly from the Nomination Cell at the District Commissioner's Office here.

The 6 – Diphu (ST) parliamentary constituency, comprising the hill districts of Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong, and Dima Hasao, is slated for polling in the second phase of parliamentary elections on April 26.

Candidates from the BJP, INC, Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), and an Independent candidate backed by the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) have all successfully collected their nomination papers.

The BJP has put forth Amarsing Tisso, a current member of the Autonomous Council and executive member of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), as their nominee. The INC has nominated Joyram Englang, a former chief executive member (CEM) of KAAC and former Howraghat MLA. Meanwhile, the ASDC has nominated Jotson Bey, the party's general secretary and former chief executive member of KAAC.

The official notification is scheduled for March 28, with the deadline for filing nominations set for April 4, and the last date for withdrawal of candidature being April 8. Counting of votes will take place on June 6.

Political parties ramp up door-to-door campaigns ahead of LS elections in Morigaon

HT Correspondent
MORIGAON, March 28: With the Lok Sabha elections looming, various political parties have intensified their door-to-door election campaigns with their candidates contesting in the district. The Congress, as the leading Opposition party, has launched door-to-door campaigns in a bid to secure the Nagaon LS seat for the second consecutive term, as revealed by MP Pradyut Bordoloi during a press meet held at Morigaon Congress Bhawan on Thursday. The India Alliance, led by Congress party's national spokesperson Mahima Singh, has joined hands with CPI, AJP, APP, and Rajior Dal to challenge the BJP in the LS elections.

Addressing the media, Mahima



Singh criticised the BJP for ignoring alleged wrongdoings within the party. She alleged that Delhi's chief secretary, Rajendra Kumar, was being made a scapegoat by the CBI to provide evidence against Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal, leading the IAS officer to consider vol-

untary retirement due to pressure. MP Pradyut Bordoloi stated, "We, the Congress party, have always been against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). We do not support the CAA and will never implement it on Assam's land."

NDA alliance organises bike rally in Kokrajhar



HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, March 28: A grand bike rally in support of NDA alliance (UPPL, BJP, and AGP) candidate for No.1 Kokrajhar Lok Sabha constituency, Joyanta Basumatary, was conducted on Thursday under Baukhungri LAC in Kokrajhar district.

Chief convener of the Central Election Steering Committee and EM (BTR), Gautam Das, EM of BTR, Arup Kumar Dey, MLA Lawrence Isary, flagged off the rally in the presence of NDA alliance candidate, Joyanta Basumatary. Thousands of participants from different areas of Baukhungri LAC representing the

alliance partners - UPPL, BJP, and AGP participated in the rally, which was organised by NDA alliance parties. It started from Dholmara playground, traversed through Nayeogaon, Choraikola, Kokrajhar town, Magurmari, Monakocha, and ended at Fakiragram. NDA alliance candidate, Joyanta Basumatary, was also seen riding on the road, creating an enthusiastic moment ahead of the ensuing Parliamentary elections.

MLA Isary said that the bike rally has attracted the common masses as the NDA alliance candidate Joyanta Basumatary is receiving overwhelming support from Kokrajhar Lok Sabha constituency. He mentioned that people from all communities are eagerly waiting to vote in favour of the NDA alliance candidate.

Meanwhile, NDA alliance candidate, Joyanta Basumatary, attended several public meetings in Kokrajhar district. Basumatary addressed public gatherings at Karigaon, Kalipukhuri, Kerkamuri, and Tintila Alurbhui under Salakati and Baukhungri constituencies in Kokrajhar district. People from all sections of society offered warm welcome and felicitation to NDA candidate, Joyanta Basumatary, with traditional aronai and gamosa. Basumatary expressed his hopefulness that he would emerge victorious from Kokrajhar Lok Sabha constituency with majority support. He assured to dedicate himself to the welfare and development of the society in the days to come.

Election expenditure observer assesses preparedness in Margherita

HT Correspondent
MARGHERITA, March 28: Dinesh Badgurjar (IRS), the election expenditure observer for the 13th parliamentary constituency of Dibrugarh, visited the office of the Margherita sub-divisional officer (civil) and district election officer on Wednesday.

The purpose of the visit was to assess the preparedness and ongoing activities related to election expenditure monitoring in the 83-Margherita Assembly segment, in view of the upcoming general election to Lok Sabha 2024.



During his visit, Dinesh Badgurjar meticulously reviewed the arrangements made for election expenditure monitoring, including a thorough examination of various monitoring cells such as MCMC (Media Certification and Monitoring Cell) and accounting teams. Additionally, he conducted an assessment of the on-

site locations of static surveillance teams and flying squads deployed specifically for the 83-Margherita Assembly Segment.

Accompanied by Dinesh Badgurjar, the district election officer and assistant returning officer, Margherita Parikshit Thoudam, IAS, and Aditi Neog, ACS, election officer Margherita emphasised the importance of voter participation and urged eligible electors to exercise their valuable votes. The officials assured the public that the administration is diligently implementing relevant and necessary measures to ensure a free, fair, and transparent election process.



