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● Sunak: UK is descending into mob rule; Critics accuse him of undermining protest rights

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● TMC strongman Shajahan arrested, CID takes over probe

● Modi, Jugnauth inaugurate airstrip, jetty, 6 other India-assisted projects in Mauritius

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Government of India

Modi Sarkar
Ki
Guarantee

Means Guarantee of world class Infrastructure

Atal Setu, longest Sea-bridge; Chenab, world's highest Rail Arch bridge

Hamara Sankalp
Viksit Bharat

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5,400 seizures worth ₹ 330 cr in FY'24 in NE

GUWAHATI, Feb 29: The customs department has recorded nearly 5,400 seizure cases of various contraband items worth almost Rs 330 crore while trying to smuggle them across international border during the current financial year, a senior official said on Thursday.

Addressing a press conference, Bandhana Deori, the chief commissioner of Central Excise and Customs (Guwahati Zone), highlighted the department's efforts in combating smuggling activities, particularly focusing on the smuggling of gold and narcotics.

"Coming to the role of customs in combating smuggling, the commissionerate of customs (preventive) has booked 5,364 seizure cases valued at Rs 329 crore in this financial year so far," (CONT'D. ON PAGE-2)

Assam LS polls: BJP to contest 11 seats, allies rest three

GUWAHATI, Feb 29: The BJP will contest 11 seats in the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls in Assam, leaving three for its allies Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL), chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Thursday.

The AGP will contest from Barpeta and Dhubri, while UPPL will field its candidate in Kokrajhar.

The allies will support each other's candidates in all the 14 constituencies, Sarma said.

"Yesterday, BJP state chief Bhabesh Kalita and I had a meeting with our national president J P Nadda, Union Home minister Amit Shah and our national general secretary B L Santosh, during which the seat-sharing was discussed," he

told a press conference at the party headquarters here.

He said UPPL had requested for the Kokrajhar seat, which the BJP agreed to.

"The AGP, which has its base across the state, wanted more seats. But, I conveyed to them the request of our central leadership to contest from two seats this time, and they have obliged us," the CM said.

"Of the total 14 seats, we are optimistic of winning 11," he said.

The BJP has nine MPs in the outgoing Lok Sabha from the state, while the AGP and UPPL have no representation. The Congress holds three seats and the AIUDF one, while another is with an independent candidate. (PTI)

UOFA urges Prez to repeal CAA, warns of stir ● Daily loss of ₹ 1,643 cr by bandh recoverable from agitators: GP Singh ● Who is DGP, questions Akhil

DGP warns of anti-CAA stir consequences



High Court order," he added. Reacting to the DGP's post, Rajiv Dal chief and MLA Akhil Gogoi said there will be no problem at all if the CAA is not implemented.

"You (Centre) will bring a draconian law and if we protest, then we will be punished for making the losses. Who is to be blamed for this loss? Is it BJP or us? They are planning to give citizenship to 15-20 lakh Bangladeshis and we cannot even protest!"

"Who is this DGP? Why does he not tell the Centre to withdraw this law if he is so concerned about the financial losses to the state?" asked Gogoi, who had spent 567 days in jail for his alleged role in violent anti-CAA agitation of 2019 before a Special NIA Court cleared him of all charges. Gogoi, who is the Chief Spokesperson of the UOFA, (CONT'D. ON PAGE-2)

Departure of Rana Goswami won't affect party: Jorhat cong president

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, Feb 29: Jorhat District Congress president, Putul Buragohain, on Thursday asserted that the departure of Rana Goswami would not adversely impact the party's standing in Jorhat.

Speaking to reporters at the Congress Bhawan, Buragohain emphasised the high morale among party workers and various affiliated wings, including youth, students, women, and Seva Dal. Addressing concerns about potential defections, Buragohain reassured that he had been receiving calls from party members and leaders (CONT'D. ON PAGE-2)

KAAC unveils budget for 2024-2025 fiscal year

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Feb 29: The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) presented the budget for the 'Entrusted Subjects' and 'The council budget (inherent Subject)' for the financial year 2024-2025 during the 247th budget session held at KAAC's session hall here on Thursday.

Amarsing Tisso, executive member of the Land and Revenue Department of KAAC, was tasked with presenting the budget for the 2024-25 session on behalf of the chief executive member, Tuliram Ronghang, who was out of station.

EM Tisso presented the 'Entrusted Subjects' with a proposed budget estimated under State Owned Priority Development (SOPD)/ establishment expenditure at ₹ 209636.33 lakh and 'the council budget' with a probable estimated expenditure of ₹ 80015.57 lakh for the financial year 2024-25.

The expected revenue receipt from the Council's sources is ₹ 37415.57 lakh, and Grand in Aid (GIA) from the state government and administrative charges etc. is ₹ 42600.00 lakh.

While presenting the budget, Tisso stated, "There is a significant amount of arrear administrative charges to be released by

the state Government, approximately ₹ 7000.00 lakh, as well as arrears in the share of Motor Vehicle Tax. The state government is therefore requested to release the Motor vehicle tax for Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council during this financial year to enable meeting the normal expenditure of the Council and fulfill the Annual expenditure required for the financial year 2024-25 by placing the fund at the disposal of the council."

The council revenue is derived from its own sources as well as from the state government and the government of India in the form of grants-in-aid (CONT'D. ON PAGE-2)

ANIMAL HUSBANDRY & VETERINARY DEPARTMENT
Government of Assam

অসম চৰকাৰ

অসমৰ মুখ্যমন্ত্রী ড° হিমন্ত বিশ্ব শৰ্মাৰ বলিষ্ঠ নেতৃত্বত পশুপালন আৰু পশুচিকিৎসা বিভাগত আকৌ

নিযুক্তি সমাৰোহ

পশুপালন আৰু পশুচিকিৎসা বিভাগৰ সঞ্চালকালয়ৰ অধীনত

৩৬৫ গৰাকী ক্ষেত্ৰ সহায়ক পদৰ প্ৰাৰ্থীলৈ নিযুক্তিপত্ৰ প্ৰদান অনুষ্ঠান

মুখ্য অতিথি
শ্ৰীযুত অতুল বৰা
মন্ত্রী, পশুপালন আৰু পশুচিকিৎসা বিভাগ, অসম

স্থান - শ্ৰীশ্ৰীমাধৱদেৱ আন্তৰ্জাতিক প্ৰেক্ষাগৃহ, পাঞ্জাবাৰী, গুৱাহাটী
তাৰিখ - ১ মাৰ্চ ২০২৪ সময়: পুৱা ৯:০০ বজা

নিযুক্তিৰ ৰূপৰেখা

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১ মাৰ্চ ২০২৪ ত	৩৬৫ গৰাকী
সৰ্বমুঠ	৯৭,০৫৩ গৰাকী

১লাখ নিযুক্তি সম্পূৰ্ণ হোৱাৰ দিশেৰে অসম চৰকাৰ

তথ্য আৰু জনসংযোগ সঞ্চালকালয়, অসমৰ দ্বাৰা প্ৰচাৰিত

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অসম বাৰ্তা ছাবস্ক্ৰাইব কৰিবলৈ ৭৬৩৬৮৩৪৯৪৩ ত Assam লিখি ৱাটছএপ কৰক

Janasanyog/D/18575/23/1-Mar-24

Union Cabinet nod to ₹ 1.26 lakh cr chip-making units

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: The Union Cabinet on Thursday approved setting up three semiconductor-making units by firms, including Tata Group and Japan's Renesas, as an investment of ₹ 1.26 lakh crore as part of an attempt to cut India's dependence on imports to meet requirements of chips.

The units which will make chips for sectors including defence, automobiles and telecommunications, will begin construction within the next 100 days, Telecom Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw told reporters after the cabinet meeting.

The three units will be set up under the 'Development of Semiconductors and Display Manufacturing Ecosystem' programme that provides government support of up to ₹ 76,000 crore.

Tata Electronics Pvt Ltd will set up a semiconductor fab in partnership with Taiwan's Powerchip Semiconductor Manufacturing Corp at Dholera in Gujarat. The plant will have a capacity to produce 50,000 wafers per month and will involve an investment of ₹91,000 crore.

Tata Semiconductor Assembly and Test Pvt Ltd (TSAT) will set up a semiconductor unit in Morigaon, Assam, at an investment of ₹ 27,000 crore. CG Power in partnership with Renesas Electronics



Corp and Stars Microelectronics of Thailand will set up a unit in Sanand in Gujarat at an investment of ₹ 7,600 crore.

In June last year, the Cabinet approved a proposal of Micron for setting up a semiconductor unit in Sanand, Gujarat.

The approvals are part of the Modi government's ambitions to make India a chipmaker for the world and cutting reliance on countries like Taiwan.

Vaishnaw said the Tata plant at Dholera will produce high-performance compute chips with 28 nm technology for electric vehicles (EV), telecom, defence, automotive, consumer electronics, display and power electronics.

The unit in Assam will have a

capacity of 48 million per day for automotive, electric vehicles, consumer electronics, telecom, and mobile phones. The CG power semiconductor unit will manufacture 15 million chips for consumer, industrial, automotive and power applications.

"Within a very short time, India's semiconductor mission has achieved four big successes. With these units, the semiconductor ecosystem will get established in India. India already has deep capabilities in chip design. With these units, our country will develop capabilities in chip fabrication. Advanced packaging technologies will be indigenously developed in India with today's announcement," he said adding the three units will

generate direct employment of 20,000 advanced technology jobs and about 60,000 indirect jobs.

These units will accelerate employment creation in downstream automotive, electronics manufacturing, telecom manufacturing, industrial manufacturing, and other semiconductor-consuming industries.

Construction of Micron's Sanand unit is progressing at a rapid pace and a robust semiconductor ecosystem is emerging near the unit, he said.

Tata Electronics' partner PSMC is renowned for its expertise in logic and memory foundry segments. PSMC has 6 semiconductor foundries in Taiwan. Power management chips the two will manufacture are high voltage, high current applications.

TSAT semiconductor is developing indigenous advanced semiconductor packaging technologies including flip chip and ISIP (integrated system in package) technologies.

Renesas is a leading semiconductor company focussed on specialised chips. It operates 12 semiconductor facilities and is an important player in microcontrollers, analogue, power, and System-on-chip (SoC) products. (PTI)

Fiscal deficit at Jan-end touches 63.6 pc of full year target: Govt data

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: The government's fiscal deficit at ₹ 11 lakh crore at January end touched 63.6 per cent of the revised annual target, according to the official data released on Thursday.

In the corresponding period last year, the fiscal deficit or gap between the expenditure and revenue was 67.8 per cent of Revised Estimates (RE) of the Union Budget 2022-23.

For 2023-24, the government's fiscal deficit is estimated at ₹ 17.35 lakh crore or 5.8 per cent of the GDP. The government's total receipts stood at ₹ 22.52 lakh crore (81.7 per cent of corresponding RE 2023-24 of total receipts) as of January 2024, according to the data released by Controller General of Accounts (CGA).

This comprised ₹ 18.8 lakh crore tax revenue (net), ₹ 3.38 lakh crore of non-tax revenue and ₹ 34,219 crore of non-debt capital receipts.

Non-debt capital receipts consist of the recovery of loans and miscellaneous capital receipts.

The total expenditure incurred by the Centre was ₹ 33.54 lakh crore (74.7 per cent of corresponding RE 2023-24), out of which ₹ 26.33 lakh crore is on revenue account and ₹ 7.2 lakh crore on capital account.

As per the CGA data, ₹ 8,20,250 crore has been transferred to state governments as devolution of share of taxes by the central government up to this period,

which is ₹ 1,52,480 crore higher than the previous year. Out of the total revenue expenditure, ₹ 8,21,731 crore was on account of interest payments and ₹ 3,15,559 crore on major subsidies.

Commenting on the data, Aditi Nayar, Chief Economist, ICRA, said: "While there may be some slippage in the disinvestment target and capex may trail the FY2024 RE, ICRA does not expect the revised fiscal deficit target of ₹ 17.3 lakh crore for FY2024 to be breached."

The Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government in the interim Budget refrained from announcing populist measures, which is expected to help it trim the fiscal deficit to 5.1 per cent of the GDP next fiscal and 4.5 per cent in FY26.

The nominal GDP growth for the next financial year has been pegged at 10.5 per cent against the 11 per cent estimated earlier.

The nominal GDP as per budget estimate 2024-25 has been projected at ₹ 3,27,71,808 crore, assuming 10.5 per cent growth over the estimated nominal GDP of ₹ 2,96,57,745 crore, as per the First Advance Estimates of FY2023-24.

Helped by an improvement in tax buoyancy, the government managed to achieve a fiscal deficit of 5.8 per cent against the budget estimate of 5.9 per cent for the current financial year. (PTI)

Sensex, Nifty close higher in volatile trade; RIL gains after mega-merger deal

MUMBAI, Feb 29: Benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty closed with gains on Thursday in a highly volatile trade amid the scheduled monthly expiry of derivative contracts.

The 30-share BSE Sensex rebounded 195.42 points or 0.27 per cent to settle at 72,500.30. During the day, the benchmark oscillated between a high of 72,730.00 and a low of 72,099.32.

The broader Nifty of NSE gained 31.65 points or 0.14 per cent to close at 21,982.80.

"Domestic benchmark traded near a flat-line trend throughout the session, but some buoyancy emerged by the end of the day. Investors adopted a cautious wait & watch approach on the verge of a heavy economic data week," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services.

Among Sensex shares, IndusInd Bank, Mahindra & Mahindra, HCL Tech, Power Grid, Maruti, State Bank of India, Titan, Asian Paints, Nestle and UltraTech Cement were the major gainers. Reliance Industries climbed



nearly 2 per cent intra-day before closing more than half-a per cent higher after the company and Walt Disney announced the signing of binding pacts to merge their media operations in India to create a ₹ 70,000 crore behemoth.

Hindustan Unilever, Bharti Airtel, Tata Motors, ITC, Tech Mahindra and Axis Bank were among the laggards.

"Markets traded volatile on the monthly expiry day but managed to end marginally higher," said Ajit Mishra, SVP - Technical Research, Religare Broking Ltd.

In the broader market, the BSE midcap gauge climbed 0.84 per cent and smallcap index went up by 0.50 per cent.

Among the indices, services jumped 1.46 per cent, power climbed 1.01 per cent, commodities (0.79 per cent), industrials (0.74 per cent), metal (0.74 per cent) and capital goods (0.65 per cent).

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

European markets were trading mostly in the green. The US markets ended marginally lower on Wednesday.

Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 1,879.23 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data.

The BSE benchmark fell by 790.34 points or 1.08 per cent to settle at 72,304.88 on Wednesday. The Nifty slumped 247.20 points or 1.11 per cent to settle at 21,951.15.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 0.43 per cent to USD 83.32 a barrel. (PTI)

OPPO India Unveils F25 Pro 5G with Premium Features



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 29: OPPO India has launched its latest smartphone, the F25 Pro 5G, offering consumers premium features at competitive prices. The device comes in two storage variants, priced at ₹ 23,999 for 128GB and ₹ 25,999 for 256GB. Available in a vibrant Lava Red color, the F25 Pro 5G boasts a 64MP rear triple-camera setup capable of 4K video recording on both front and rear shooters. Highlighted by a sleek 6.7-inch borderless AMOLED display, the smartphone is powered by the octa-core Dimensity 7050 SoC and features a 67W 5000mAh fast-charging battery. Director of Product Communications at OPPO India, Savio D'Souza, expressed enthusiasm about the device, emphasizing its premium features and sophisticated design. The F25 Pro 5G's borderless design offers an immersive viewing experience with a 93.4% screen-to-body ratio, enhanced by its 120Hz AMOLED display and 10-bit color technology, providing over 1 billion hues for natural gradients. Moreover, the smartphone's durability is reinforced with Panda Glass protection for the display and a PC-GF body fabrication for added strength. With an IP65 rating, the F25 Pro 5G ensures resistance to dust and water jets from all directions, making it suitable for various environments. Additionally, rigorous quality tests guarantee long-term reliability, including 1,00,000 volume key presses, 2,00,000 power button presses, and 20,000 instances of USB-C cable plugging and unplugging. Available in Lava Red and Ocean Blue colors, the F25 Pro 5G offers consumers a stylish and durable smartphone option with top-tier features at an affordable price point.

Cabinet nod for ₹ 24,420 crore subsidy for P&K fertilisers for 2024 kharif season

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: The government on Thursday announced a ₹ 24,420 crore subsidy on Phosphatic and Potassic (P&K) fertilisers for the kharif season and said the farmers will continue to get key soil nutrient DAP at ₹ 1,350 per quintal. Along with DAP (Diammonium Phosphate), the government asserted that retail prices of other major P&K fertilisers would remain stable.

The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has approved the proposal of the Department of Fertilisers for fixing the Nutrient-Based Subsidy (NBS) rates for the kharif season 2024-25 (April 1 to September 30) on P&K fertilisers.