HT Correspondent
MARGHERITA, March 28: Concerns regarding extensive soil erosion along the Buridehing and Tirap rivers in the 83rd constituency of Margherita have escalated. Despite over 1000 bighas of agricultural land being lost to these rivers, no proactive measures have been taken by Margherita MLA Bhaskar Sharma, the Margherita Sub-divisional Civil Administration, or the state government's Irrigation Department to address this pressing issue.

Thamai Chakap Sonar, a long-standing resident of the 2nd

Maulang Reserve in the Hamukjan Gaon Panchayat, emphasised the daily challenges faced by the community, particularly the ordeal of crossing the Buridehing River via a makeshift bamboo bridge at Tirap Mukh Paar Ghar. The area, home to 360 households across the 2nd Maulang Reserve and Nonglai Kubiabari, primarily relies on agriculture. However, recurring heavy rainfall during the monsoon season results in the loss of over 1000 bighas of arable land to the Buridehing and Tirap rivers.

Despite numerous appeals and memoranda submitted to the

Margherita Sub-divisional Civil Administration, the community's plight remains unheard. Sonar lamented the lack of essential government amenities in the 2nd Maulang Reserve and Nonglai Kubiabari, particularly affecting the well-being of patients, especially pregnant women, and hampering communication since independence. Additionally, the inadequate infrastructure disrupts the education of school and college students, who often miss classes during the rainy season.

Expressing disillusionment with both the Congress and BJP, Sonar criticised their lack of tangible development efforts, accusing them of engaging in mere publicity stunts and mudslinging politics. Residents of the 2nd Maulang Reserve and Nonglai Kubiabari have vowed to deliver a resounding message to the BJP in the upcoming Lok Sabha election, highlighting their collective dissatisfaction and determination for change.

Bhagawat oration concludes at Balichang

HT Correspondent
BISWANATH CHARIALI, March 28: The three-day Bhagawat oration program convened by Sammiti Samaj Sangha in collaboration with the general public of Laxman Basti Namghar premises near here concluded on Wednesday. The first day's program began with the hoisting of the religious flag by Niranjan Hazarila followed by a community plantation drive. The Bhagawat procession was inaugurated by Saruram Bora, former president of Pabhoi regional committee of Srimanta Sankardev Sangha. Mandira Bharali read out the Bhagawat on Tuesday while Jiten Dadhora explained the meaning; on the contrary, Jitne Lahkar read out the Bhagawat on Wednesday while Anil Tanti explained the meaning. A Dihanaam competition was organised among the locals. Januguri Milijuli Dihanaam team bagged the first position, Paschim Sakomotha Milijuli Dihanaam team secured the second prize, while Sorajania Parijat Dihanaam team from Soota secured the third position respectively.

RRU members trained for effective HEC mitigation

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 28: Member volunteers of Rapid Response Units (RRU) operating in various human-elephant conflict (HEC) affected areas in eastern Assam districts are entrusted with the important responsibility of raising early alarms over the presence of wild elephants in the proximity of human settlements to avoid human-elephant confrontations as much as possible in the greater interest of coexistence.

These RRU members, who are closely networked through WhatsApp groups, resort to fast dissemination of information among the group members as soon as they spot wild elephants close to human habitats. They constantly monitor movements of elephant herds.

These RRUs have been formed in certain HEC-affected areas of five eastern Assam districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh,



Mayuli, Sibsagar, and Jorhat by the biodiversity conservation organisation Aaranyak and the British Asian Trust with support from the Darwin Initiatives.

As many as 117 RRU members were re-

cently trained by experts in a series of training programs organised by Aaranyak-British Asian Trust during March 19 to 21 last in Tinsukia, Sibsagar, and Jorhat districts.

Precisely speaking, such training was held at Basa Gaon of Sadiya in Tinsukia district, Charaguwa High School at Charaguwa Grant village around Panidhing Bird Sanctuary in Sivasagar district, and at Hatisal Chapori village in Jhanjimukh locality of Jorhat district.

Members of anti-depredation squads (ADS) of state Forest Department and other forest staff also attended the training programs besides RRU members. Each of these training programs comprises a theory session equipped with substantive presentations by conservation scientist Dr Bibhuti Prasad Lahkar and Aaranyak official Anjan Baruah preceded by a brief session of introduction on Aaranyak by officials Zakir Islam Bora and Niranjan Bhuyan who also explained in detail the objectives for the creation of RRUs. Aaranyak's researcher Rubul Tanti explained morphological characteristics to

identify elephants in a herd, their distribution, and various causes of growing conflict in north-east India during the series of training programs.

He also focused on various roles and responsibilities that RRU members would be playing in their villages on various issues related to conflict. Anjan Baruah explained various mitigation tools for minimising human-elephant conflict and facilitating coexistence.

Pre and post-evaluation exercises were conducted to assess the outcome of training programs. Several other staff members of Aaranyak including Rimpee Moran, Tonmoi Priya Gogoi, Debojit Gogoi, Tibrayoti Gogoi, Deepjyoti Buragohain, Chiranjib Kalita, Ananta Kalita, Lakhinath Taye, and village champions Maya Gogoi, Nihar Ranjan Gogoi, Bidya Borbor, Makhon Kalita coordinated these programs.

Never thought of becoming a cricketer, the game was a 'free way to study': Burger

JAIPUR, March 28: South African left-arm fast bowler Nandre Burger never aspired to be a cricketer but chose to take up the sport as "it was a free way to study".