Briefing reporters, I&B Minister Anurag Thakur said, "A nutrient-based subsidy of ₹ 24,420 crore on P&K fertilisers has been approved for the kharif season starting April 1 till September 30." The minister said the subsidy on Nitrogen (N) has been fixed at ₹ 47.02 per kg, phosphatic (P) at ₹ 28.72 per g, potassic (K) at ₹ 2.38 per kg, and Sulphur (S) at ₹ 1.89 per kg for 2024 kharif season, he said.



In fact, the subsidy on phosphatic fertilisers has been increased to ₹ 28.72 per kg for the 2024 kharif season from ₹ 20.82 per kg in the 2023 rabi season. However, the subsidy on nitrogen (N), potassic (K) and Sulphur (S) has been kept unchanged for 2024 kharif season.

"With this subsidy, DAP which is sold currently at ₹ 1,350 per bag (50 kg), will continue to be available at the same rate in the upcoming 2024 Kharif season," the minister said. He also said Muriate of Potash (MoP) will also continue to be available at ₹ 1,670 per bag, while NPK will be available at ₹ 1,470 per bag.

In order to reduce the import de-

pendence on DAP, the cabinet also approved the inclusion of three new fertiliser grades under the NBS scheme.

The subsidy would be provided to the fertiliser companies as per approved and notified rates so that fertilisers are made available to farmers at affordable prices.

The government is making available 25 grades of P&K fertilisers to farmers at subsidised prices through fertiliser manufacturers/importers. The subsidy on P&K fertilisers is governed by the NBS scheme since 2010.

In accordance with its farmer-friendly approach, the government is committed to ensure the availability of P&K fertilisers to the farmers at affordable prices, the minister added.

As per the official data, the government has provided nearly ₹ 1.71 lakh crore as fertilisers subsidy till January in this fiscal year. For the 2024-25 fiscal, the government has allocated fertiliser subsidy of ₹ 1.64 lakh crore as against the revised estimates of ₹ 1.89 lakh crore for the ongoing financial year. (PTI)

Airtel Introduces Recycled Plastic SIM Cards

GUWAHATI, Feb 29: In a pioneering move for the Indian telecom sector, Bharti Airtel has announced its transition from virgin plastic to recycled PVC SIM cards, marking a significant step towards sustainable business practices. Collaborating with IDEMIA Secure Transactions, a division of the IDEMIA Group renowned for its payment and connectivity solutions, Airtel aims to reduce environmental impact while promoting circularity. By adopting recycled plastic SIM cards, Airtel anticipates a reduction of over 165 tonnes of virgin plastic usage, resulting in a decrease of approximately 690 tonnes of CO2 equivalent emissions annually. This initiative underscores Airtel's steadfast commitment to mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and fostering sustainability across its supply chain and stakeholder ecosystem. Pankaj Miglani, Director of Supply Chain, Bharti Airtel, expressed delight at the company's latest achievement, emphasizing its dedication to aligning with sustainable measures and contributing to India's net zero ambitions. He highlighted the collaboration with IDEMIA as a testament to shared values in driving towards a greener future. Rahul Tandon, Senior Vice President, Connectivity Services, India, IDEMIA Secure Transactions, commended Airtel for its proactive approach in reducing carbon footprint and providing eco-friendly solutions to subscribers. He credited the innovative efforts of both companies' research and development teams for making such advancements possible.

Airtel has committed to reducing absolute scope 1 and 2 greenhouse gas emissions by 50.2% by FY 2030-31, with FY 2020-21 serving as the base year. Additionally, the company aims to slash absolute scope 3 GHG emissions by 42% over the same period. Key initiatives include promoting energy efficiency, leveraging green energy sources, and implementing renewable energy solutions across operations, alongside building a climate-resilient network and enhancing resource efficiency and waste management.

Govt sets conservative target for wheat procurement at 30-32 million tonnes in 2024-25 season

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: The government has fixed a conservative target of wheat procurement in the range of 30-32 million tonnes during the 2024-25 rabi marketing season, according to the food ministry.

The lower target has been fixed despite the Ministry of Agriculture hoping for a record wheat production of 114-115 million tonnes in

the 2023-24 crop year (July-June).

The target was fixed after deliberations with state food secretaries in a meeting chaired by Union Food Secretary Sanjeev Chopra in the national capital on Wednesday.

"After deliberations, the estimates for wheat procurement during the ensuing rabi marketing season of 2024-25 were fixed in the range of 30-32 million tonnes," the ministry said in a statement.

Apart from wheat, the ministry has also fixed the target for paddy procurement in terms of rice for rabi season in the range of 9-10 million tonnes.

Besides, the government has set a procurement target of 6,00,000 tonnes for rabi coarse grains (millets (Shri Anna).

In the meeting, the Centre has asked states and Union Territories to focus on procurement of millets for diversification of crops and enhanced nutrition in dietary patterns.

In the 2023-24 season, the government procured about 26.2 million tonnes of wheat against the target of 34.15 million tonnes. In 2022-23, wheat procurement was only 18.8 million tonnes against

the target of 44.4 million tonnes. The procurement was lower due to fall in production.

Recently, the food secretary had said the farmers' protest at the Punjab-Haryana borders is unlikely to impact the procurement operations.

Normally, the wheat procurement is carried out from April to March. However, this time, the Centre has decided to allow states to procure depending on the arrival of the crop in the market. In most states, wheat arrivals begin in the first fortnight of March.

Uttar Pradesh and some other wheat growing states have indicated that they will begin procurement from March 1.

Government agencies buy wheat and paddy at a Minimum Support Price (MSP) to add foodgrain stock to the central pool for public distribution under the National Food Security programme and other welfare schemes.

At the beginning of each marketing season, the procurement targets are set by the central government in consultation with states and the Food Corporation of India.

In Wednesday's meeting, the state governments were also asked to adopt or improve their existing MSP procurement applications in line with the standard and core features of the Centre's AgriStack portal, for bringing about transparency and efficiency in the procurement system before the start of 2024-25 kharif marketing season.

During the meeting, issues relating to supply chain optimization for transportation of foodgrains from designated depots to Fair Price Shops, improving infrastructure in procurement centres, good milling practices and on-boarding Fair Price Shops on the government-backed Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) were also discussed.

In the meeting, the Telangana government said it was able to save ₹ 16 crore annually with the adoption of supply chain optimisation, while the UP government shared how linking of e-PoS (electronic point of sale) with electronic weighing scale has effectively ensured supply of foodgrains to the beneficiaries as per their entitled quantity. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

DGP warns of anti-CAA

claimed that Assamese identity and culture will die if the CAA is implemented in the state. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA) seeks to provide Indian citizenship to Hindus, Jains, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Parsis entering India on or before Dec 31, 2014 from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan after five years of residence here.

Meanwhile, activists of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) and Satra Mukti Sangram Samiti (SMSS) staged protests at several places, including Guwahati and Upper Assam districts such as Tinsukia, and demanded repeal of the Act.

"The government is not allowing us to protest peacefully. It is our democratic right to lodge our opposition, but they are using police force to stop us," an agitator said while being dragged by police into a vehicle.

A police official said the agitators tried to obstruct traffic in Tinsukia town, following which they were detained and taken to the nearby police station. The KMSS and SMSS are sister organisations of the Rajjor Dal. Meanwhile, the UFOA on Thursday sought the intervention of President Droupadi Murmu for repealing the CAA, asserting that they would undertake a "democratic mass movement" across the state if their demand is not met. They submitted a memorandum to Murmu through Governor Gulab Chand Kataria.

"This act is not only unconstitutional, but it is also going to nullify the historic Assam Accord of 1985 by putting in danger the history, culture, social fabric, economy and the very identity of the Assamese people," they said. The UFOA urged her to intervene in the matter and direct the Centre to desist from its decision to implement the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 in Assam, and repeal the "unconstitutional and anti-national" act.

"We further inform you, if the Government of India pays no heed to it, we the opposition political parties and the people of Assam will have no alternative except to go for democratic mass movement to compel the government to repeal it," the memorandum said.

Union home minister Amit Shah has recently declared that the CAA is going to be implemented in Assam before the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, they said. After submitting the memorandum, Assam Congress president Bhuben Kumar Borah said: "We will not accept the CAA at any cost, and we told it very categorically to the governor. He said that he has some limitations and will duly forward the memorandum to the President."

The UFOA also decided to seek an appointment of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to register its opposition to the CAA implementation plan, and said they will write to him in this regard on Thursday. Assam TMC chief Ripun Bora said the opposition parties will hit the streets if the government goes ahead with its plan to implement the CAA. Lurinjyoti Gogoi, the president of the Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP), claimed that the controversial law is being rolled out for "religious polarisation" ahead of the general elections. (PTI)

KAAC unveils budget

and administrative charges every year.

The Council's main sources of revenue are derived mostly from forest products, entry tax, professional tax, trading callings and employment, land revenue, share of motor vehicle tax, sale proceeds from weekly markets, ghats, fisheries, cattle pounds, besides other sources of revenue such as the sale of revenue district council receipts, court fees stamps royalty from mines and minerals, said EM Tisso. Under grant in aid, ₹ 1008.60 lakh has been made available for pension benefits to former Members of Autonomous Council, ₹330.00 lakh for IAS & ACS coaching for ST (H) students, and ₹ 1621.00 lakh for payment of honorarium to Karbi language teachers. KAAC also proposed a budget of ₹ 3 lakh for the celebration of various community festivals, Langkhon, Domahi, and Tihar, has been allocated respectively. Moreover, EM Tisso stated that this budget is the people's budget, and the people of Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong under the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council will benefit from it.

Departure of Rana Goswami

across the district reaffirming their loyalty to the party's cause. Further, as a former Zila Parishad chairman, Buragohain underscored the enduring strength of the 130-year-old party, noting that the departure of one individual would not significantly alter its trajectory. Expressing confidence in his leadership role during this critical period, Buragohain pledged to fortify the party's position in the days ahead.

"People are observant and discerning, capable of distinguishing right from wrong," he remarked. Buragohain further disclosed that a team from the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) would arrive from Guwahati on Friday to assess the situation, following which the Congress would launch an intensive campaign across constituencies to highlight government shortcomings.

Asserting his commitment to duty, Buragohain affirmed, "I will not shy away from my responsibilities." Meanwhile, jubilant party workers and leaders celebrated outside the party office, symbolising a sense of relief at Goswami's departure. Workers expressed satisfaction at the prospect of operating without the perceived constraints imposed by Goswami, whom they accused of stifling the rise of other leaders within the party.

5,400 seizures worth

she added. Deori said the seizure of narcotics includes 2.08 metric tons of ganja and 3.06 kg of heroin, along with other drugs valued at ₹ 48.56 crore. She also said that the authorities intercepted 40 cases of gold weighing 29.76 kg, valued at ₹ 18.96 crore, a case of Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN) with face value of ₹ 23.72 lakh, 127 cases of foreign origin cigarettes worth at ₹75.38 crore and 336 cases of areca nuts valued at ₹ 132.02 crore. "Other major commodities include wildlife and wildlife items such as baby orangutan and pangolin scales, foreign currency, garments, medicines and liquor. The officers are committed to serve the nation with dedication and professionalism as guardians of the economic frontiers in this part of the country," Deori said. (PTI)

CONSTRUCTION RCC BOX INSTALLED BY AIR PUSHING METHOD

E-Tender Notice No. LMG/Engg/32 of 2024 Dated: 27-02-2024. E-Tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following works:
Brief Description of Item: Provision of additional opening at KM 221/3-4, KM 252/9-253/0 & KM 297/4-5 by construction RCC Box installed by Air pushing method. **Tender Value:** ₹3,35,19,363.07. **Earnest Money:** ₹3,17,600/-. **Date & Time of closing of tender:** 15.00 hrs. on 26-03-2024 & opened at 15.00 hrs. of 27-03-2024. The complete information with tender documents of above e-tender will be available upto 15.00 hrs. of 26-03-2024 in website www.ireps.gov.in

DRM (W), Lumding
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY
 Serving Customers With A Smile

CM announces financial aid for sacred constructions in honour of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma

Himanta attends Vishwa Shanti Maha Jagya in Kokrajhar

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, Feb 29: Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma graced the occasion of the Vishwa Shanti Maha Jagya as the chief guest, which was organised at the Green Field, Bodofa Nwgrv in Kokrajhar on Thursday. The event saw tens of thousands of devotees and followers of the Brahma Dharma from different districts of the state.

The event was organised by the Brahma Dharma Coordination Committee to offer prayer and worship to the almighty Brahma God. CM Sarma offered his prayer and worship to the Brahma God on the occasion, which marked a mega praying event amongst the Brahma Dharma devotees and followers. CM Sarma also offered tributes to Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, an eminent social reformer of the Bodo and other tribal communities of the state. He recalled the contributions of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, who united the Bodo community through spirituality. His vision has given a place as the form of Agnik



Param Brahma.

CM Sarma announced financial support to construct Gurudham of Gurudev in Kokrajhar and Gurudham at Rowmari Brahma Jyoti in Chirang district. "It is the most revered Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma who united the elders through spirituality. Feeling honoured to participate in the Mahayagya in Kokrajhar with 50,000 devotees. His vision has given a

place as the form of Agnik Param Brahma. Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma united the Bodo Community through spirituality. Felt a happy moment while joining 50,000 of his devotees to perform Maha Yagya in a mega praying event," CM Sarma said. Pramod Boro, the chief executive member of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), said that the Vishwa Shanti Maha Jagya witnessed grand participation from different districts of the state and prayed for peace and tranquility among the citizens. CEM Boro said that the sacred occasion has been made even more auspicious by the gracious presence of chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and several dignitaries across the state. He said that the BTR government has been emphasising restoration of peace and tranquility among the communities since its inception of government in the Bodoland region.

"It was a warm & hearty welcome to our beloved CM Himanta Biswa Sarma to the Maha Yagya for Vishwa Shanti in Kokrajhar. This sacred occasion has been made even more auspicious by your gracious presence," Boro said. Among others, Assembly Speaker Biswajit Daimary, state cabinet ministers, Urkhao Gwra Brahma, Dr Ranaj Pegu, BTCLA speaker Katiram Boro, Rajya Sabha MP Rungwra Narzary, Bodo Sahitya Sabha president Dr Surath Narzary were prominent attendees at the event.

Student union opposes amalgamation of college

HT Correspondent

DEMOW, Feb 29: In a press release issued by Chinmoy Pritam Borah, president, and Chandan Barua, general secretary of Nitai Panidehing Regional Students Union on Wednesday, it was stated that in the Nitai Panidehing area (arts stream), the only higher educational institution is HCDG College. The information that came to light regarding the amalgamation of HCDG College, Nitaipukhuri, with another college was strongly opposed by them. They stated that at a time when the Nitai Panidehing Regional Students Union has demanded the initiation of a science stream in HCDG College, Nitaipukhuri, the decision to close the college has raised serious concerns for them. The Nitai Panidehing Regional Students Union has demanded the government to abolish the decision to amalgamate HCDG College, Nitaipukhuri.

Regional Meteorological Centre installs weather stations



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 29: The Regional Meteorological Centre, Guwahati, has installed automatic weather stations in remote and hilly regions in the state of Arunachal Pradesh with the help of the Indian Army. It is a great challenge to maintain the systems for continuous receipt of weather data from such regions. A training program on 'Installation, Preventive, and Corrective Maintenance of Satellite-Based Automatic Weather Stations' was organised by the Regional Meteorological Centre, Guwahati, during February 27-28, 2024 for army personnel. In the inaugural function, KN Mohan, sci-

entist-G, delivered a lecture on 'Introduction to Automatic Weather Station and its Components'. On this occasion, Dr Sanjay O'Neill Shaw, scientist-F, Sunit Das, scientist-F, Sailen Saikia, scientist officer, and AC Roy, meteorologist, were also present. On the concluding day, Dr M Mohapatra, director-general of Meteorology, India Meteorological Department, interacted with the army officials through video conferencing. Dwipen Bezbaruah, professor and former head of the department, Anthropology, Gauhati University, distributed certificates and mementoes to the army officials for successfully completing the training program.

Indian Army and Assam Rifles organises National Science Day



HT Correspondent

MARGHERITA, Feb 29: Indian Army and Assam Rifles orchestrated a thought-provoking lecture series titled 'Changing Lives through Science' to commemorate 'National Science Day' at Mahatma Gandhi High School in Bordumsa, Arunachal Pradesh, and ARPS Chariduar, Assam on Wednesday.

Attended by students from grades 8 to 10 and educators from the respective institutions, the event aimed to underscore the sig-

nificance of fostering a scientific mindset in contemporary society. The lectures, delivered by company commanders from COB Bordumsa and Chariduar, facilitated engaging discussions with students, exploring the pivotal role of science in daily life.

Emphasising the indispensable role of science and technology in addressing present-day challenges, the COB commanders underscored their relevance in inspiring future generations toward the noble pursuit of nation-building.

In addition to the impactful lectures and discussions, practical demonstrations showcasing scientific principles were conducted, further enriching the learning experience for students and educators alike. Hands-on experiments and interactive sessions allowed participants to witness firsthand the wonders of scientific inquiry and innovation. By providing a platform for experiential learning, the Indian Army aims to ignite a passion for science and technology among the youth, empowering them to become catalysts for positive change in their communities and beyond.

A total of 194 students and 28 educators enthusiastically participated in the event, actively engaging in discussions and committing to a pledge titled 'Striving to Build a Scientific Temper', reaffirming their dedication to the principles of science. The event not only fostered a sense of unity but also kindled goodwill among the youth, who pledged their unwavering support to the security forces. The Indian Army looks forward to organising similar initiatives in the future, further fostering scientific curiosity and national spirit.

Dibrugarh Akashvani hosts Radio Drama Festival

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, Feb 29: The Radio Drama Festival - 2024, organised by Akashvani Dibrugarh Station on the occasion of its 56th anniversary, is considered to be a big inspiration for amateur drama groups in the state. The festival will be aired until March 15, and of the 13 radio plays to be aired, the play 'Rangamancha', written by Devabrat Barthakur and directed by Swastika Devi, will be aired on March 7 at 9.30 pm. The play was earlier staged by Shivsagar Jyoti Sangha. The play is directed by Abhinav Dev Kashyap and produced by Khurshid Ahmed.

The playwright exposes the selfishness and idiosyncrasy of a section of people in our society through the play. Debabrata Barthakur, Jadumani Bora, Abhinav Dev Kashyap, Kankana Bezbaruah, Anjima Pathak, Nipa Rajkhowa, Swastika Devi, Bandana Shaikia, Sumoy Gogoi, and Popi Das are the actors in the play.

AJYCP commemorates Semson Sing Ingti's death anniversary

HT Correspondent

BOKAJAN, Feb 29: The Asom Jatiyatbadi Chatra Parishad (AJYCP-Bokajan) commemorated the death anniversary of Semson Sing Ingti, the founder of Karbi Anglong district. At 9 am, lamps were ceremoniously lit in front of Semson Sing Ingti's statue, followed by floral tributes paid by AJYCP leaders. The event was attended by notable figures including Barim Ingti, former president of Karbi Lammet Anei; Jitu Phukon, AJYCP executive member; SGB Borsing Bey, and others.

Meeting on road safety held at Dima Hasao

HT Correspondent

HAFLONG, Feb 29: The District Road Safety Committee (DRSC) held a meeting on road safety at the DC Conference hall in Haflong on Thursday. Dima Hasao district commissioner, Simanta Kumar Das presided over the meeting. In the meeting, the district commissioner reviewed the accident data and dead records of 2023-24. After a prolonged discussion, he instructed the committee to conduct road safety awareness in educational institutions and among the general public. He also appealed that in case of an accident if patient is unable to avail emergency treatment in a health centre, then the doctors should refer him to the nearest hospital instead of to Guwahati. The meeting was attended by superintendent of police of Dima Hasao, Mayank Kumar, additional district commissioner James Aind, senior medical officer Parikshit Barman and other officials from various departments such as MVI, DTO, NHAI, PWD (R&B).

Land patta distribution ceremony held

HT Correspondent

MARGHERITA, Feb 29: A ceremonial land patta distribution program was organised on Thursday at North Margherita Rangamanch, Margherita under 83-Margherita LAC in Tinsukia district. A total of 4059 land pattas were distributed to eligible beneficiaries of Mission Basundhara 2.0.

Leena Pawe, ADC (Revenue) Tinsukia, welcomed the dignitaries, and Swapneel Paul, deputy commissioner of Tinsukia district, informed the beneficiaries about the DigLocker facility, where the electronic copy of the land document can be stored and accessed from any device with the help of the internet.

Sanjoy Kisan, state minister of Tea Tribes Welfare & Labour Welfare Department, graced the occasion and pointed out the drastic positive change that the society is going through during the present regime of the government. He highlighted that land patta is a vital document, and citizens with land documents, specifically the agriculturalists, can reap benefits of many government schemes. Minister Kishan also praised the government officials for their relentless efforts in the completion of Mission Basundhara 2.0 and expressed hope that the recently launched Mission Basundhara 3.0 will fulfill many aspirations of the indigenous community in the near future. The ceremony was also attended by Parikshit Thoudam (IAS), SDO (Civil), various government officials, media, and the general public. Our Nagaon correspondent adds: Local MLA Rupak Sarma ceremonially launched the distribution of land pattas among the beneficiaries of Nagaon-Batadroba assembly constituency under the Mission Basundhara 2.0 scheme initiated by the state government on Thursday. The event took place at a meeting held at the Nagaon district library auditorium. Sarma distributed land pattas



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under the scheme among ten beneficiaries on Thursday. It is pertinent to mention that a total of 119 beneficiaries have been selected in the Nagaon-Batadroba delimited legislative assembly constituency.

Manuroma Morang, additional district commissioner, Nagaon, delivered the welcome address. Ambika Mazumder, chairman of Nagaon Municipality Board, Ishan K Singh, circle officer, Nagaon, Dhruva Jyoti Sharma, chairman of District Development Authority, Nagaon, Silpirekha Pandit, assistant commissioner, and other officials from the district administration participated in the distribution ceremony on Thursday, an official press note stated here.

Protest erupts over ration card deprivation in Dibrugarh

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, Feb 29: Hundreds of people, under the banner of CPI(M-L), Dibrugarh district unit, staged a demonstration in front of the Dibrugarh Deputy Commissioner's Office on Thursday after being deprived of getting ration under NFSA. "There are many poor families who are deprived of getting ration. In the Tingkong and Lohowal Legislative Assembly of Dibrugarh Lok Sabha constituency, there are many families who were deprived of ration. In a total, nine villages of Tingkong and Lohowal, there are more than 200 people who were deprived of getting ration," said Bitupon Bokulia, CPI(M-L) secretary, Dibrugarh district.

He said, "The BJP government has announced that those with an annual income of less than Rs 4 lakh will get the benefits of ration, but it seems that many poor people who have a monthly income of less than Rs 3000 are also deprived of ration." "The BJP government in Assam, under Himanta Biswa Sarma, has recently stated that over 42 lakh beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) have been provided free ration cards by the government in January 2024, but in reality, many people are deprived of the ration. The government is busy in publicity, but the ground reality is different," the release stated.

Bolen Saikia, CPI(M-L), central committee member said, "We have seen that under one fair price shop, a total of 150 people were deprived of getting ration. The people have submitted their Aadhaar cards, but still, they are not getting ration. Due to the Aadhaar card mismatch, many of them are deprived of getting ration."

The CPI(M-L) has submitted a memorandum to the Dibrugarh deputy commissioner and stated that every poor person should get a ration card.

Iron contaminated water plagues Dalgaon village

HT Correspondent

DALGAON, Feb 29: A severe water crisis grips a village in Dalgaon as residents of Duliapara face a lack of clean drinking water. The situation has led to the discovery of new diseases, raising concerns about public health. Despite initiatives like Har Ghar Nal, Har Ghar Jal, and Jal Jeevan Mission, the problem persists, with slow progress blamed on contractor negligence. Residents are demanding water testing to assess the quality. Although tap installations were made under the Jal Jeevan Mission scheme, households still lack access to clean water.

The government's efforts through the Jal Jeevan Mission to provide clean drinking water to the village have fallen short, leaving Duliapara residents to consume water tainted with excessive iron content, evident from its reddish hue. Consequently, various health issues, including kidney and skin diseases, have emerged in the area due to the use of contaminated water, causing widespread concern and panic among the residents. Anger mounts against the contractor responsible for the delayed implementation of the Jal Jeevan Mission scheme, which was supposed to cover an area of 1000 square meters.

Wild elephant rampage

HT Correspondent

BOKAJAN, Feb 29: A wild elephant raided a home in Upper Hatoka Sarthe Rongpi village, Karbi Anglong, causing significant destruction. Owned by Sika Rongpipi, the house had its walls demolished, and the elephant consumed all stored food items, including rice and paddy seeds intended for the next planting season. The kitchen and cooking utensils were also damaged in the incident.

Winsome Tea Plantations introduces Group Mediclaim policy for tea estate workers

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 29: Winsome Tea Plantations Pvt Ltd, a prominent player in the Assam Tea Industry and owner of Chandana Tea Estate situated in Udalguri district, has taken a significant step towards ensuring the welfare of its workforce. In a pioneering move, the company has introduced a comprehensive Group Mediclaim policy, covering all 350 permanent workers at Chandana Tea Estate in Udalguri. This initiative marks a historic milestone in the Assam Tea Industry, establishing a new benchmark for employee welfare and corporate responsibility.

The implementation of the Mediclaim policy underscores Winsome Tea Plantations Pvt Ltd's steadfast commitment to the well-being of its workforce. Acknowledging the crucial role played by tea estate workers in the company's success, this initiative aims to provide them with access to high-quality healthcare services, thereby safeguarding their health and security.

"We are immensely proud to announce the launch of the Group Mediclaim policy for all our workers at Chandana Tea Estate," stated Chetan Joshi, director of Winsome Tea Plantations Pvt Ltd. "This initiative reflects our dedication to the welfare of our workers, who are the backbone of our operations and work tirelessly for the company. By extending comprehensive healthcare coverage, we aim to improve their quality of life and offer them peace of mind."

"Despite the challenging times faced by the Indian Tea industry, we believe it is crucial to prioritise societal well-being. We remain committed to the industry's success and are optimistic about its future."

The Group Mediclaim policy includes a wide range of medical services, such as hospitalisation. Additionally, it provides coverage for pre-existing conditions and emergency medical expenses, ensuring that workers and their families receive adequate support during times of need.

The Biofloc culture tanks are generally circular in shape with a diameter of 4 meters that can hold around 10,000 liters of water

NABARD and College of Fisheries spearhead BFF initiative in Nagaon

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Feb 29: With the objective of supporting capacity building & skill development of unemployed youth through training and demonstration, encouraging fish farmers to maximise their earnings through the adoption of small-scale Biofloc Fish Farming (BFF), and promoting high-yielding intensive fish farming in small-sized areas, NABARD has supported the establishment of two BFF units in Nagaon district. The project is implemented by the College of Fisheries (CoF), AAU, Raha. One unit is installed on the premises of CoF, Raha, and the second unit is installed at Gramsri Krishak Sangha (GKS), Garajan, Rupahihat. The implementation of the project is collectively supervised by DDM-NABARD, Rajendar Perma, and Kaustubh Bhagawati, assistant professor, CoF.

Both these units are now operational and are undertaking stocking and cultivation of a variety of fish like singhi, magur, koi, amur carp, etc. These units are also available for demonstration, exposure, and learning purposes.

Under the project, special training was organised by NABARD and CoF for local educated youth and fish farmers, wherein the participants were guided regarding the



selection of different species of fish, identification and management of diseases, economics of BFF, setting up enterprises, etc.

Biofloc is a protein-based organic matter considered as microbial protein for fish. It is an aggregate of algae, beneficial bacteria, protozoa, living and dead particulate matter that floats on water. It is a protein-rich food for fish formed as a conversion of unused feed and excreta into natural food in a culture system. The BFF technology is an environmentally friendly aquaculture technique based on in-situ microorganism production. It involves the utilisation of microbial processes within the tank/pond itself to provide food resources for cultured organisms. The Biofloc culture tanks are

generally circular in shape with a diameter of 4 meters that can hold around 10,000 liters of water. The tanks are generally made of tarpaulin plastic sheets of 450-650 GSM. The water depth in the tanks is maintained up to 1.0-1.5 meters. To withstand high water pressure, the tarpaulin sheets are tied to a circular iron mesh frame, and the bottom of the tank is cemented & lined with tarpaulin. To remove the sludge, an outlet pipe is fitted at the center of the tank.

Recently, a team of R-TAG officers from NABARD consisting of S S Waghode and Aishwarya Priyadarshi, along with the DDM Rajendar Perma, visited both these BFF units and interacted with the dean, professors, associate professors of CoF, and the representa-

tives of GKS, Garajan regarding the utility of the BFF units and their replicability. During the discussions, assistant professor Kaustubh Bhagawati briefed the NABARD officials that under the project, so far, CoF has trained around 165 fish farmers of Nagaon and Morigaon districts, and that around 145 school and college students have visited the BFF units on study visits. These units are becoming a profitable venture and are encouraging youths to take up this low-cost fish farming enterprise. He further informed that the BFF unit at CoF has been included under the revenue generation model of the Revolving Fund scheme of AAU so that this BFF system can be disseminated among a larger number of marginal fish farmers, in addition to generating substantial revenue for continuing the unit.

The visiting officers from NABARD appreciated the efforts of the College of Fisheries, Raha in successfully implementing the project and requested the dean Dr P Bhuyani to continue popularising this sustainable model of aquaculture among the fish farmers of the state and uplift their socio-economic status. They also assured complete support of NABARD in this new endeavour, an official press note asserted here.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Great dancers are not great because of their technique, they are great because of their passion.
-Martha Graham

Decline of morality in Indian politics

In the annals of Indian politics, the phenomenon of 'aaya ram gaya ram' has become an entrenched practice, tracing its origins to the tenure of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Initially, it was Bhajan Lal, the former Chief Minister of Haryana, who set the stage by orchestrating the wholesale defection of opposition MLAs to bolster a Congress government, despite being in the minority after elections. However, what began as an isolated incident has now metamorphosed into a pervasive menace under the stewardship of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. As political analyst and former Congress spokesperson Sanjay Jha astutely observed, the forthcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections seem destined to manifest as a clash between "Congress (Nehru) versus Congress (Modi)". This forewarning implies that instead of achieving a 'Congress-mukt Bharat', the BJP risks transforming into a repository of Congress defectors. The rampant proliferation of defections raises profound questions about the erosion of morality, particularly within the realm of Indian politics. Unlike in mature Western democracies where individuals align with parties based on ideological affinity and a commitment to public service, in India, political allegiance appears to hinge solely on self-interest. This is especially disheartening considering the BJP's avowed stance as an ideology-driven party committed to upholding moral values—a promise now betrayed by its engagement in egregious 'aaya ram gaya ram' politics. Moreover, the alarming trend of embracing tainted individuals accused of corruption and criminality further underscores the ethical decay pervading Indian politics. The expedient absorption of such figures into the BJP fold, followed by the conspicuous attenuation of legal proceedings against them, epitomizes a brazen disregard for honesty and integrity.

This moral bankruptcy is not confined to the political arena but permeates various facets of Indian society, exposing systemic failures in our educational system. Despite claims of progress in literacy and educational prowess, the glaring absence of moral education remains a critical deficiency. Our schools fail to instill values of integrity and respect for the law, thereby perpetuating a culture where rules are routinely flouted with impunity. Corruption festers unchecked, from government appointments to educational admissions, subverting constitutional guarantees meant for social upliftment. The recent case of DMK's Senthil Balaji, embroiled in corruption allegations yet retained as a minister, epitomizes the pervasive rot within political circles. The BJP cannot evade culpability, having orchestrated similar defections and subversions of democratic mandates in various states. While short-term gains may accrue from such unscrupulous tactics, the long-term repercussions are ominous. The erosion of cadre morale, stemming from disillusionment with leadership integrity, portends a perilous trajectory akin to the decline witnessed within the Congress.

To salvage the moral fabric of Indian politics, concerted efforts are imperative. Citizens must demand accountability and transparency, endorsing politicians of unwavering moral rectitude. Simultaneously, a systemic overhaul of our educational curriculum is warranted to prioritize moral education alongside academic instruction. The road ahead is arduous, demanding collective resolve and perseverance. However, the imperative to restore morality to the forefront of Indian politics transcends political affiliations, calling for a united endeavour towards a more principled and ethical governance ethos.

CPI and CPI(M) have to focus most on improving Lok Sabha tally from Kerala

The stage is set for the holding of the Lok Sabha elections in April/May this year. The two Left parties CPI and the CPI(M) which played a major role in the formation of the Congress led UPA government after the Lok Sabha polls in 2004, are struggling to be relevant in Parliamentary politics. In 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the tally of the Left was a total of only five—three by the CPI(M) and two by the CPI. Out of the five, two seats each by the CPI and the CPI(M) were won as a part of the DMK led alliance. That way, on the basis of its own strength, the Left -- the CPI(M) got only one seat from Kerala.

In the last five years since the 2019 polls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been aggressively going with the implementation of the Hindutva agenda -- the latest being the inauguration of Ram Mandir at Ayodhya on January 22 this year. The opposition parties, after lot of discussions, have finally formed the INDIA bloc to take on the BJP unitedly. The CPI, CPI(M) and the third left party CPI(ML) are constituents of this INDIA bloc. The left leaders are contributing to the discussions about the campaign strategy as also the contents of the programme. But these days, the ultimate bargaining power of the Left is little since they lack the electoral strength which is most important in Parliamentary politics.

Can the combined Left change the present low level of representation to a substantial one in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls? There is a good possibility of an increase in the number of seats but that depends mainly on the performance of the CPI(M) and the CPI in Kerala. The Left is not considered in a winning position in Bengal in the current electoral scenario. So now, the Left can increase its 2024 Lok Sabha tally mainly from Kerala and if possible, through some push from one or

two other states.