In 2014, it was through a cricket trial that Burger got admission to University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) with a full scholarship to pursue a psychology major. He has never looked back since.

Burger, 28, now is an all-format pacer for South Africa, having made his national team debut in December last year.

His performances for South Africa earned him a Rs 50 lakh contract with Rajasthan Royals. He also played for Joburg

Super Kings in SA20 last month.

"Sounds strange, right. WITS offered a scholarship for those who played cricket. I thought it was cool. I didn't want to be a cricketer, but I was getting a free way to study, so I thought, why not? Cricket was actually my back-up to academics (laughs)," Burger told ESPNcricinfo.

He made his IPL debut in RR's 20-run win over Lucknow Super Giants here on March 24.

But the journey wasn't easy for the lanky left-arm pacer. He tried his hand at tennis and squash before turning to cricket because of a back in-

jury. Burger has since recovered from the injury. It was his university coach Neil Levenson who saw a potential fast bowler in him for the national team.

"I laughed it off at first. I was like, 'Man, I bowl at 125kph. I can't do this for a living. I've seen guys bowl 145kph.' Neil would have none of that. I said to him, 'Okay, I'll give this a go.' And within a few weeks, I was excited to train. I'd miss classes to be at training, wanting to work batters over," Burger said. "Then I got the chance to be a net bowler at the franchise team in Joburg - Highveld Lions. I'd always played



cricket in the backyard with friends and parents, but wouldn't say I ever had the desire to be a professional."

Burger has so far played two Tests, three ODIs and a T20 International for South Africa, picking up 11, 5 and 1 wicket respectively.

In only his second ODI last December in Gqeberha, Burger picked up 3 for 30 to help South Africa bowl out India for 211.

"As I walked off the field, Pommie (Mbangwa) and Shaun Pollock were like, 'Well bowled, and congrats,' and I'm thinking, congrats for taking three wickets? Congrats for bowling ten overs? It wasn't

even my debut, so I'm confused. I go in, change and come back down again," he said.

"Shaun was like, 'I'm sure you're so excited.' I still didn't get it, so I said, 'Yeah, it's cool, I think I got my first (ODI) wicket, so it's a great feeling.' Then he's like, 'No man, I mean for the IPL. You're going to play for Rajasthan Royals'."

"Everyone was saying 'Congratulations' and I was oblivious to what was happening. After the game, when I put my phone on, all I read was 'congrats, congrats, congrats' and 'well done, well done'. I didn't know if it was for the game or IPL." (PTI)

Warner, Stoinis, Agar left out of CA's 2024-25 central contracts list

MELBOURNE, March 28: Veteran opener David Warner, who has retired from ODI and Test cricket, along with all-rounders Ashton Agar and Marcus Stoinis, was on Thursday dropped from Cricket Australia's list of centrally-contracted players for the 2024-25 season. Besides, Victoria opener Marcus Harris and pacer Michael Neser have also missed out on contracts that were offered to 23 players, stated a report by 'cricket.com.au'.

Australia have a hectic season ahead that will feature the T20 World Cup in the USA and West Indies in June and a home Test series against India towards the end of the year among other engagements. Warner's omission was expected as he intends to call it quits from the game after the T20 World Cup. He is currently in India, playing in the IPL for Delhi Capitals.

Stoinis is the most notable omission. However, the 34-year-old, who is currently playing with Lucknow Super Giants in the IPL, remains in contention for the upcoming T20 World Cup despite missing Australia's recent tour of New Zealand with a back injury.

Pacers Xavier Bartlett and Nathan Ellis are among those



who have been offered contracts for the first time.

Bartlett (25) and Ellis (29) are joined by Victoria and Adelaide Strikers batter Matt Short (28),

and Western Australia all-rounder Aaron Hardie (25) as the four new faces on this year's central contracts list.

The four players have already

made their international debut for Australia.

Short and Hardie made their debuts during last year's T20 series in South Africa, while Ellis

played in Australia's ODI and T20I tour of South Africa, and T20 campaigns in India and New Zealand.

He, however, missed the home white-ball series against the West Indies due to a rib injury.

"Matt, Aaron and Xavier have been extremely impressive in the early stages of their international careers," national selection chair George Bailey was quoted as saying by cricket.com.au

"Their performances and the way they have embraced the international stage has been exciting to watch."

"The panel believes they have strong futures and are deserved of their contracts as they work towards striving to become regulars in the Australian setup."

CA contracted men's players 2024-25: Sean Abbott, Xavier Bartlett, Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Pat Cummins, Nathan Ellis, Cameron Green, Aaron Hardie, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Marsh, Glenn Maxwell, Lance Morris, Todd Murphy, Jhye Richardson, Matt Short, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc, Adam Zampa. (PTI)

MANCHESTER, March 28: Win against Arsenal on Sunday and Manchester City's path to a record fourth straight English Premier League title becomes clearer.

Lose, and Arsenal takes a giant step towards becoming league champion for the first time in 20 years.

Draw, and the big winner this weekend could be Liverpool.

With 10 rounds to go, the clash at Etihad Stadium is the last time any of the three title rivals will go head to head.