Why Kerala is important for the Left's better fortunes in 2024? Kerala has 20 seats in Lok Sabha. In 2019 polls, the CPI(M) got only one seat on behalf of the LDF while the Congress led UDF got 19 seats out of which the Congress alone won 15 seats. This was the highest tally of the Congress from any state in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. This big tally of the Congress was not commensurate with the political situation then since the LDF government led by the CPI(M) was in power. This time, this is more so. The LDF won a big victory in 2021 assembly polls. Since then, the Congress also won some by polls but in the latest local body polls, the LDF did far better than UDF. The LDF is organisationally prepared.

The CPI(M) is contesting in 15 seats while the CPI is fighting in four seats. One seat has gone to Kerala Congress(Mani), a new member of LDF.

At the same time, the Congress high command has been giving maximum focus on retaining its 15 seats in Kerala and that is of crucial importance in the Congress planning for crossing the figure of 120 nationally as against the 2019 tally of 52. The Congress cannot afford to lose existing seats. The party organisation has been assured all resources for attaining the objective. So for the LDF, it will be a bitter battle to get a few new seats from the Congress's sitting constituencies. But still it is possible-it can be near five to six.

As regards Tamil Nadu is concerned, the DMK led INDIA alliance is strong and the Left has to see that the DMK leader M K Staling checkmates the Congress pressure to get more seats from the Left quota. Congress is seeking eleven seats as against its 2019 contesting figure of nine. The Party got eight, in one



seat, it was defeated by AIADMK. If the DMK leaders stick to the present quota of the Left for 2024 also, the CPI and the CPI(M) can retain two seats each in 2024 polls.

Then the most important state for the Left is Bihar where the CPI(ML) Liberation is the most

DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Nitya Chakraborty

powerful Left party. With the desertion of JD(U) to NDA, RJD led INDIA bloc has enough strength to share more seats among them. The CPI(ML) Liberation is seeking five seats in its strongholds, the CPI may get two seats and the CPI(M) one or two seats. There is a good possibility of the Left getting a total of 4 to 5 seats from Bihar. The CPI(ML) Liberation may get representation in Lok Sabha for the first time after 2024 polls.

There are two other states Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, where the Congress will benefit by having alliance with the CPI(M) and the CPI. In AP, both the Communist parties have their own support bases and under alliance formula, both the parties can get two seats each. Similarly in Odisha, the Congress will be facing a three way contest with the ruling BJD and the BJP. A seat sharing with both CPI and the CPI(M) in one seat each can be helpful for the INDIA bloc.

That way, initial assessment shows that in 2024 elections, the three Left parties together can

cross the two digit figure as against the 2019 figure of five. This is still too low compared to the electoral performance of the united CPI in the first general elections in 1951-52. The CPI got 16 seats, and its ally PDF 8 -- a total of 24 -- the second largest after the Congress which got 364 seats while the Bharatiya Jana Sangha, the parent party of BJP got three seats.

In the last seventy two years of the country's parliamentary democracy and 17 Lok Sabha elections, the communists have performed in a consistent manner in terms of their seats despite split of the CPI in 1964 into CPI and the CPI(M) till 2009 when there was a big setback in West Bengal with the Lok Sabha seats falling drastically to 16 for the CPI(M) and 4 for the CPI. In 2014 elections, this plummeted further to 10-nine for the CPI(M) and one for the CPI. The downhill journey of the communists in 2019 Lok Sabha elections reached its nadir at 5 from the peak of 61 for the entire Left in 2004 when the CPI(M) alone had 44 seats and CPI 11.

The undivided CPI got 29 seats in 1957 Lok Sabha elections and 30 seats in 1962 Lok Sabha elections. Thereafter, significantly, despite the split in 1964 and bitter fighting between the CPI and the newly formed CPI(M) in 1967 Lok Sabha elections, the CPI got 24 seats and CPI(M) 19 seats. This means that the two CPs together fight-

ing separately got 43 seats in the bitterly contested 1967 elections surpassing the earlier figure of undivided CPI. The 1967 elections led to the formation of non-Congress governments in the states. In 1971, Indira Gandhi with her Garibi Hatao slogan swept the Lok Sabha elections but the CPI and the CPI(M) managed 24 each with a total of 48 seats in the new Lok Sabha. From 1977 onwards, it was a period of reaching the peak for CPI(M) with its dominance in West Bengal where it got elected to lead the state government after the state assembly elections in June 1977. In 1977 Lok Sabha elections, the CPI(M) got 22 while the CPI seats came down to 7. Both the parties fought separately. Then from 1980 again, the two CPs became the partners of the Left block and in 1980 Lok Sabha elections, the CPI(M) got 39 and the CPI got 14.

In 1984 Lok Sabha elections in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination, there was a wave in favour of Rajiv Gandhi throughout the country including West Bengal. The CPI(M) could get only 22 seats in new Lok Sabha while the CPI got just six. The Congress got a record 414 seats. Then from 1989 elections till 2004, the CPI(M) through its wins in Bengal, could manage 34 seats in 1989, 36 in 1991, 32 in 1996, 32 in 1998 and 39 in 1999 Lok Sabha elections. CPI got 12 seats in 1989, 14 in 1991, 12 in 1996, 9 in 1998, 5 in 1999 and 11 in 2004.

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections have given an opportunity to three Left parties to go to the people and apprise them of both INDIA and their own programmes. Ultimately, the people are the arbiters in a democracy. The CPI and the CPI(M) have to work hard to raise their striking power in favour of the people's struggles through higher representation in Lok Sabha. The Time is now. (IPA Service)

Bitcoin closing in on \$60,000 as cryptocurrency market is booming

By: Arun Kumar Shrivastav

As we go about our lives with mundane affairs, Bitcoin (BTC) is on the fire. Well, hold your breath! BTC is only a few hundred away dollars from the \$60,000 milestone. At the time of writing, BTC is trading at \$59,258.65 - that is, 5.22% up on 24-hour, 14.58% up on 7-day, 39.44% on 1-month, and a massive 154.38% up on 1-year timeframe. With \$60K achieved, BTC can go berserk, with recent surge of institutional interest in the coin. The overall crypto market cap has soared to \$2.2 trillion, while that of BTC is \$1.164 trillion. The second most popular cryptocurrency, Ethereum (ETH), is up 13.80% to \$3,324.32 in a 7-day timeframe.

Even at this bullish moment, some investors are not choosing profit-booking. Instead, they are still going for more. Take the example of MicroStrategy, an IT company with products in several categories, including market intelligence, mobile software, and cloud-based services. Two days ago, when BTC was moving around \$51000-\$52,000, MicroStrategy bought 3,000 more Bitcoins, increasing their total holdings to 193,000, worth nearly \$10 billion. This purchase adds to their strategy of holding Bitcoin as an investment, with their average purchase price being significantly lower than the current market price. MicroStrategy, a publicly traded company, currently holds the most Bitcoin among publicly traded companies, except for Grayscale's Bitcoin Trust.

BTC has seen its all-time high in November 2021 when it skyrocketed to \$69,000, driving the overall cryptocurrency market cap to \$3 trillion. After that momentous high, the cryptocurrency market experienced a long winter during which several crypto companies went bust and nearly 30,000 jobs were lost. The Bull Run is back once again, and given the historical background, such as bitcoin halving approaching, the bull run is expected to continue. It can drive BTC to \$100,000, a psychological milestone, in the near term. If BTC and other coins keep going north like they are doing now, it will be impossible for policymakers to try to ignore cryptocurrencies. Can you think of an investment that can give you a 150% return in a year and, at the same time, it is as liquid as BTC?

Over the past few days, BTC has added \$140 billion on average to its value. Which company would not like a few days like this in their business? MicroStrategy did not sell BTC even when it dropped from \$69K to under \$20K during this crypto winter. They have kept their faith in BTC, and they are doing it even now. Well, today, they have a reason to smile, too!

Bitcoin is experiencing a resurgence in interest from investors and traders, fuelled by its recent price surge and the potential for substantial profits. On-chain data reveals a significant increase in activity on cryptocurrency exchanges, with short-term holders and speculators leading the charge.

One key driver of this renewed interest is the improved profitability for Bitcoin investors. Since the



beginning of the year, the average investor has seen their holdings appreciate by an impressive 120%, highlighting the potential for significant gains. This positive sentiment has attracted new participants to the market, as evidenced by the near-record daily exchange volume. This increased trading activity indicates a rise in speculative behaviour, with short-term holders depositing more of their Bitcoin onto exchanges.

Furthermore, the launch of Bitcoin ETFs has played a crucial role in driving demand. These exchange-traded funds have absorbed over \$6 billion in Bitcoin since their January debut, offering a convenient and accessible way for institutional investors to gain exposure to the cryptocurrency. This new avenue for institutional participation further bolsters the long-term outlook for Bitcoin.

The data reveals a significant uptick in open interest for Bitcoin futures and options contracts. This surge suggests increased leverage and potential volatility in the market as traders utilize these instruments to amplify their gains (or losses).

However, policymakers still need to be convinced, and they would want you to continue with the old centralized financial system. United States senator from Massachusetts, Senator Elizabeth Warren, has once again criticized the crypto industry, expressing her frustration that it appears unwilling to adhere to established financial regulations.

In an interview with Bloomberg Television, the 74-year-old politician and a former law professor stated her desire to collaborate with the industry. Still, they questioned why it seemed to resist regulations, suggesting it was creating space for illegal activities. She emphasized the need for the crypto sector to follow the same rules as the traditional U.S. financial system. Warren referred to her proposed "Digital Asset Anti-Money Laundering Act," which aimed to impose anti-money laundering requirements on various crypto entities, including miners, validators, and wallet providers. The bill is awaiting approval but has faced delays in the Senate Banking Committee. (IPA Service)

BJP's momentum in Kerala politics

By: Dipak Kurmi

The BJP's narrative in Kerala is unfolding with significant momentum. Prime Minister Narendra Modi not only inaugurated the party's 2024 re-election campaign in the state but also paid two more visits within a span of two months. For the BJP, the symbolic significance of making inroads into Kerala, a bastion of pluralism, cannot be overstated.

The visual impact of the Prime Minister's recent trip to Thiruvananthapuram was truly impeccable. During the visit, he unveiled the identities of the four chosen Indian astronauts for the Gaganyaan mission. Notably, among them was Kerala's pride, Group Captain Prashanth B Nair. The astronaut's sudden rise to fame was magnified when it was disclosed a few hours later that he is married to the renowned Malayalam film star Lena.

In the meantime, Shashi Tharoor, the Congress MP hailing from the region, asserted that the BJP would not secure a single seat in Kerala. According to him, the party's political approach simply doesn't resonate with the people of the state. Kerala has consistently proven to be an inhospitable terrain for the BJP, despite the longstanding history and extensive influence of the RSS in the region. Even though Mission 400-plus urges the party to broaden its reach, almost any other state in the country appears to be a more promising prospect.

However, the landscape has undergone a transformation since 2019, and the BJP perceives a chance to break the dry spell. What has changed? There is now a noticeable erosion of trust between the two minority communities in Kerala, traditionally considered strongholds by the Congress. In 2021, when Bishop Mar Joseph Kallarangatt of the Syro-Malabar Catholic church cautioned his congregation about 'Love jihad' and 'Narcotics jihad,' he garnered support within the community.

However, this development raised concerns within the Congress-led United Democratic Front. The situation presented a dilemma as, on one side, the Syro-Malabar church holds significant influence as the largest among the predominant Christian denominations. On the flip side, the Indian Union Muslim



League remains a crucial ally within the Congress front. Faced with this delicate balance, the party found itself compelled to criticize the leaders of the church.

The Congress faced a prior setback when the Kerala Congress (M), supported by the Christian community, parted ways with the UDF and aligned with the CPM-led Left Democratic Front. This strategic move significantly aided the LDF in penetrating strongholds traditionally dominated by Christians within the UDF during the subsequent assembly elections.

The LDF's growing advantage can also be attributed to the perception that the IUML wielded disproportionate influence within the UDF. The Congress' reliance on the Muslim vote has led to an assertive IUML, to the extent that it has requested the Congress to concede an additional seat in the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections. However, this move could potentially alienate the Congress' Christian voter base.

The actions of the Popular Front of India (PFI), a Muslim organization with purported terrorist connections, have exacerbated the situation. Instances of severe violence perpetrated by PFI activists, including the disfigurement of a professor's hand over accusations of blasphemy, have instilled a sense of fear in the region.

Therefore, the BJP is actively engaging with the Christian communities in Kerala, employing a strategy that has proven successful in the Northeast and Goa. In the Northeast, out of the 25 seats, the BJP currently commands 18. Notably, in the 2022 Goa assembly elections, one-third of all BJP candidates were Catholics. In Christian-majority

Nagaland, the BJP formed an alliance with the NDDP and secured victory in 12 out of the 20 contested seats. The term 'Chrisanghi,' previously derogatory for Christian supporters of the BJP, is gradually gaining acceptance. While it's not suggested that the BJP will secure a substantial portion of the Christian vote, given the internal differences among denominations, it might make inroads particularly among the affluent elite.

The second facet of the BJP's strategy came to light during the Prime Minister's rally in Thrissur last month. The event, centered around 'stree-shakti' (women empowerment), drew a substantial number of women attendees. Renowned figures like former athlete P T Usha and actor Shobana provided the necessary star appeal. Modi highlighted his women-centric initiatives to the women of Kerala, addressing them as 'mothers and sisters.' These initiatives ranged from offering sanitary napkins at a nominal cost to opening up Sainik Schools for girls. In a state where the gender literacy gap is already minimal, women emerge as a distinct and influential constituency.

Beyond courting women and celebrities, the BJP's campaign prominently showcases the theme of 'vikas' (development). Positioning itself as the sole party equipped with a comprehensive plan for the nation's and the state's progress, the BJP has been emphasizing its commitment to development. In pursuit of this objective, Modi inaugurated three infrastructure projects amounting to Rs 4,000 crore in Kochi last month, coupled with the assurance of 'Modi's guarantee.' Furthermore, he underscored his government's initiatives specifically tailored for

the welfare of fishermen.

Prudently, the BJP has strategically chosen to concentrate its efforts on particular constituencies. The objective is not merely to accumulate numbers but to secure a symbolic breakthrough. The spotlight is on four specific constituencies, two of which the Prime Minister has already visited: Thrissur and Thiruvananthapuram. In the 2019 elections, the renowned actor and BJP candidate, Suresh Gopi, clinched the third position in Thrissur but significantly elevated the BJP's vote share from 11% to 28%. Meanwhile, in Thiruvananthapuram, the BJP secured the second position with a notable 31% vote share.

Providing a boost to the BJP's campaign in the state is the gradual decline of the Congress, notably marked after its setback in the 2023 assembly elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. The party has witnessed prominent defections, with figures like Anil Antony, the son of the staunch Gandhi loyalist A K Antony, contributing to the perception that the Congress is losing momentum. Subsequently, news surfaced that the BJP emerged victorious in the Rajya Sabha elections, casting a shadow over the Congress and its coalition partner, the Samajwadi Party.

Recognizing the impracticality of relying on ideological debates in Kerala, the BJP has adopted a region-specific approach. This entails concentrating efforts on women and youth, emphasizing development, and engaging with specific Christian denominations. (The writer is a journalist and commentator based in Guwahati, can be reached at dipaknewsline@gmail.com)

Dilemmas in disaster management: SAARC under scrutiny

By: Sohini Bose

South Asia is vulnerable to a variety of natural hazards. While arid Afghanistan faces earthquakes and landslides, Pakistan experiences floods and earthquakes. Nepal and Bhutan are also located in seismically active zones and face flood risk from glacial lake outbursts. Bangladesh is one of the most disaster-prone countries and suffers from severe cyclones, storm surges, and flooding.

Neighbouring India, with its vast expanse, witnesses a variety of natural disasters in different parts of its territory. Northern India faces extreme temperatures and earthquakes and its eastern coastline framing the Bay of Bengal is vulnerable to cyclones, floods, and sea level rise. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are prone to cyclones and occasionally encounter tsunamis generated by the Andaman-Sumatra Subduction Zone.

Due to Sri Lanka's proximity to the same zone, it is also prone to tsunamis and coastal floods. Maldives, the lowest-lying country in the world, is exposed to sea-level rise. As more than a quarter (25.2 percent) of the world's population resides in this region, natural hazards take a heavy toll on life and property. Thus, disaster management is crucial for survival in South Asia.

Cognisant of their disaster vulnerability, these countries have formed policies, passed legislations, and implemented mechanisms to combat it. However, natural disasters are transnational threats, therefore, inter-country collaboration in disaster management is a critical feature of foreign policy outreach in South Asia.

However, it is interesting to note that although such cooperation prevails at the multilateral level, it is essentially functional via bilateral means. This means that although regional institutions in South Asia have sectors of cooperation in disaster management, in the event of a crisis, when the affected country needs external assistance, it usually requests help from its bilateral partners rather than turning to a regional institution despite being its member.