Arsenal leads the league. Liverpool is second on goal difference. City is a point behind both of them. Just five goals separate the top two.

An element of risk and reward hangs over City and Arsenal.

History is clearly on City's side, having won its last eight home games against the Gunners. City's last home loss in this fixture was in 2015.

But Arsenal has been better this season after beating City in a penalty shootout to win the Community Shield in August, followed by a 1-0 victory at Emirates Stadium in October.

City manager Pep Guardiola's preparations haven't been helped by injuries to key defenders Kyle Walker and John Stones during the international break.

Mikel Arteta was once Guardiola's trusted lieutenant at City. Arteta was spoken of as a future City manager but is working on creating his own legacy at Arsenal after transforming the club's fortunes since taking charge in 2019.

He has been backed with money and time, and that faith has paid off with Arsenal leading the league and advancing to the Champions League quarterfinals. After falling away badly at the end of last season to allow City to take the English title, it remains to be seen if Arteta and his players have learned from that experience.

Those two wins against City this season suggest Arsenal is more prepared to go head to head against the champion.

Arsenal stands as the last major test for City. It has arguably the smoothest run of games to the end of the league. Arsenal and Liverpool both have to travel to Manchester United and face respective derbies against Tottenham and Everton.

All three teams still have to face Aston Villa and Spurs, who are competing for fourth spot and Champions League qualification.

Liverpool plays Brighton on Sunday with the chance to go to the top of the standings before City and Arsenal kick off.

There is little to choose between the challengers.

City is on an ominous 22-game unbeaten run in all competitions, dating to the start of December.

Liverpool has lost two of its last 23 games and already has its first trophy of the season after winning the English League Cup in February.

One of those defeats was Manchester United's extra time winner in the FA Cup final this month. The other was 3-1 to Arsenal in the league in February.

Arsenal, meanwhile, has risen to the top of the league on the back of an eight-game winning streak.

All three teams are battling on multiple fronts.

City is defending its Premier League, Champions League and FA Cup treble of last season.

Liverpool is no longer competing for a quadruple, but after winning the League Cup it is also still in contention for the Europa League.

Arsenal is in the Champions League quarters, where it faces Bayern Munich.

City was given the toughest draw of all against Real Madrid.

Guardiola could make history by winning back-to-back trebles including an unprecedented fourth Premier League in a row. Not even Alex Ferguson managed that at Man United.

Arsenal will be driven to make amends for last season's title collapse after it led the table for 248 days, the longest of any team that hasn't gone on to be crowned champion. (AP)

Marseille hit by injuries ahead of biggest game against bitter rival PSG

MARSEILLE (FRANCE), March 28: For Jonathan Clauss, the France friendly against Chile this week was meant to be pure joy in front of his home crowd.

It ended up as a sour 11-minute experience concluded by an injury that ruled out the defender from French soccer's biggest game this weekend.

Clauss, who plays for Marseille, left the pitch with a torn left hamstring and was forced to watch his teammates' 3-2 win from the sidelines.

The former Lens player is expected to be out of action for up to four weeks at a crucial moment of the season for Marseille, which has big matches lined up against Lille then Benfica in the Europa League following the clash with bitter rival Paris Saint-Germain on Sunday.

Marseille was already hit by an injury crisis ahead of hosting PSG at a sold-out Stade Velodrome in a match known as "Le Classique."

The confrontation became popular during the 1990s when the arrival of prominent players such as Rudi Voeller and George Weah ignited the rivalry. Marseille, the only French team to win the Champions League back in 1993, has fallen well behind since PSG was taken over by Qatari investors in 2011, but the game continues to stir up passion.

PSG has won 11 of the last 14 matches against Marseille. Marseille has failed to score in the last four.

Clauss is just the latest name

to join Marseille's injury list. The defense has been severely hit, and it's a big blow before PSG's attacking armada led by Kylian Mbappe sets foot in town.

Alongside Clauss, Bamo Meité and Amir Murillo have already been ruled out, while Samuel Gigot and Leonardo Balerdi are doubtful.

Building a solid backbone should give a real headache to interim coach Jean-Louis Gasset, who has managed to put the club back on track since he replaced Gennaro Gattuso last month.

With eight league matches left, seventh-placed Marseille is lagging 20 points behind PSG but can still qualify for next season's Champions League. At the top, PSG has a 12-point lead over Brest and looks all but guaranteed a record-extending 12th league title.

"Let's end racism!" Following incidents earlier this season, that's the message the league will be hammering at matches in the top two divisions this weekend.

Players will be wearing a special jersey with a badge featuring the word racism crossed out in red. Referees, coaches and other match officials will wear a special armband, while the Ligue 1 and Ligue 2 competition badges will change to black and white colors.

The league said this weekend's action will be followed by an auction on April 3 of jerseys worn by the players, with all the profits donated to groups fighting discrimination. (AP)



Nikita Chand, representing Uttarakhand, secured gold medal in the Youth Women's 60kg category at the Youth World Boxing Cup in Budva, Montenegro. Her outstanding performance earned her the title of 'Best Boxer' of the tournament. Dr. Sandeep Tiwari of Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam Ltd. congratulated her on her remarkable achievement.

'Foreign players were frustrated by KKR coach's militant style of functioning'

NEW DELHI, March 28: Several foreign cricketers in Kolkata Knight Riders were frustrated by head coach Chandrakant Pandit's "militant" style of functioning during the previous edition of the IPL, former South Africa and Namibia all-rounder David Wiese, who played for the franchise last year, has claimed.

The 38-year-old all-rounder, who played five Tests for KKR in 2023, said foreign cricketers weren't happy at being tutored on how to behave or what to wear by the coach.

"He (Pandit) is known in India as a very militant type of coach. He is very strict, very disciplinarian that type of stuff. Sometimes in franchise cricket, when you have overseas guys, who've played all over the world, they don't need anyone coming and

telling them how they need to behave, what they need to wear and what they need to do the whole time. So, that was tough," said Wiese on the podcast 'Hitman for Hire: A year in the life of a franchise cricketer' recently.

Pandit took charge as KKR's head coach after New Zealander Brendon McCullum quit the job in 2022. The much-admired coach, who played five Tests for India, coached Vidarbha to successive Ranji Trophy titles in 2018 and 2019. He later guided Madhya Pradesh to its maiden Ranji title in 2022.

Wiese, who was part of the Namibia side that played the 2022 T20 World Cup, said he saw players unhappy with Pandit's style of coaching. "...he liked to do things a certain way and that didn't sit well with certain players. It

caused a little bit of tension in the changing room."

"Guys were frustrated, there was a lot that changed over the last couple of years (when McCullum was around) and the new coach brought in some new things that he thought would bring success to us," Wiese, who first played the IPL in 2015, said.

Wiese added he wasn't too bothered about the environment around him. "I'm like 'listen it's your circus, you run the show. End of the day, I am here just to play. If you tell me to do this, I'll do it. I'm not the guy who's going to bump heads or anything. But there are certain players who are a bit more stubborn than me,'" he said.

Two-time champions KKR had a disappointing season last year finishing seventh and Wiese said he felt frustrated because he

didn't get more opportunities to showcase his talent.

"...that frustration was more because of the fact that I played those games. I didn't really get the opportunity to do much."

"I did hit a couple of sixes but didn't really get the opportunity to showcase my skills there, and never got picked again in the team that was struggling with players," he added. "I think if I hadn't played a single game it would've been fine but the fact that I played three games, had a taste, did relatively well and then didn't get another chance in a team that is struggling, that was the more frustrating part." Wiese said he didn't get the same vibe in IPL 2023, which he got in his first year in the tournament in 2015.

"I don't know if that's because I've played in every single fran-

chise tournament now. Honestly, it felt like just another franchise tournament. It didn't have the hype feeling."

Wiese was also uncomfortable with some of the dressing room celebratory, including smudging faces with cake on someone's birthdays. He called it stupid and annoying.

"In India, the tradition is like that you cut the cake and then somebody feeds it to you and then you feed it to everybody else. Then somewhere through that they'll put a little smudge on your face and then some guy decided, it's going to be funny just smash cake in your face."

"It's such a nice cake, why go out and make nice cake then smash it all over the face... it's almost inedible. It's really annoying. (PTI)

RCB, KKR eye course correction to add momentum to campaign

BENGALURU, March 28: Victory in their respective previous games might have eased the initial nerves but imperfections remain, hence Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Kolkata Knight Riders will eye a quick course correction to add steam to their campaign in an IPL 2024 match here on Friday.

The Royal Challengers defeated Punjab Kings by four wickets, while the Knight Riders elbowed out Sunrisers Hyderabad by four runs to garner some early points.

But entering the points table has not really eased some of the worries — particularly pertaining to the top and middle-order batting.

The Bengaluru dugout might be a happy space after star batter Virat Kohli made a classy fifty on an unusually gripping Chin-naswamy pitch while chasing 177 against Punjab the other night, but that's only one part of the story.

Skipper Faf du Plessis, Glenn Maxwell, Cameron Green and Rajat Patidar are yet to hit the overdrive, and for the win against PBKS they had to rely on the last-minute cameos of Dinesh Karthik and 'Impact Player' Mahipal Lomror.

The Kolkatans have a much more capable bowling unit, at least on paper, and such a collectively underwhelming effort by

frontline batters might push RCB into deep troubles against them.

Once they iron out that rough edges, RCB can look at their bowling unit that still needs to fill a couple of unticked boxes despite good outings by pacers Mohammed Siraj and Yash Dayal against Punjab.

Pacer Alzarri Joseph continues to be profligate and his figures -- 0/38, 1/43 -- might prompt the RCB think-tank to bring in England left-arm quick Reece Topley, who has impressive white-ball skills, in place of the West Indian for this match.

The Knight Riders offer a strikingly similar plot. Their top and middle-order consisting of captain Shreyas Iyer, Venkatesh Iyer, Sunil Narine and Nitish Rana malfunctioned against SRH at the Eden Gardens.

It required a combined effort from impact sub Ramandeep Singh, Rinku Singh and Andre Russell -- the 6, 7, 8 -- for them to post a competitive total.

Shreyas, who is central to their batting plans, was dismissed for a two-ball duck, but the return to Chin-naswamy might give him a sense of relief as he had fruitful outings here in white-ball cricket in his last two innings.