Consequently, regional systems of disaster management have remained underdeveloped. In South Asia, this dearth of development led to the creation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which includes all eight countries belonging to the region.

Since its inception in 1985, SAARC adopted a sector of cooperation on "Environment, Natural Disasters, and Biotechnology" as a core concern. Through consequent studies, the need for a regional approach to disaster management surfaced and 21 years later, in 2006, the members adopted a Comprehensive Regional Framework for Action 2006-2015 modelled on the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015.

However, since 2015, the Framework has not been renewed, indicating a lack of initiative to remain relevant and proactive. This lackadaisical approach has resulted in the SAARC sector of disaster management being sidelined from mainstream efforts in the region.

However, as the risk of climate change increases, the need for a regional system of disaster management is more than ever before. Going beyond SAARC's overarching problems of functionality, identifying and addressing challenges in this sector is thus vital. To an extent, this will help SAARC respond to a crisis or even guide unilateral cooperation on disaster management in South Asia.

The dearth of political will

Regional initiatives of disaster management in South Asia have been reactionary, triggered by overwhelming natural calamities. This is because over time recurrent natural hazards have become a part of the life of the communities living in the vulnerable zones of these countries.

Unless a calamity of staggering magnitude occurs, the need for a regional mechanism to collectively address the concern is not felt. Accordingly, a surge in extreme weather events in 1985, led SAARC to adopt a sector on disaster management.

The tsunami of 2004 and the Pakistan earthquake of 2005 triggered its next major development: the adoption of the Comprehensive Regional Framework for Action. The third major step again was undertaken in the wake of the devastating Pakistan floods of 2010, with the SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters (SARRND) signed in 2011.

As normalcy returned to the region, the rigour generated by the calamity was lost and it wasn't until five years later, in 2016, that the SARRND came into force, once again following the Nepal earthquake.

This indicates, that in the absence of natural disasters or a stimulus, SAARC loses its momentum. In the fortunate absence of disasters, the only alternative is a political stimulus.

Indeed, regional disaster management can develop under SAARC if only there is the necessary political will in the governments of its member states. But in a scenario complicated

by historical tension and political conflicts, this is difficult to achieve, which explains SAARC's stupor. It is only if the growing concern of climate change and its impacts become an overriding political agenda in each of the SAARC member states, that the sector be prioritised and rapid developments will follow. These states may also decide to engage in unilateral cooperation on regional disaster management, giving due attention to the concern but avoiding the baggage of SAARC.

Unfulfilled terms:

Although the SARRND came into force in 2016, most of its terms are yet to be implemented. For example, the Agreement obligates its member states to either jointly or individually create Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), to regulate their assistance to another member country if the latter requests help in the event of a disaster. While the member countries do have guidelines at the national level for their HADR programs, no such set norms have been designed for SAARC's regional response to disaster situations.

Similarly, while many of the member states have earmarked resources as standby for HADR operations, these are mostly despatched on a bilateral basis and are not necessarily designated for regional assistance. Naturally in the absence of such rules and resources, it has not been possible for the regional organisation to develop a rapid response mechanism and extend any institutional assistance to its member states in crisis. Moreover, the SARRND does not stipulate a time limit for the creation of the SOP which further dampens the possibilities of SAARC's coordinated response.

Multilateral cooperation is provided as an option:

The SARRND does not make joint initiatives compulsory for disaster management. Rather it articulates multilateralism as an alternative to bilateral options. For example, the Agreement provides that the Parties shall "jointly or individually" develop strategies and contingency response plans to reduce losses from disasters. It does not mandate the creation of a regional SOP.

Similarly, it states that "Member states shall organise periodic mock drills... to which it may invite other member countries to test the effectiveness of regional preparedness for response." Hence, there is no legal mandate to host regular regional disaster management exercises and, only one SAARC disaster management exercise has been held to date, in 2015.

Regarding disaster response, the SARRND puts forth that affected member states may request assistance from another member state either directly or via the SAARC Secretary General. In a political climate in which bilateralism is the reigning paradigm of the region, it is natural that an affected country of SAARC would reach out directly to its bilateral partners, rather than going via a multilateral institution which to date has no experience of providing disaster response.

Especially in an emergency where time is of the essence, tested bilateral ties would be the preferred medium of seeking assistance. Therefore, once again SAARC is sidelined from real-time disaster management in the region. The need, thus, is to identify a few specific regional actionable such as; a regional early warning system, regular disaster management exercises, a regional pool of resources and expertise, and an SOP; back these with a legal mandate and develop these areas.

Want of structured approach and initiative:

Lastly, regional disaster management initiatives have suffered within SAARC for want of a centralised structure. For a long time, disaster management efforts within SAARC were coordinated between its multiple bodies such as the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) (India), Meteorological Center (Dhaka), Forestry Center (Thimphu), and the Coastal Management Center (Male). Coordinating between four centres is time-intensive and does not bear well in emergencies. Furthermore, it hinders prompt decision-making. Hence, in November 2016, the role of the SDMC was expanded by merging four erstwhile SAARC Centres.

While this integration indicates a more structured approach to regional disaster management, it is yet to gain momentum. Furthermore, there is a need for more vision and leadership. Based on their expertise, member countries need to be given charge of developing specific sectors.

This will bestow the sector with more initiative, especially if the country in charge considers it to strengthen diplomatic ties and multilateral partnerships. Such an approach will usher in direction-driven development.

If these challenges are addressed, regional disaster management will receive a boost under SAARC. Beyond the institution, these can also be a cautionary for any unilateral initiative on regional disaster management.

Above all, the need is to cultivate a regional consciousness about the impact of natural disasters and a regional responsibility to address natural disasters collectively and collaboratively as South Asians. (Courtesy: ORF)

'Even on MSP, but issues vary': As farmers protest globally, India stands out

By: Nabanita Sircar

Farmer protests are gripping several countries. India is witnessing its second round of protests by the farmers, which has already led to deaths and serious injuries in standoffs with the police. There are continuous protests across 12 countries in Europe where farmers have rolled out tractors through capital cities, burnt bales and manure, and blocked highways. But there has been no report of injuries or deaths caused by the police unlike the reports from the Indian farmers' protests.

Unlike the situation in India where farmers are being cordoned off using metal barriers and showered with pellet gun bullets and tear gas, farmers across Europe are storming their capitals in tractors and burning tyres near government buildings.

World over, farmers are revolting against government policies

France has been seeing farmer protests for a while now. During the weekend, a group of French farmers stormed the 60th International Agriculture Fair in Paris ahead of President Emmanuel Macron's visit to the venue.

It is a major event in France, which hosts around 600,000 visitors over nine days. It is known to be a political event, where presidents and their opponents engage with the public under intense media scrutiny.

There were some clashes with the lines of French CRS riot police who tried to contain the protestors who were shouting, "This is our home" and booing Macron when he arrived at the venue, even though Macron has said he is on the side of the farmers.

'668 hate speech events in 2023': Why the India hate lab report should worry us

Last week in Greece, farmers took brightly coloured tractors and parked them outside the country's parliament,

horns blaring, as thousands of farmers, angry at high production costs, protested in Athens. A banner read: "Without us, you don't eat." Some farmers carried mock coffins and funeral garlands as symbols of their plight. They have spent weeks staging sporadic blockades along highways and in rural towns.

In Spain, hundreds of farmers drove their tractors into central Madrid last week as part of ongoing protests against the European Union and local farming policies and to demand measures to alleviate production cost hikes.

The protest was the biggest to take place in the Spanish capital after more than two weeks of daily protests across the country. The farmers rang cowbells and beat drums. Many of the tractors had Spanish flags on them and some farmers carried banners reading, "There is no life without farming," and "Farmers in extinction."

What separates protests in India from elsewhere

Similar protests are taking place, some in coordination across a dozen European countries, but the brutal police action seen in India stands out distinctly.

It led to a question by Indian-origin Labour MP and Shadow Minister for Exports Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese in the UK Parliament regarding the killing of 21-year-old farmer Shubhakaran Singh. Representing Slough, the MP said his constituents, which include a high number of Sikhs, had written to him expressing their concerns and pointed out that social media platform X "admitted to being compelled against their wishes to take down legitimate posts and accounts of activists" about the protests, adding "the freedom of expression and the safety of protestors and their human rights must be protected".

In response, Leader of the House

Penny Mordaunt described Singh's killing as a "very serious situation" and that the British government supports the right to protest. "I shall make sure that the Foreign Office has heard his [Dhese's] concerns and ask the relevant minister to get in touch with his office," she told the House.

On Monday, Brussels was under siege when over 900 tractors drove to the headquarters of the European Commission as agricultural ministers from EU countries met to discuss the crisis in the farming sector. Farmers set fire to piles of tyres, sprayed manure on police, jammed parts of the city, and destroyed and overran police barriers to demand action on cheap supermarket prices and free trade deals.

Riot police fired water cannons at protesters throwing bottles and eggs and doused the fires, which left a stench across the city.

Low food prices add to farmers' woes

Farmers in the UK are unhappy with low supermarket prices and cheap food imports from post-Brexit trade deals. Inspired by the French protests along with the others across the Channel, demonstrations, most notably from farmers in Wales and Southern England, have sprung up. They began with a go-slow protest that caused traffic jams around the Port of Dover but are planning for more French-style protests with tractors.

Andrew Gibson, a farmer from Kent, has been central in organising the protests and promised to have further protests, while calling for more support.

Speaking to The Quint, he said, "It needs to be a national effort because it's not all about us; it's about the entire industry which is on its knees. We are just getting hammered by the supermarkets, by the government, by post-Brexit trade deals, by imports of

cheap rubbish. We are getting it from everywhere."

Activists have appealed to the British public: "What we ask is that you consider why it is cheaper. How can food from the other side of the world be cheaper? What chemicals are being used that are banned in the UK?" When asked about the Indian farmers' protests, Gibson said he has been reading about it on social media and was "appalled" by the death and police action. A spokesperson of the National Farmers' Union (NFU), without specifically mentioning India said, "We share farmers' concerns and frustration."

MSP: A global issue

Issues surrounding European farmers are country-specific, but the common thread is EU farm policy and red tape.

Farmers are complaining of low prices and high costs, cheap imports and constraints from the EU's Green Deal initiative for climate change. They are urging the EU to cut red tape and drop some changes to its Common Agriculture Policy (CAP). Responding to the weeks of protests across Europe, the EU has weakened some parts of its flagship Green Deal environmental policies, scrapping a goal to cut farming emissions from its 2040 climate roadmap.

However, at the Brussels protest, Morgan Ody, General Coordinator of farming organisation La Via Campesina, called on the EU to set up Minimum Support Prices (MSP) and exit free trade agreements that enable cheaper foreign produce.

She has been quoted saying that for most farmers, "It's about income. It's about the fact that we are poor, and that we want to make a decent living."

Clearly, MSP is a global issue and farmers across countries are suffering and it is time they are heard. (Courtesy: The Quint)

The truth behind the government's claim that poverty has fallen to just 5%

By: Santosh Mehrotra and Rakesh Ranjan Kumar

After more than a decade, we finally have a Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2022-23 (HCES). The survey data was made public even though the media had earlier been told that the results of the HCES would be released only after the general elections.

Somewhere along the line, there appears to have been a last minute change of heart, evidenced by the publication of a 27-page factsheet before the election. While no reason for this has been provided, what is certain is that no sooner was the factsheet released than the narrative started to build about the government's success in ending poverty. The Niti Aayog stated that poverty had declined to less than 5% and applauded the government for achieving this feat.

It is prudent to understand that the 27-pager HCES [PDF] says nothing about the poverty decline in 2022-23 as compared to 2011-12. Rather it goes ahead and cautions readers about the change in methodology in the current HCES as compared to earlier ones. The factsheet lists various "Issues related to Comparability".

Given that HCES 2022-23 has undergone methodological changes, its results ought not to be compared with the previous Consumption Expenditure Survey (CES). In fact, the National Survey Organisation (NSO), which conducts these surveys, has personally informed one of the authors that the HCES is not comparable with the earlier CES.

Nevertheless, the Niti Aayog CEO, who also knows this surely, went ahead and compared the current survey with earlier ones in claiming poverty reduction. Bear in mind that the Niti Aayog has no current poverty line by — unlike the erstwhile Planning Commission — by which to measure the current level of poverty. Additionally, it would be curious to argue that consumption expenditure is rising when real wages have been stagnating in recent years; yet that is exactly what representatives of the government

have used HCES 2023 data to argue.

In HCES 2022-23, the sampling methodology has undergone significant change. Second stage stratum classification is now made on land for rural areas and car availability for urban areas, unlike the previous survey where the divisions were made based on household status and household activity for rural areas and monthly per-capita income for urban areas.

In a country where agricultural labourers outnumber cultivators, access to land remains limited let alone possessing land amongst the highest order as classified in the top two second-stage stratum.

For urban areas, households were classified based on the availability of four-wheeler cars, with a price of more than ₹ 10 Lakh, price less than ₹ 10 lakh and households without cars. In a country where 8% of households own a car, the urban second stratum will be among the wealthiest households.

Thus, there seems to be a higher representation of the well-off groups in the HCES 2022-23 sampling approach, thereby resulting in higher consumption expenditure.

The HCES 2022-23 factsheet lists various methodological changes as well. The number of items covered has increased from 347 to 405 items. Instead of a single questionnaire, HCES 2022-23 uses four separate questionnaires to be canvassed in three separate monthly visits in a quarter instead of the usual practice of a single visit. Therefore on account of methodological changes alone, the results of the current HCES are not strictly comparable with the 2011-12 CES or the earlier CES.

HCES 2022-23 states that the average monthly per-capita consumption expenditure (MPCE) at current prices has increased to ₹ 3,773 for rural households and ₹ 6,459 for urban households. These numbers have been used in order to claim that poverty in India has fallen to just 5%, even though the factsheet does not make any reference to poverty eradication, nor is there any poverty line given by the HCES. So how has this claim that poverty has fallen been made?

The 27-page factsheet is mostly based on ratios and

proportions.

There are no comparisons with real amounts. From the comparative perspective, a Consumer Price Index needs to be used to deflate current expenditure to arrive at real expenditure. In making comparisons over the years, there is a lack of data on real expenditure and quantity of consumption. Additionally, HCES 2022-23 takes into account the imputed value of social-welfare programmes, though the same was not undertaken for the earlier years.

With economic growth and progress, the share of food expenditure in total household expenditure is bound to come down. The current level of food expenditure in India — 46.38% (for rural households) and 39.17% (for urban households) — remains comparatively very high as compared to 6.4% for USA and 6.9% for Singapore, and thus cannot be taken as a sign of economic development.

Above all, how can poverty have fallen when job growth and real wages have come down? While from 2004-05 to 2011-12 there was an unmistakable and sustained rise in real wages, wages have stagnated between 2013 and 2017. Additionally, joblessness grew from 10 million in 2011-12 to nearly 38 million in 2022. Moreover, 190 million workers (2021-22) in India are earning just up to ₹ 100 per day (in real terms at 2010 prices) which can be categorised as absolute poor, as compared to just 106.1 million workers in 2011-12. There has been a massive surge in the number of poor workers in recent times. T

here are 144.0 million workers (2021-22) that are earning between ₹ 100 and ₹ 200 per day which can be categorised as poor and vulnerable. Additionally, there are still 127.5 million workers (2021-22) who earn between ₹ 200 and ₹ 300 per day, which can be categorised as non-poor but definitely vulnerable. The number of working poor and the decline in real wages indicate the need for interrogating labour market conditions in India, before jumping to the conclusion that India has been able to end poverty. The CES 2022-23 is being read to mean what cannot be found in it nor inferred from it either. (Courtesy: The Wire)

A roadmap for comprehensive socio-economic inclusion

By: Naghma Mulla

As is the case with multiple developing economies across the world, India is faced with wealth inequality, unemployment, existing and persisting gaps in healthcare infrastructure and delivery, and environmental concerns. The Global Multidimensional Poverty Index based on data from 2021/22 finds that 16.4% of India's population lives in poverty with 4.2% facing severe poverty.

The Regional Human Development Report 2024 by UNDP finds that the top 10% of the population controls 65% of the nation's total wealth, underlining stark wealth inequality. The consequences are multidimensional — it negatively impacts upward intergenerational mobility and lowers the rate of economic growth.

Lack of jobs has been an area of concern for the country for decades now. While the current unemployment rate for January 2024 is 6.8, unemployment amongst educated youth is concerning. The State of Working India 2023 by Azim Premji University reveals that over 42% of India's graduates under 25 were unemployed in 2021-22.

Marked by a distinct urban-rural divide, gaps in healthcare services and

infrastructure are a major obstacle for people in small towns and rural areas. A large part of India's population suffers from inaccessibility to quality healthcare — leading to delayed treatments and high out-of-pocket expenditure.

A United Nations report emphasises that approximately 75% of healthcare infrastructure, medical personnel, and other health resources are predominantly located in urban regions, home to merely 27% of the overall population.

The impact of climate change and disasters on both people and the economy has been devastating. India experienced uninsured losses of \$32.94 billion from natural disasters between 2018 and 2022. The ramifications of human loss are even more grave and are evident in the 55.9 million displacements from 237 disasters mapped between 2018 — 2022.

The interim budget addresses these issues in a big way.

It presents a comprehensive roadmap for national progress, meticulously designed to touch upon critical facets of development such as women empowerment, job creation, environmental conservation, and poverty alleviation. It aims to address the needs and aspirations of diverse social groups — 'Garib' (the poor), 'Mahilayen' (women), 'Yuva' (youth),

and 'Annadata' (farmers). This inclusion is notable as it envisages the significance of marginalised social groups in achieving a Viksit Bharat — a developed India by 2047 — marking a century of India's independence.

The budget prioritises support for the 'Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises' (MSME) sector with necessary finances, technologies, and training to enhance global competitiveness. The rooftop solarization policy is set to offer employment and entrepreneurial opportunities in technical and supply sectors.

Additionally, the establishment of a separate Department for Fisheries and the expansion of the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY) underscore efforts to double production and exports in the fisheries sector, aiming to create 55 lakh new jobs and drive inclusive economic progress.

A significant step is the focus on provisions for the inclusion of low-income groups and women. Initiatives like the disbursement of 30 crore Mudra Yojana loans to women entrepreneurs and financial support to 78 lakh street vendors under PM-SVANidhi emphasise the government's focus on enhancing workforce participation and providing earning avenues that drive upward mobility.

The SHG model of development

has also proved to be successful — enabling nearly 10 million women to achieve annual incomes of over INR 1 lakh. Capitalising on this success, the goal has been expanded to elevate the target from 2 crore to 3 crore 'lakhpati didis', showcasing a commitment to women's economic empowerment. The budget made notable health sector announcements. The focus on preventive healthcare through the provision of cervical cancer vaccinations for young girls and the integration of various maternal and child health schemes indicate a push towards addressing the specific health needs of vulnerable groups.

The expansion of the Ayushman Bharat scheme to extend healthcare benefits to approximately 1.5 million AASHA workers and Anganwadi workers acknowledges the crucial contribution of these frontline health workers to primary healthcare services. Leverage existing hospital structures for the establishment of more medical colleges, addresses both — the healthcare professional shortage and the surging demand for medical education. This builds on the initiative from April 2023, when the government approved the establishment of 157 nursing colleges, allocating INR 1,570 crore, with the central government contributing INR 1,016 crore. (Courtesy: The Pioneer)

The warning came in a state-of-the-nation address ahead of next month's election

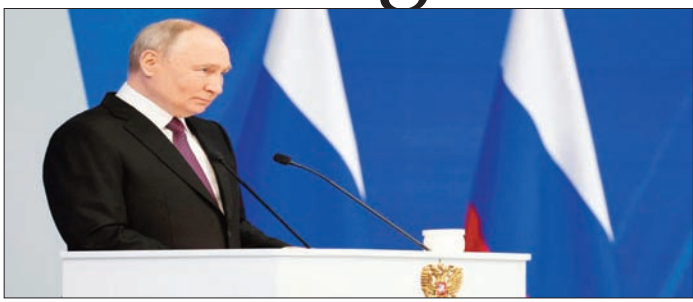
Putin warns that sending Western troops to Ukraine risks a global nuclear conflict

MOSCOW, Feb 29: Russian President Vladimir Putin vowed on Thursday to fulfill Moscow's goals in Ukraine and sternly warned the West against deeper involvement in the fighting, saying that such a move is fraught with the risk of a global nuclear conflict.

Putin's warning came in a state-of-the-nation address ahead of next month's election he's all but certain to win, underlining his readiness to protect Russian gains in Ukraine.

In an apparent reference to French President Emmanuel Macron's statement earlier this week that the future deployment of Western ground troops to Ukraine should not be "ruled out", Putin warned that it would lead to "tragic" consequences for the countries who decide to do that.

Putin noted that while accusing Russia of plans to attack NATO allies in Europe, Western allies were "selecting targets for striking our territory and selecting the most efficient as they think striking assets and talking about the



possibility of sending a NATO contingent to Ukraine."

"We remember the fate of those who sent their troop contingents to the territory of our country," the Russian leader said. "Now the consequences for the potential invaders will be far more tragic."

Speaking before an audience of lawmakers and top officials, Putin said the West should keep in mind that "we also have the weapons that can strike targets on their territory, and what they are now suggesting and scaring the world with, all that raises the real threat of a nuclear conflict that will mean the destruction of our civilization."

"Don't they understand it?" he said, alleging that Western leaders are playing with options of deeper involvement in the conflict, as in a simulation. "Those people haven't been through any tough challenges and they have forgotten what war means."

Putin emphasized that Russia's nuclear forces are in "full readiness," saying that the military has deployed potent new weapons, some of them tested on the battlefield in Ukraine.

The Kremlin leader said they include the new Sarmat heavy intercontinental ballistic missile that has entered service with Russian nuclear forces, along with the Burevstnik atomic-powered cruise

missile and the Poseidon atomic-powered, nuclear-armed drone, which are completing their tests.

At the same time, he rejected Western leaders' statements about the threat of a Russian attack on NATO allies in Europe as "ravings" and again dismissed Washington's claim that Moscow was pondering the deployment of space-based nuclear weapons.

In his speech that focused heavily on economic and social issues ahead of the March 15-17 presidential vote, Putin argued that Russia was "defending its sovereignty and security and protecting our compatriots" in Ukraine, charging that the Russian forces have the upper hand in the fighting.

He hailed Russian soldiers and honored those who were killed in fighting with a moment of silence.

Putin has repeatedly said that he sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022 to protect Russian interests and prevent Ukraine from posing a major security threat to Russia by joining NATO. Kyiv and its allies have denounced it as an unprovoked act

of aggression.

The Russian leader has repeatedly signaled a desire to negotiate an end to the fighting but warned that Russia will hold onto its gains.

Putin, 71, who is running as an independent candidate in the March 15-17 presidential election, relies on the tight control over Russia's political system that he has established during 24 years in power.

Prominent critics who could challenge him have either been imprisoned or are living abroad, while most independent media have been banned, meaning that Putin's reelection is all but assured. He faces taken opposition from three other candidates nominated by Kremlin-friendly parties represented in parliament.

Russia's best-known opposition leader Alexei Navalny, whose attempt to run against Putin in 2018 was rejected, died suddenly in an Arctic prison colony earlier this month, while serving a 19-year sentence on extremism charges. Navalny's funeral is set for Friday. (AP)

Strike on Palestinians waiting for aid kills 70, Gaza officials say, taking war's toll past 30,000

RAFAH, Feb 29: At least 70 people were killed in a strike early on Thursday on a crowd of Palestinians waiting for humanitarian aid in Gaza City, bringing the total number killed since the start of the Israel-Hamas war to more than 30,000, Gaza's Health Ministry said.

Gaza City and the rest of northern Gaza were the first targets of Israel's air, sea and ground offensive launched in response to Hamas' October 7 attack. The area has suffered widespread devastation and has been largely isolated from the rest of the territory for months, with little aid entering.

Aid groups say it has become nearly impossible to deliver humanitarian assistance in most of Gaza, in part because of the crowds of desperate people who overwhelm aid convoys. The UN says a quarter of Gaza's 2.3 million Palestinians face starvation.

Health Ministry spokesman Ashraf al-Qidra said another 280 people were wounded in Thursday's strike. Fares Afana, the head of the ambulance service at the Kamal Adwan Hospital, said medics arriving at the scene found

"dozens or hundreds" lying on the ground. He said there were not enough ambulances to collect all the dead and wounded and that some were being brought to hospitals on donkey carts.

The Israeli military said it was looking into the reports. The Health Ministry said the Palestinian death toll from the war has climbed to 30,035, with another 70,457 wounded. It does not differentiate between civilians and combatants in its figures but says women and children make up around two-thirds of those killed.

The ministry, which is part of the Hamas-run government, maintains detailed records of casualties. Its counts from previous wars have largely matched those of the UN, independent experts and even Israel's own tallies.

The Hamas attack into southern Israel that ignited the war killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and the militants seized around 250 hostages. Hamas is still holding around 130 hostages, a quarter of whom are believed to be dead, after releasing most of the others during a weeklong cease-fire in November. (AP)

Sunak says the UK is descending into mob rule; Critics accuse him of undermining protest rights

LONDON, Feb 29: Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said Britain is descending into "mob rule" because of the pressures created by protests against the Israel-Hamas war — words criticized as alarmist by a human rights group. Sunak told a meeting of police leaders on Wednesday that there was a "pattern of increasingly violent and intimidatory behaviour" that's intended to "shout down free debate and stop elected representatives doing their job."

"There is a growing consensus that mob rule is replacing democratic rule," he said, according to a transcript released by the prime minister's office. "And we've got to collectively, all of us, change that urgently."

Tom Southerden of Amnesty International said Thursday that talk of mob rule "wildly exaggerates the issue and risks delegitimizing the rights of peaceful protest."

Mass protests have drawn hundreds of thousands of people to central London almost weekly to call for a cease-fire in a conflict that has killed close to 30,000 Palestinians, according to the Gaza Health Ministry in the Hamas-run territory. Israel says Hamas killed 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians, and abducted roughly 250, in the Oct. 7 attack.

The protests have been overwhelmingly peaceful, though there have been dozens of arrests over signs and chants allegedly supporting Hamas, a banned organization in Britain. Jewish organizations and many lawmakers say the mass marches have created an intimidating atmosphere for Jewish Londoners — though members of the Jewish community have been among those on



pro-peace-fire marches. Divisions over the conflict in Gaza have convulsed British politics, with some lawmakers saying they fear for their safety after receiving threats over their positions on the war. Reports of both antisemitic and anti-Muslim abuse in Britain have soared since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel, which triggered Israel's invasion of Gaza.

A debate last week in the House of Commons on whether to call for a cease-fire descended into chaos amid allegations the speaker of the house had bent parliamentary rules in response to pressure from pro-Palestinian activists. During the debate, protesters projected "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" — a slogan some see as calling for the destruction of Israel — onto Parliament's Big Ben clocktower.

On Saturday, Sunak suspended Conservative lawmaker Lee Anderson from the party for saying London Mayor Sadiq Khan, who is Muslim, was controlled by Islamists and had allowed them to take charge of the city.

Pro-Palestinian demonstrators protested at the house of a Conservative lawmaker earlier this month, while environmental activists have targeted Sunak's family home in northern England.

The prime minister met police chiefs after announcing a 31-million-pound (\$40-million) fund to step up security for lawmakers after politicians reported threats and intimidation connected to the war. At Wednesday's meeting, the government told police chiefs that protests at politicians' homes "should generally be considered to be intimidatory."

Sunak told officers to take a "robust approach ... to protect our democratic processes from intimidation, disruption, from subversion."

The debate comes after several years of increasingly stringent restrictions on peaceful protest by the Conservative government. It has passed new laws to clamp down on broadly defined "public nuisance," punishable by up to 10 years in prison, and giving police more powers to restrict protests judged to be disruptive. Hundreds of environmental activists have been arrested and sometimes jailed for blocking roads and other nonviolent acts. "Freedom of expression and assembly are absolutely fundamental rights in any free and fair society," said Southerden, law and human rights director at Amnesty U.K.

"The U.K. has undergone a major crackdown on protest rights in recent years, with peaceful protest tactics being criminalized and the police being given sweeping powers to prevent protests taking place," he said. (AP)

Three time former PM Nawaz Sharif takes oath as ordinary lawmaker

ISLAMABAD, Feb 29: Three-time former prime minister Nawaz Sharif on Thursday took oath as an ordinary lawmaker in the 16th session of Pakistan's National Assembly, days after giving up his bid to lead the country for a record fourth time.

A quirk of fate following the poor show in the electoral battle led Nawaz, 74, the supreme of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party to abandon his claim to the prime minister's position to his younger brother Shehbaz, 72.

Sharif is back in Parliament after seven long years. His terms as the prime minister include the first from 1990-1993, then 1997-1999, and the last from 2013-2017, none of them for a complete five years.

Amid sloganeering, Nawaz Sharif took oath along with his brother Shehbaz. "Historic visuals from the 16th National Assembly oath-taking ceremony!" the PML-N X handle posted along with a hashtag #MeraQuaid-PhirSeAya and a 1:18 minute video.

The video showed the smiling elder Sharif entering the Parliament, then walking towards the many members of his party and shaking hands, with all the while a party song that said "Sher Aaya" (Lion Nawaz Sharif has come) playing in the background.

As per the Constitution, a party must win 133 out of 265 contested

seats in the 266-member National Assembly to form a government.

Independent candidates — a majority backed by 71-year-old jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party — won 93 National Assembly seats. The PML-N won 75 seats while the PPP came third with 54 seats. The Muttahida Quami Movement Pakistan (MQM-P) has 17 seats.

That left PML-N and PPP to ally along with four smaller parties to keep Khan's PTI out of power. As part of the arrangement, instead of Nawaz, it was Shehbaz who was to don the premier's hat, a deal said to have the backing of the powerful military.

The nomination of Shehbaz Sharif as the next prime minister by Nawaz Sharif, who himself was eyeing the plum post for a record fourth time, had surprised many within and outside the party.

However, the PML-N leaders and Nawaz Sharif's daughter Mariam Nawaz, have reiterated that Nawaz Sharif is not quitting politics and he would continue to guide the party.

Ironically, a pinned post from the President PMLN's X handle still reads: "The President of PMLN Shehbaz Sharif, during the news conference, reaffirmed that Quaid PML-N Nawaz Sharif will become the Prime Minister." (PTI)

I2U2 continues to be priority for Biden administration: WH

WASHINGTON, Feb 29: The grouping of India, Israel, the UAE and the US continues to be a priority for the Biden administration and is not on the back-burner due to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, the White House has said, underlining that the President is "deeply committed" to making sure that the I2U2 initiatives make progress.

The I2U2 grouping was conceptualized during the meeting of the foreign ministers of the four countries held on October 18, 2021. The I2U2's first summit was held on July 14, 2022, to establish the group.

The grouping remains critically important, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters at the White House here on Wednesday.

Asked if the grouping is now on the back-burner or no longer active because of the Israel-Hamas conflict, the official said, "No, not at all, still a priority."

"The I2U2 remains critically important and the president is deeply committed to making sure that we continue with the I2U2, obviously with our partnership among our four countries and beyond through innovative, inclusive and science-based solutions to advance... let's not forget, enhance food and energy security space operations and other ventures, advancing projects on water conservation, waste management and other areas," Jean-Pierre said.

So, there is a strong future for the I2U2 and "we're looking forward to continuing that partnership" and it has not taken on the back-burner, the White House official said. "It certainly continues to be a priority," Jean-Pierre said.

This grouping identifies bankable projects and initiatives to tackle some of the biggest challenges confronting the world, with a particular focus on joint investments and new initiatives in water, energy, transportation, space, health, food security, and technology.

It also aims to mobilize private sector capital and expertise to achieve a variety of goals, including modernising infrastructure, advancing low-carbon development pathways, and improving public health.

I2U2 partnership projects and initiatives are not limited in geographic scope — the group will explore opportunities anywhere it can make a positive impact, the State Department said.

The formation of the grouping, known as "I2U2" with "I" standing for India and Israel and "U" for the US and the UAE, is largely seen as a strategic attempt by the United States to check China's increasing influence in Asia and the Middle East. (PTI)

Kishida vows no more fundraising parties at Parl's ethics hearing over a funds scandal

TOKYO, Feb 29: Japan's beleaguered prime minister renewed his apology over his governing party's corruption scandal, promising to not hold any more parties himself as leader during a political ethics committee on Thursday.

Fumio Kishida has fought against plummeting support ratings since his governing party's corruption scandal rocked the government. The scandal, considered the biggest in decades, centres on political funds raised through party event tickets bought by individuals, companies and organisations. It led to 10 people — lawmakers and their aides — being indicted in January.

While Kishida himself is not the focus of the scandal and was not even invited to the hearing, the surprise announcement of his personal appearance broke a deadlock between the opposition lawmakers and his governing party Wednesday when the five implicated attendees refused to go public, holding up a hearing. Kishida expressed a "sense of crisis" that the deadlock on the hearing would further deepen the public's distrust in politics.

The ruling Liberal Democratic Party's resistance to have a fully open session fuelled public criticism that Kishida's party is taking the corruption lightly and trying to hide something. Kishida's action could help ease criticisms that he was too slow and lax in addressing the public's distrust and taking anti-corruption measures.

In his opening statement, Kishida renewed his apology for triggering public distrust in politics, and promised to take leadership in reforming his party, saying seniority-based tradition, lack of compliance and a sense of privilege among lawmakers need to be removed if they were part of the problem.

Kishida said he volunteered to appear at the hearing to provide an explanation as head of the LDP. But he brushed off

questions from opposition lawmakers seeking further details about the fundraising problems, such as when and how they began. Kishida said the governing party's internal probe focused on preventive measures instead of digging deeper into details of the wrongdoings.