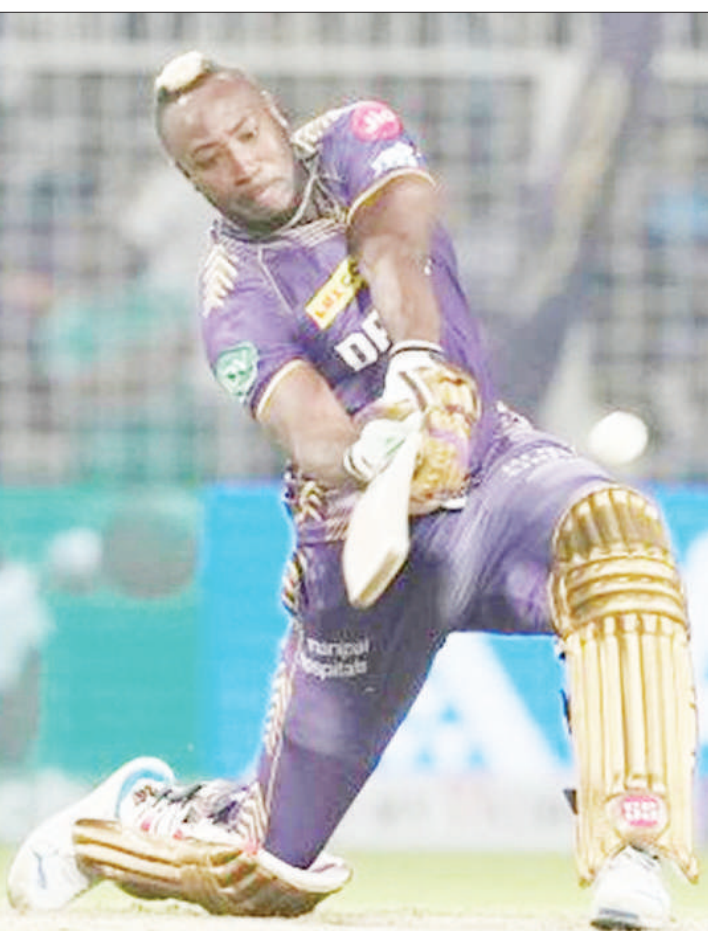
The elegant right-hander made an unbeaten 128 against the Netherlands in last year's World Cup before making a 53 against



Australia in the fifth T20I in December.

In bowling, Narine redeemed

himself with a frugal spell (1/19) after a modest effort with the bat, but pacer Mitchell Starc, their record



buy, and Varun Chakravarty failed to impress, leaking over 50 runs in their four overs.

The KKR think-tank might not be unduly worried as their campaign is still at a nascent stage,

but they would like to see the first-choice pacer and spinner finding their range at the earliest.

But it is unlikely that the Knights will make changes to their eleven for this match, unless they want to give a go to promising leg-spinner Suyash Sharma, who showed fine form during KKR's pre-season matches.

Squads:

Royal Challengers Bengaluru: Faf du Plessis (c), Glenn Maxwell, Virat Kohli, Rajat Patidar, Anuj Rawat, Dinesh Karthik, Suyash Prabhudessai, Will Jacks, Mahipal Lomror, Karn Sharma, Manoj Bhandage, Mayank Dagar, Vyshak Vijaykumar, Akash Deep, Mohammed Siraj, Reece Topley, Himanshu Sharma, Rajan Kumar, Cameron Green, Alzarri Joseph, Yash Dayal, Tom Curran, Lockie Ferguson, Swapnil Singh, Saurav Chauhan.

Kolkata Knight Riders: Shreyas Iyer (c), KS Bharat, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Rinku Singh, Angkrish Raghuvanshi, Sherfane Rutherford, Manish Pandey, Andre Russell, Nitish Rana, Venkatesh Iyer, Anukul Roy, Ramandeep Singh, Varun Chakravarty, Sunil Narine, Vaibhav Arora, Chetan Sakariya, Harshit Rana, Suyash Sharma, Mitchell Starc, Dushmantha Chameera, Sakib Hussain, Mubeen Ur Rahman.

Match starts at 7.30 PM. (PTI)

Perplexed by Bumrah getting just one over till 13th over: Smith

HYDERABAD, March 28: Left perplexed by Mumbai Indians skipper Hardik Pandya's tactics in the record-breaking IPL loss to Sunrisers Hyderabad, former Australia captain Steve Smith has said he cannot fathom why premier pacer Jasprit Bumrah bowled just six deliveries up until the 13th over of the match.

In a stunning display of power-hitting, Sunrisers Hyderabad posted the highest ever IPL total of 277/3 before clinching a 31-run victory over an equally aggressive Mumbai Indians on Wednesday night.

Bumrah was the second-most economical bowler in the match, after SRH captain Pat Cummins (2/35), conceding 36 runs in his four overs which did not yield any wicket.

"I was perplexed with some of their bowling changes in the first innings for Mumbai. Bumrah bowled in the fourth over, he went for 5 and then we didn't see him again till the 13th over when they were on 173," Smith told host



broadcaster 'Star Sports'.