Former Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, now an executive of main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, criticised Kishida for holding a number of his own fundraising parties. Kishida in turn promised not to hold any more of what he called "benkyo-kai," or study meetings, during his leadership.

Asked about his own faction's accounting irregularity, which had to be corrected, and its prior status, he said documents were lost and details were unknown. Kishida doesn't have to call a parliamentary election until 2025, but his party has set a leadership vote for September.

The ethics committee is tasked with determining whether a lawmaker violated political ethics standards and should be held responsible, but critics say it's largely a show and any serious investigative role is not expected. Its hearings can be held in a closed meeting, but all but nine of its previous hearings were held publicly.

More than 80 LDP lawmakers, most of them belonging to a faction previously led by assassinated former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, acknowledged not reporting funds in possible violation of the Political Funds Control Law. The money was alleged to have gone into unmonitored slush funds in the systematic long-term practice.

Kishida removed a number of ministers from his Cabinet and others from party executive posts, while some stepped down in the scandal, though support ratings for his government dwindled to around 20%. (AP)



SL signs security pact with US to prevent illicit maritime trafficking

COLOMBO, Feb 29: Sri Lanka has signed a nuclear security pact with the United States to detect and interdict illicit trafficking in special nuclear material and other radioactive material, as part of the efforts to address the growing global security threats.

The Sri Lankan Navy signed the Memorandum of Understanding with the US National Nuclear Security Administration at the Navy headquarters here on Wednesday. The MoU was signed in the presence of the US Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Julie Chung and the Commander of the Sri Lanka Navy, Vice Admiral Priyantha Perera, according to media reports on Thursday.

"The U.S.-Sri Lanka partnership in addressing global security threats

is ever-growing," Ambassador Chung posted on X. The new MOU between the Sri Lanka Navy and the U.S. Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration will "bolster our joint efforts to prevent illicit maritime trafficking in nuclear and radioactive material," she wrote.

The MoU addressed bilateral cooperation to detect and interdict illicit trafficking in special nuclear material and other radioactive material through technical and methodological cooperation, including the installation and improvement of technical systems for the detection and identification of such material at border crossing control points of Sri Lanka, media reports said. (PTI)

Russian rocket successfully puts Iranian satellite into orbit

MOSCOW, Feb 29: A Russian rocket on Thursday successfully put an Iranian satellite into orbit, a launch that underscored increasingly close cooperation between Moscow and Tehran.

Russia's state-run Roscosmos Corporation said that a Soyuz rocket blasted off from the Vostochny launch facility in the country's far east to carry the Iranian satellite and 18 Russian satellites into orbit. The Iranian state TV said the 110-kg (242-pound) satellite has three cameras to take images for environmental, agricultural and other purposes.

Iran's state TV said the satellite will be put into orbit around the North and South Poles, synchronised to be in the same fixed position relative to the Sun, and will be fully functional after a calibration of its systems. Thursday's launch comes after Russia put into orbit the Iranian Khayyam satellite in 2022.

Iran's Communication Minister Isa Zarepour told the TV that Iran's space programme has had a total of 23 launches, including 12 during President Ebrahim Raisi's administration. (AP)

Imran Khan writes to IMF, urges Feb 8 polls 'audit' before any bailout talks with Pak govt

ISLAMABAD, Feb 29: Pakistan's jailed former prime minister Imran Khan has written to the IMF, urging it to conduct an "audit" of at least 30 per cent of the national and provincial assembly seats to unearth the brazen "intervention and fraud" during the elections before considering any further bailout talks with the cash-strapped country.

The 71-year-old Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party founder had announced last week that he would ask the Washington-based International Monetary Fund (IMF) to avoid any assistance as the authorities rigged the electoral outcome to keep his party out of power.

His nominated chairman of the party, Gohar Ali Khan, addressing a press conference with party secretary General Omar Ayub Khan, on Wednesday confirmed the letter but he refused to share its content.

The Press Trust of India has seen a letter addressed to IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva by party spokesperson Raouf Hasan under the guidance of



Khan. It begins with a clarification that the party was not against the IMF facility to Pakistan.

"It must be clarified that the very outset that the PTI does not wish to stand in the way of any IMF facility to the state of Pakistan that promotes the immediate as well as the long-term economic well-being of the country," the letter read.

But it added that the IMF facility should be linked with conditions. The letter alleged that the February 8 general elections — which it said caused the public expenditure of Rs 50 billion or USD 180 million — were "subjected to widespread interven-

tion and fraud in the counting of votes and compilation of results". "This intervention and fraud have been so brazen that the IMF's most important member countries, including the US, Britain, and countries forming part of the European Union, have called for a full and transparent investigation into the matter," the party said.

"We, therefore, call upon the IMF to give effect to the guidelines adopted by it with respect to good governance as well as conditionalities that must be satisfied prior to the grant of a finance facility that is to burden the people of Pakistan with further debt."

"An audit of at least thirty per cent of the national and provincial assemblies' seats should be ensured, which can be accomplished in merely two weeks," the party demanded. It also said that PTI was not calling for the IMF to adopt the role of an investigative agency itself, and suggested that two indigenous organisations, including the Free and Fair Election Network (FaFen) and PATTAN-Coalition38, had the

proposed comprehensive methodologies to conduct the election audit.

"Such a role by the IMF would be a great service to Pakistan and its people, and could become the harbinger of enduring prosperity, growth, and macroeconomic stability in the country," the letter concluded.

Meanwhile, the United States has urged Pakistan to "continue working with the IMF and other international financial institutions towards macroeconomic reforms" for economic stability in the country.

"As the US knows, Pakistan needs \$2 billion alone in March to be able to avoid economic breakdown. How do you see this effort on PFI's part to be contacting IMF and also talking about election rigging?" a reporter asked US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller during a press conference on Wednesday.

Miller replied, "I'll just say with respect to the IMF that we support Pakistan's efforts to break free from the vicious cycle of debt and international financing." (PTI)

Manipur police warns action against radical group

Deploying of army, central forces to be enhanced with radical groups targeting Manipur police

IMPHAL, Feb 29: The Manipur police on Thursday announced toughening of its stand against radical Meitei group Arambai Tengol (AT) and other anti-social groups, who indulge in crimes like attacks and extortion saying the need for deploying army and other central forces will have to be enhanced after the attack on a state police officer.

In a hard-hitting statement, the Manipur police also said it is a neutral force and does not act against any community or in favour of one and it remains ever committed to guard and protect the lives and properties of public. The public must not be misled and cooperate with the Manipur police in bringing back peace and tranquility to the state, it said.

"Combing operations will continue in the days to come and no one responsible for such criminal activities will be spared. With Manipur police being targeted, the need for calling in army and other central forces will have to be enhanced," the statement said.

The statement came in the wake of the attack on Manipur police additional superintendent of police, Moirangthem Amit Singh allegedly by AT members two days ago.

The Manipur police said all personnel of the force from top to bottom are united and any attack on anyone and use of social media to target any officer or unit will be taken seriously and stringent action will be taken. An extensive area domination and combing operations by police and other security forces continued in different parts of Manipur as police sought cooperation of the public in bringing peace and tranquility back to the violence-hit state.

The area domination and combing operations came hours after more than 1,000 Manipur police commandos took a stand on Wednesday by laying down their arms in response to Tuesday's attack on ASP Kumar.

An extensive area domination drive by combined forces led by superintendents of police was conducted in five valley districts -- Imphal West, Imphal East, Bishnupur, Thoubal and Kakching - Wednesday night, a police spokesman said.

He said combing operations will continue in the days to come and no one responsible for "criminal activities" will be spared.

The Manipur police also requested the public to refrain from rumour mongering and circulating fake news.

Condemning the attack on the life of ASP Kumar and other police officers by members of the AT, the spokesman said the family members of the officer were also intimidated by the assailants by firing bullets, besides vandalising houses and properties.

The officer was also abducted, beaten and later released after timely intervention by the department, he said, adding in connection with this incident numerous concocted narratives are being circulated on various platforms, including social media, leading



to character assassination of the officer and the police department as a whole.

"In this regard, it is important for right-thinking people to understand the origin of the event(s) which have led to this unprecedented and unprovoked incident. It is to be informed that on February 27 (afternoon) information was received about the stealing/snatching of two cars, by some unknown armed miscreants from government oil depot, located at North AOC.

"Based on this information, the officers - Kumar, Inspector P Achouba Meitei and other teams -- had conducted a search and intercepted the two vehicles which were stolen. One individual, who had been involved in the crime, was also arrested.

"Later, in this connection a case was registered at the Imphal Police Station under various sections of IPC and Arms Act," the spokesman said.

The spokesman said the members of AT had carried out targeted attack on the officers as well as attacked the house and properties of the ASP who along with his team have been working tirelessly and contributing to the efforts to ensure law and order in the state, especially Imphal West District.

Besides, the AT is engaging in many anti-social activities like assaulting civilians, snatching of vehicles from public and government officials, indulging in extortion from the common public and businessmen.

"They are garnering false support from the public in the garb of protecting the public, but they are committing many anti-social activities and criminal acts. Public must not be misled and should cooperate with Manipur police in bringing back peace and tranquility back to the state," the spokesman said.

The state has witnessed escalating violence since May 3, 2023 with 219 casualties reported after a "Tribal Solidarity March" in the hill districts was taken out to protest against the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status.

The Meiteis, constitute around 53 per cent of Manipur's population and reside predominantly in the Imphal Valley, while the tribals, including Nagas and Kukis, who make up 40 per cent and primarily inhabit the hill districts. (PTI)

Manipur govt seeks Assam Rifles' help to maintain peace in violence-hit districts

IMPHAL, Feb 29: The Manipur government has sought Assam Rifles' assistance to maintain peace and restore public confidence in six violence-hit districts.

An order issued by the Imphal West district magistrate on Thursday highlighted the reports of significant breaches of law and order, notably instances of mob violence.

"The situation has gone beyond the control of the district administration and police," the order said, adding that the services of Assam Rifles have been requisitioned in different parts of the district from February 29 till March 5.

This follows recent events, including a torchlight rally on Wednesday night by thousands of women in Imphal West demanding the termination of the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement between the central government and Kuki militant groups.

On February 27, around 200 armed men vandalised

and fired upon the residence of additional ASP, M Amit Singh at Wangkhei in Imphal East district, leading to Singh's abduction and subsequent rescue by security forces. (PTI)

Mizoram registers 13.5 % GSDP growth in FY 2022-23



AIZWAL, Feb 29: Mizoram has registered a 13.5 per cent gross state domestic product (GSDP) growth in the 2022-23 financial year, according to an economic survey.

The Mizoram Economic Survey 2023-24 also stated that the service sector continued to drive the state's economy, contributing to over 45 per cent of the gross state value added (GSVA) in the 2022-23 fiscal.

The economic survey, presented by chief minister Lalduhoma in the assembly on Thursday, said that the state's economy grew over the years, barring the pandemic period.

The GSDP at constant prices (2011-12), which is the true indicator of growth without being influenced by factors such as inflation, is expected to grow to ₹ 21,000.56 crore in the 2022-23 fiscal against the estimate of ₹ 18,493.72 crore for the 2021-

2022 fiscal, registering a growth of about 13.55 per cent over the previous year, the survey stated.

Whereas the GSDP at current prices registered an increase of 17.99 per cent over the previous year, it said.

The GSDP at current prices is estimated to be at ₹ 32,829.46 crore in 2022-23 as against ₹ 27,823.50 crore in 2021-22.

The GSVA at constant (2011-12) prices has clocked 10.43 per cent average annual growth during financial years 2011-2012 to 2022-23, peaking at 14.32 per cent in 2014-15, the survey said.

The service sector contributed the lion's share of the GSVA at 45.70 per cent in 2022-23 against 50 per cent in 2021-22.

"The remarkable contribution of the tertiary or service sector, constituting a share of about 45.70 per cent of the total GSVA, indicates that this sector drives the

economy of Mizoram," the economic survey said.

Major contributors in the service sector are public administration, trade and commerce, education and health sectors.

The contribution of industry to the GSVA has increased to 34.15 per cent in 2022-23 from 25.09 per cent in the 2021-22 financial year.

Whereas, the contribution of the primary sector comprising of agriculture and allied activities, has declined to 20.15 per cent in 2022-23 from 25.23 per cent in 2021-22.

With more than half of the state's population deriving the greater part of their income from agriculture, faster growth in the primary sector is necessary to increase their income and rising income in agriculture will also be an impetus to non-agricultural income in rural areas, thus helping redress the rural-urban imbalance, the economic survey stated.

Recently, horticulture and floriculture have gained momentum and shown marked improvement in their production, it said. The share of agriculture, forestry and fishing in the GSVA has seen a steady increase over the years from 20.12 per cent in 2011-12 to 25.93 per cent in 2020-21 and a slight decline thereafter.

The share of crops and fisheries in the GSVA has shown a steady decline from 10.21 per cent and 0.65 per cent in 2011-12 to 6.35 per cent and 0.25 per cent in 2022-23 respectively.

Whereas, the share of livestock in the GSVA, which was 4.08 per cent in 2011-12, declined to 1.77 per cent in 2022-23.

According to the economic survey, the state's per capita income for the fiscal 2022-23 is projected at ₹ 2,32,126 as against the previous year's estimate of ₹ 1,98,961.92. (PTI)

MHRC directs SP to submit report on assault on HYC president



SHILLONG, Feb 29: The Meghalaya Human Rights Commission (MHRC) has directed the East Khasi Hills superintendent of police (SP) to submit a detailed report into the alleged assault on president of the Hynniewtrep Youth Council (HYC), Riwar Mihngi circle by the second officer in-charge of Pynursla Police Station within fifteen days.

A statement issued by the MHRC secretary on Thursday said, "Notice has been issued to the superintendent of police, East Khasi Hills district, Meghalaya, to submit a detailed report to the Commission within 15 days."

The MHRC has taken cognizance of the complaint filed by the HYC central body president and the secretary. On February 26, the HYC in its complaint filed with MHRC had sought action against the second officer in-charge of the Pynursla Police station for allegedly assaulting its members, who wanted to file a complaint against illegal smuggling of buffalo to Bangladesh.

A complaint was also lodged with the SP of East Khasi Hills district.

HYC president Roy Kupar Synrem said, "We demand that George Dkhar be prosecuted as per law and to be investigated for his bad and illegal action. We also demand that immediate action be taken against him by putting him under suspension during the course of investigation."

Synrem said that six members of the 'HYC Riwar Mihngi circle (Pynursla sub-division) under the leadership of its president Lamphrang Khonglam apprehended two trucks, which were carrying buffaloes meant for illegally transporting to Bangladesh.

After apprehending these trucks, they took them to Pynursla Police Station with the intention of filing a complaint and to urge the police department to take necessary action as per law.

"The police personnel on duty on being led by George Dkhar instead of hearing the complaint of our members and registering the complaint, started abusing them.

They dragged Lamphrang Khonglam inside the police station and physically assaulting him, thereby injuring him.

Dkhar also assaulted the other members of our organisation and threatened them with dire consequences for their act of apprehending these vehicles.

They were lathi-charged and all their belongings were taken away from them," he alleged in the letter. (N/N)

Gauhati HC Kohima bench launches online RTI portal

Indian citizens can now file RTI application, first appeal online through newly launched portal, fee payment goes online

HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, Feb 29: In a first in Nagaland, the Kohima bench of the Gauhati High Court on Thursday launched its online Right to Information (RTI) portal to ensure transparency and efficiency in the court.

The RTI portal was formally launched by Justice Devashis Baruah, judge of the Gauhati High Court and the information and communication technology in-charge of the Kohima bench, in the presence of Justice Sushmita Phukan Khaund, judge of the high court and officials of the High Court Registry.

To mark the event, Justice Baruah symbolically filed the first online paperless e-RTI application at the Kohima bench through the dedicated web portal.

Section 6 (1) of the Right to Information Act, 2005, stipulates that an information seeker has a statutory right to move an application through electronic means.

So far, the RTI applications can be filed only through the physical mode.

The online RTI portal has been initiated to make it convenient for people to access information about the Gauhati High Court and its outlying benches.

Through the web portal, Indian citizens can now file their RTI application and first appeal online. Fee payment can be made online via Internet banking or UPI.

To access the online RTI portal, citizens can simply click on the dedicated 'RTI' tab available on the official website of the Gauhati High Court, Kohima bench.

The web portal has a user-friendly interface and operates on an end-to-end paperless mode.

The online RTI facility will be scaled up to all district courts of Nagaland in the near future.

Nagaland Assembly passes 3 bills

Nagaland Assembly passes bills on enhancement of legislators' salaries and allowances, GST, supplementary demand for grants

KOHIMA, Feb 29: The Nagaland Assembly on Thursday unanimously passed two bills, one regarding enhancing of salaries and allowances of legislators and the other on goods and services tax.