"All the damage had been done, you needed your best bowler to be coming back and take some wickets in that period and I think they missed a trick there bringing him back only in the 13th over," he pointed out.

"I think he got a few things wrong, and that was the main one for me. I mean you can't have one of the best bowlers in the world

bowling one over."

Smith said Bumrah's late reintroduction into the attack rendered him ineffective.

"When the ball is going around like that, you've just got to bring your best bowler back earlier than you would have liked. It's just about adapting on the go and I'd have almost bowled Bumrah out by the 15th, 16th over, try to get some wickets, if he gets wickets,

you slow the rate down anyway. "If the guy is batting at the end, doesn't matter who is bowling, we saw that really with Bumrah in the last two overs and he still got smacked with the bat at the back end," he explained.

"So if he came back earlier and had taken some risks, things would have been really different and they got 277 and they could have been reduced to 240 and might have chased those down, so I was just perplexed that he bowled only one over up until the 13th over."

Smith said it's hard to make sense of the power-hitting contest the match turned out to be.

"...38 sixes in total, the ball was just going all over the place. It was an incredible game. Another former cricketer Brian Lara lauded SRH's Abhishek Sharma, who smacked a 23-ball 63.

"Abhishek Sharma is one of my favourite young batters...He can hit it, he's not a big muscular guy, but when he hits the ball it stays hit. I think his was a special knock today," he said. (PTI)

Sindhu advances to Madrid Masters quarters

MADRID, March 28: Star Indian shuttler P V Sindhu continued her impressive run at the Madrid Spain Masters, advancing to the quarter-finals with a comfortable straight-game win over Chinese Taipei's Huang Yu-Hsun here on Thursday. It was a smooth performance from Sindhu as she was hardly tested by the Taiwanese qualifier, ranked world no. 63, resulting in a 21-14 21-12 win in 36 minutes.

The former world champion, who finished runner-up in the last edition, will take on either sixth seed Supanida Katethong of Thailand or

Japan's Natsuki Nidaira.

In the opening game, Sindhu was 3-0 up initially but then entered a phase where she often found the net or went long, while her rival produced some precise returns to grab a 7-6 lead before taking a one-point advantage with a straight down-the-line smash.

The Indian, however, produced a better show after resumption, taking a 18-12 cushion with Yu-Hsun making errors. She soon grabbed eight game points, wasted two of them before sealing the opening game with her trademark smash.

After the change of sides, Yu-Hsun struggled to control the shuttle as her lifts repeatedly went long. The Taiwanese shuttler tried to use her drops and placements but she didn't have power in her smashes. The result was Sindhu quietly waited for her opponent to commit errors. Soon she had a five-point advantage at the break. Every time Yu-Hsun tried to extend the rallies, she ended up with unforced errors.

Soon a smash handed another eight match points to Sindhu and she wrapped it up when her opponent sprayed into net again. (PTI)

Sharfuddoula first Bangladesh umpire to enter ICC elite panel, Menon enters 5th year; Broad excluded

DUBAI, March 28: Bangladesh's Sharfuddoula Ibne Shahid on Thursday became the first from his country to be inducted into the ICC Elite Panel of Umpires while India's Nitin Menon entered the top tier for an unprecedented fifth time.

Indore-based Menon, who joined the elite panel at the start of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, remains the only Indian in the 12-member club.

The 40-year-old is only the third Indian to be part of the elite panel after S Ravi and former India spinner S Venkataraghavan, who performed on-field duties in 33 and 73 Tests respectively.

Menon has been an on-field umpire in 23 Tests, 58 ODIs and 41 T20s (122 overall) and is expected to surpass Venkataraghavan's overall match tally of officiating in 125 games in the T20 World Cup in the USA and Caribbean.

Menon had also realised his dream of officiating in the Ashes last year.

On the other hand, Bangladesh's Sharfuddoula was elevated from the ICC International Panel of Umpires, replacing the now retired Marais Erasmus.

Sharfuddoula has been on the International Panel since 2006 and his first international appointment was an ODI between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka at Mirpur in January 2010.

He has been an on-field umpire in 10 Tests, 63 ODIs and 44 T20Is. He has also



featured on-field in 13 women's ODIs and 28 T20Is.

"It is a great honour to be named on the ICC Elite Panel. To be the first from my country on the panel makes it extra special and I look forward to justifying the faith shown in me. I have had a fair bit of experience over the years and am ready for more challenging assignments," said Sharfud-

doula. The ICC Elite Panel of Match Referees has been reduced from seven members to six, with Chris Broad not included in the panel for 2024-25.

Broad, who had been on the panel since 2003, has refereed 123 Tests, 361 ODIs and 135 T20s, as well as 15 women's T20s.

A senior ICC official said Broad had been

dropped as part of a restructuring process.

"Chris Broad has been dropped as a part of restructuring process and there would be no immediate replacement," an ICC Board of Director from one of the member nations aware of the developments told PTI.

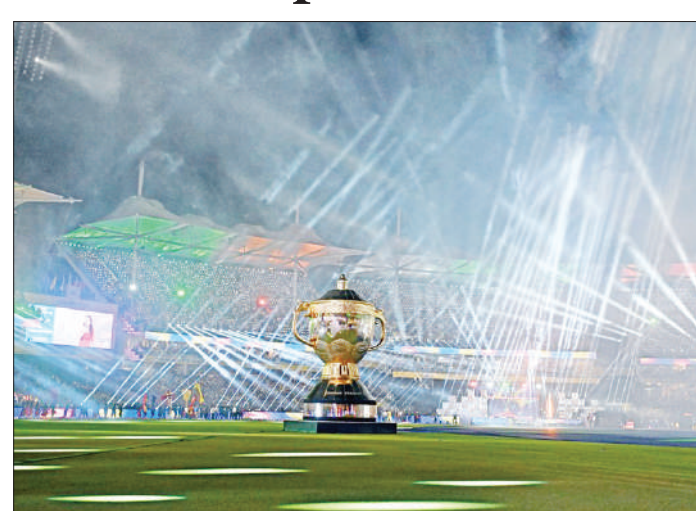
ICC Chief Executive Geoff Allardice said: "Chris Broad has been a valuable member of the Emirates ICC Elite Panel of Match Referees over many years and has performed his role with distinction.

"He was prepared to take difficult calls in the best interests of the game and was respected by players and officials from all over the cricketing world. On behalf of the ICC, I would like to thank Chris for his long and distinguished contribution to the game."

Emirates ICC Elite Panel of Match Referees: David Boon (Australia), Jeff Crowe (New Zealand), Ranjan Madugalle (Sri Lanka), Andrew Pycroft (Zimbabwe), Richie Richardson (West Indies), Javagal Srinath (India).

Emirates ICC Elite Panel of Umpires: Kumar Dharmasena (Sri Lanka), Christopher Gaffaney (New Zealand), Michael Gough (England), Adrian Holdstock (South Africa), Richard Illingworth (England), Richard Kettleborough (England), Nitin Menon (India), Ahsan Raza (Pakistan), Paul Reiffel (Australia), Sharfuddoula Ibne Shahid (Bangladesh), Rodney Tucker (Australia), Joel Wilson (West Indies). (PTI)

IPL 17's opening day registers record-breaking viewership: Broadcaster



MUMBAI, March 28: The 17th edition of the Indian Premier League opened to blockbuster viewership numbers with 16.8 crore viewers tuning in to watch the season's first game between Chennai Super Kings and Royal Challengers Bengaluru on March 22, the tournament's official broadcaster said on Thursday.

Disney Star said the opening day also registered a watch-time of 1276 crore minutes -- the highest-ever for the first day of any season. The watch-time minutes are a compilation of the time spent by each viewer in watching the game.

The 17th season of IPL also witnessed the highest-ever peak TV concurrency for an opening day, with 6.1 crore viewers watching the broadcast simultaneously on the Disney Star network.

"Disney Star had recorded 870 crore minutes on the IPL's opening day in 2023. In comparison to the previous edition, there is a growth of 16 per cent in TV consumption," the company stated.

Defending champions Chennai

Super Kings defeated Royal Challengers Bengaluru by six wickets in the season-opener in Chennai.

"This growth is a reaffirmation of the incomparable capacity of Live Cricket to aggregate audiences on TV and provides a blockbuster start to the tournament. We will continue to enrich the magic of one of the world's biggest sporting events to take forward the launch momentum and deliver unprecedented viewership," a Star Sports spokesperson said in a press release.

The channel said that the record-breaking TV viewership on the opening day comes on the back of an array of programmes in the lead-up to the 17th season which attracted more than 24.5 crore viewers till a week prior to the start of the tournament.

In the digital space, JioCinema

clocked 11.3 crore viewers on the first day of the IPL.

The streamer claimed that it registered a 51 per cent jump over day one of IPL 2023. The total watch time on JioCinema on day 1 was 660 crore minutes. (PTI)

I was thinking about failure last year, but now more clear in my approach: Russell

BENGALURU, March 28: Andre Russell gave an early storm warning to opponents, plundering a 25-ball 64 for Kolkata KnightRiders against Sunrisers Hyderabad in their opening IPL game and the veteran batter attributed the bright beginning to a changed mindset.

In contrast, Russell was a pale shadow of his intimidating self in IPL 2023, managing just 227 runs from 14 matches and snaffling just seven wickets.

"My mindset wasn't right (in 2023). I was thinking about failure more than thinking about going out and doing what I do best.

"When you have a mindset that I don't want to get out, I think that's a negative mindset for me," Russell said on the eve of the match against Royal Challengers Bengaluru here.

"I think I've been allowing myself to be under pressure, because I've been thinking too much. It's all about the mindset, as I said, and now more clear in my approach to every delivery," added Russell.

But the Jamaican all-rounder said he has been working on his batting technique as well over the last year to make a bigger impact.

"I've made a few changes. I was at the nets in Abu Dhabi and Sunil (Narine) was watching my technique. We realised I was doing too much, as I was stepping out and I needed to work on my stride towards the delivery.

"When I look at most batters who are big hitters, they don't really have a big stretch against the deliveries that are going away. So, that's just one little tweak that I've done," said Russell. Detailing the changes further, the 35-year-old said: "Now, I'm just trying to move as late as possible, and you know, I wouldn't speed so much and I try to depend on that, and just use eye-hand coordination," he added. (PTI)