The Nagaland salaries, allowances and other facilities of the chief minister, speaker, deputy chief minister/ministers, leader of opposition, deputy speaker and other members of the Nagaland legislative assembly and pension for ex-members (Sixth Amendment) Bill, 2024 was introduced by the state minister for parliamentary affairs, K G Kenye.

The Nagaland Goods and Services Tax (Seventh Amendment) Bill, 2024 was introduced by chief minister Neiphiu Rio.

Both bills were introduced on Tuesday in the House.

In the statement of object, Kenye said the salaries are revisable as per section 8 of the bill and as recommended by the House Committee of the NLA.

The House committee with the speaker as the chairman in its meeting on August 17, 2023, had recommended revision of the Nagaland salaries, allowances and other facilities of the chief minister, speaker, deputy chief minister/ministers, leader of opposition, deputy speaker and other members of the Nagaland legislative

assembly and pension for ex-members (Sixth Amendment) Bill, 2024.

On the financial implication, he said on account of the increase in salaries, allowances and other facilities the total amount to be spent is ₹ 1701.51 lakhs per year.

The Nagaland Goods and Services Tax (Eight Amendment) Bill, 2023 will make the Nagaland Goods and Services Tax Act, 2017 more comprehensive and trade-friendly, Rio said.

Speaker Shringain Longkumer while announcing that no amendments or clarifications were sought by any of the members put both the bills to vote and the House unanimously passed by voice vote.

On the other hand, the bill related to the supplementary demand for grants for the year 2023-2024 was introduced by chief minister Neiphiu, who also holds the Finance portfolio.

It authorizes the state government to authorise payment and appropriation of Rs 3308,90,27,000 from and out of the Consolidated Fund of the State of Nagaland to the services of the year ending on March 31, 2024.

Rio introduced the Bill after the House unanimously passed the demand for grants, after which Shringain Longkumer put the bill to vote and members passed it by voice vote. (PTI)

No. Ecf No.443702/1

Notice for walk in interview under Directorate of Higher Education, Assam

It is for information of all willing candidates that a walk-in-interview will be held for engagement of a legal consultant on contractual basis, as per schedule mentioned below:

Sl No.	Name of the position	No. of position	Date for walk in interview	Reporting time
1	Legal Consultant	1	07-03-2024	9:00 AM

Venue: Directorate of Higher Education, Assam, Kahilipara, Guwahati-19.

The candidates must bring with them a duly filled application form along with a set of self-attested copies of all the relevant documents/ certificates. The candidates must also bring with them all the relevant original documents/ certificates for necessary verification at the time of the walk in interview.

The detailed advertisement regarding qualification, experience, age etc. along with other terms and conditions may be downloaded from the office website of Directorate of Higher Education (<https://directorateofhighereducation.assam.gov.in/>).

Sd/-

Director of Higher Education, Assam, Kahilipara, Guwahati- 19

Janasanyog/D/18554/23/1-Mar-24

ENGAGEMENT UNDER SAMAGRA SHIKSHA AXOM

SSA-17044/1/2022-Establishment-SSA/1/462198/2024

The Samagra Shiksha, Axom invites online applications from Indian Citizens (as defined in Articles 5 to 8 of the Constitution of India) for the under mentioned positions under Samagra Shiksha, Axom on contractual basis. The online applications will be received from **01.03.2024 to 10.03.2024**. The posts are temporary in nature and the selected candidates will be initially engaged for a period of 11 (eleven) months only. The contractual engagement will neither be regularized under Samagra Shiksha, Axom nor will be absorbed under any job/programme of Government of Assam in future and no person (s) so engaged shall have any right (s) to claim for permanent abolition in any post (s) in the government or in the Samagra Shiksha, Assam.

Age for categories of post: The candidate should not be less than 18 years of age and not more than 62 years of age as on 01-01-2024. The age limit of the candidates will be calculated on the basis of the Matriculation/HSLC Admit Card or Pass Certificate issued by a recognized Board/ Council and no other document shall be accepted in lieu of the mentioned documents.

Sl No	Name of the Post	Essential Qualification and Experience	Pay in Pay Band in Rs.	Grade Pay in Rs.	No. of Post	Place
1	District Project Engineer	• BE (Civil) in Engineering /equivalent qualification having 10 years experience in the Government department/ Govt. Undertaking as Assistant Engineer.	30000/- 110000/-	12700/-	8	District Mission Offices
2	Finance & Accounts Officer	• Graduate in Commerce with minimum 05 years of relevant experience under Government/ Semi Government/ Government Bodies/ PSUs/ Large Private Institute/ organization.	22000/- 87000/-	11500/-	2	District Mission Offices

N.B:-

- The link of the recruitment portal will be available in the Samagra Shiksha website <https://ssa.assam.gov.in>
- Read the User Guidelines carefully which is available on the recruitment portal on how to submit the online application form.
- Claims for any correction will not be entertained after submitting the online registration and online application.
- Before filling the on-line application, applicant has to go through the User Guidelines for online registration and online application.
- Candidate must upload all the supporting document of education qualification, experience etc. in the portal. Non submission of supporting document will be summarily rejected.
- Only eligible candidates will have to appear in test/interview, the exact date of which will be communicated separately.
- A candidate must be in good mental and bodily health and free from any physical defect likely to interfere with the efficient discharge of his/her duties as an Officer of the service.
- The exact date & time of the Test/ Interview will be communicated to the shortlisted candidates separately.
- Marking pattern will be on General Awareness, Personality & Aptitude, Subject matter in relevant field, Relevant Experience, etc. for the post. The applicant has to obtain minimum 50% of the total marks on the above in the interview and only then the candidates will be short-listed.
- The office will not be responsible for any non submission of online application due to any error or other problem.
- The decision of the Selection Committee in all aspects and all respects pertaining to the application and its acceptance or rejection as the case may be, conduct of test and at all consequent stages concluding in the selection or otherwise of any candidate shall be final in all respects and binding on all concerned. The Mission also reserves its right to alter and modify time and conditions laid down in the notification for conducting the various stages up to selection or withdraw the Notification at any time, duly intimating details thereof to all concerned, as warranted by any unforeseen circumstances arising during the course of this process, or as deemed necessary by the Mission at any stage.



Sd/-Mission Director,
Samagra Shiksha Axom
Kahilipara, Guwahati-19

Janasanyog/DF/2902/23/1-Mar-24

TMC strongman Shajahan arrested, CID takes over probe

BASIRHAT (WB), Feb 29: TMC strongman Shajahan Sheikh, accused of sexual abuse and land grab in Sandeshkhali, was arrested in the early hours of Thursday after being on the run for 55 days that witnessed violent protests led by local women and a fierce political slugfest.

Additional Director-General of Police (South Bengal) Supratim Sarkar said Sheikh was arrested from a house in Bamanpukur in Minakhan police station area, around 30 km away from the island of Sandeshkhali on the outskirts of Sunderbans, in North 24 Parganas district.

Sheikh was hiding in the house along with a few associates, police said.

After the arrest, he was taken to the Basirhat court, which sent him to 10 days in police custody.

Sheikh, who has been at the centre of a massive political firestorm, came out of the lock-up around 10.40 am, and walked to the courtroom with policemen behind him. He also made a gesture with his hand at the media contingent waiting there.

After the hearing, which lasted for barely two minutes, he returned to the lock-up. Later, he was taken to Bhabani Bhawan, the state police headquarters, in Kolkata as the CID took over the investigation.

"He has been brought to Bhabani Bhawan for questioning," an officer said.

Sheikh was taken in custody within 24 hours of the Calcutta High Court stating that the CBI, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) or the West Bengal Police can arrest him.

Celebrations broke out in Sandeshkhali as the news of Sheikh's arrest reached the area, with locals distributing sweets.

Governor CV Ananda Bose, who had on Monday night given a 72-hour "deadline" to the state government for Sheikh's arrest, said, "There is always light at the end of the tunnel. I welcome it."

"This is the beginning of an end. We have to put an end to the cycle of violence in Bengal. In parts of Bengal, the goons are ruling the roost. This must end and the gangsters should be put behind bars," he said.

Police said Sheikh was arrested in two cases lodged at the Nazat police station.

Clarified that there was no stay on his arrest, the West Bengal Police did its job. The opposition had earlier exploited the embargo on his arrest," TMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh told PTL.

"We had said he would be arrested in seven days as we were confident of the ability of the state police," he added.

The BJP claimed the state police were forced to arrest Sheikh because



and 392 (robbery), they said.

The Trinamool Congress said the arrest was possible as the court cleared the decks, while the opposition BJP, CPI(M) and Congress dubbed it as "scripted".

"Due to a legal tangle, he couldn't be arrested initially. However, after the court clarified that there was no stay on his arrest, the West Bengal Police did its job. The opposition had earlier exploited the embargo on his arrest," TMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh told PTL.

"We had said he would be arrested in seven days as we were confident of the ability of the state police," he added.

The BJP claimed the state police were forced to arrest Sheikh because

of its agitations.

"It was the TMC and the state police which were shielding the culprit. He has been arrested now as a part of a well-scripted story. The state administration was forced to arrest him because of the continuous agitation led by us," BJP state president Sukanta Majumdar said.

CPI(M) central committee member Sujay Chakraborty questioned why Sheikh was not arrested in the 43 cases that had been filed by the people of Sandeshkhali.

"There was always the scope for arresting him but this was not done as he was being shielded by the powers that be," he said.

State Congress president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury claimed the TMC leadership knew where Shajahan had been.

"It became clear today that anti-so-

cials like Shajahan are assets of the TMC. Shajahan's appearance clearly shows that he was kept in comfort. Today's arrest is nothing but a drama. The TMC knew where Shajahan had been all these days. I hope that the people of Bengal will give a befitting reply to the TMC and teach it a lesson," he said.

Sheikh was traced with the help of his mobile phone's tower location, a police officer said.

"Sheikh was changing his location from time to time. He was spotted with the help of his mobile phone's tower location," he said.

Additional police forces were deployed in parts of Sandeshkhali, which Sheikh is accused of turning into his fiefdom over the last decade, to prevent any further flare-up of the situation. Prohibitory orders under section 144 of the CrPc were clamped in 49 areas on the island.

On Wednesday, a division bench presided by Chief Justice T S Sivagnanam directed that it will be "open to the CBI or the ED also to arrest" the absconding Sheikh, noting that he has been on the run for a substantial period.

The high court had on Monday directed the state police to arrest him.

BJP's co-incharge for West Bengal Amit Malviya alleged that Sheikh was arrested by the state police to "preclude" ED and CBI from getting him.

Taking to X, Malviya, who is also the BJP's IT Cell head, said: "Is this an arrest? WB Police is escorting Sheikh Shahjahan like they would escort CM Mamata Banerjee. All these days, Sheikh Shahjahan was under the protection of WB Police."

"As soon as Calcutta High Court allowed ED and CBI to arrest Sheikh Shahjahan, Mamata Banerjee's police took control of him. They hurriedly took him to a local Court, to preclude ED and CBI lawyers from getting in. No wonder women of #Sandeshkhali have no faith in Mamata Banerjee," he added.

Police said that over 100 complaints were registered against Sheikh over the last few weeks, which saw violent protests led by women demanding his arrest.

Several cases, including that of 376D (gang rape), have been filed against Sheikh and his associates based on these complaints.

His close aides Shibaprasad Hazra and Uttam Sardar were earlier arrested on similar charges.

His another associate, Ajit Maiti, was held in connection with the allegations of land grabbing.

Police said most of the complainants claimed that Sheikh forcibly took over land from the people, and tortured the women of the area.

He was at large since a mob of around 1,000 attacked the ED team on January 5. (PTI)

Ballot boxes to EVMs: Incredible journey of Election Commission

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: Born a day before India became a republic, the Election Commission has evolved a lot in the last 75 years from the period of ballot boxes to the era of electronic voting machines with democracy being the beating heart of this electoral machinery.

Since its inception on January 25, 1950, the Commission has conducted 17 general elections, numerous assembly polls and elections to the offices of presidents and vice presidents.

The Election Commission of India (ECI), headquartered at Nirvachan Sadan in Delhi, is now gearing up to hold the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, whose schedule is likely to be announced in March.

A lot has changed from the first general elections conducted in India after Independence in 1951-52 to the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. The country, its electorate and technology have evolved a lot and so has the ECI.

Former chief election commissioner S Y Quraishi said the Indian election, given the sheer scale and magnitude of preparations over the years, is now considered "a gold standard". Sukumar Sen, an ICS officer who served as the chief secretary of West Bengal, was appointed as the first Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) of India. He assumed charge on March 21, 1950, nearly two months after the ECI was set up. Both the first and the second general elections in 1957 were conducted with him at the helm of electoral affairs.

Quraishi, who was the 17th CEC, described Sen as an "unstung hero" of India's electoral journey. Not much has been documented about his life, legacy and the seminal role he played in setting the tone for Indian elections, Quraishi said. (PTI)

Quraishi, who was the 17th CEC, described Sen as an "unstung hero" of India's electoral journey. Not much has been documented about his life, legacy and the seminal role he played in setting the tone for Indian elections, Quraishi said. (PTI)

Priyanka played 'pivotal' role in 'foiling Operation Lotus' in HP: Sources

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: Priyanka Vadra played a "pivotal" role in protecting people's mandate in Himachal Pradesh, remaining in constant touch with Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, chief minister Sukhwinder Singh Sukhu and senior leaders to "foil" the BJP's 'operation Lotus', sources said Thursday.

This came after the Congress asserted that the situation in Himachal Pradesh is "completely under control" of the party and the BJP has "failed" in its attempts to "destabilise the elected government" there.

"The way Congress MLAs rebelled in Himachal Pradesh during the Rajya Sabha elections, it seemed that another state would be lost from the hands of the Congress. But the high command of the party showed activeness and strictness, as it not only averted the crisis of rebellion but the government was also saved," a party source said.

The sources alleged that the BJP had "hatched a complete conspiracy" to topple the government in Himachal Pradesh but as soon as there was a hint of rebellion, the high command became active.

"Party general secretary Priyanka Gandhi immediately became active and took the lead herself along with senior party leaders. Senior leaders Bhupinder Singh Hooda, DK Shivakumar and Bhupesh Baghel were sent as observers and given strict instructions that they had to take everyone along," the source said. (PTI)

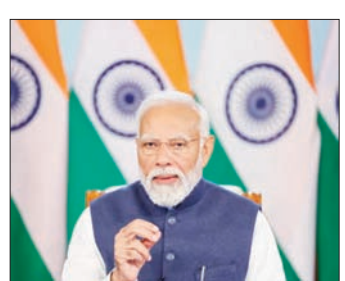
Modi, Jugnauth inaugurate airstrip, jetty, 6 other India-assisted projects in Mauritius

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: India and Mauritius are natural partners in the maritime domain to combat traditional and non-traditional challenges in the Indian Ocean region, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Thursday after virtually inaugurating a new airstrip, a jetty and six community development projects in the island nation.

The India-assisted projects in Agalega island of Mauritius are seen as significant as they are expected to boost connectivity as well as maritime security and surveillance in the strategic waters in the region.

After inaugurating the projects along with Mauritius Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth, Modi announced that Mauritius will be the first country to join India's Jan Aushadhi scheme, which is an initiative aimed at providing quality medicines at affordable prices.

In his remarks, Modi flagged concerns over challenges in the Indian Ocean region and said India and Mauritius are "natural partners" in the maritime domain to deal with them.



"Many traditional and non-traditional challenges are emerging in the Indian Ocean Region. All these challenges affect our economy. India and Mauritius are natural partners in the field of maritime security to deal with the challenges," he said at the virtual ceremony.

"We are actively working to ensure security, prosperity and stability in the Indian Ocean Region. We are cooperating together in all areas like monitoring of exclusive economic zone, joint patrolling, hydrography, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief," he said.

Modi's comments came amid increasing concerns in New Delhi over China's growing military for-

ays into the Indian Ocean region which is largely considered as the backyard of the Indian Navy.

He said the inauguration of the airstrip and jetty at Agalega island will further advance the cooperation.

The prime minister described Mauritius as an important partner under India's 'Neighborhood First' policy and that the bilateral development partnership has been an important pillar of the strategic relations.

"Our development partnerships are based on the priorities of Mauritius. Be it Mauritius's needs related to EEZ (exclusive economic zone) security, or health security, India has always respected the needs of Mauritius," he said.

Modi said the basic objective of India's efforts is to bring about meaningful changes in the lives of common people in Mauritius.

"Today holds a special significance for our development partnership. I am extremely happy that today we are seeing the completion of the commitment I had made in 2015. In India these days it is being

called 'Modi's Guarantee,'" he said.

The prime minister also talked about the "vibrant, strong and unique" partnership between India and Mauritius, adding the island nation is New Delhi's special partner under its vision of 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth For All in the Region).

"Our relations have gained unprecedented momentum in the last 10 years. We have achieved new heights in mutual cooperation," he said.

The inauguration of these projects came weeks after the launch of India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) systems and RuPay card services in Mauritius.

"We are making history today on the island of Agalega with the inauguration of a new airstrip, a new jetty and several other development projects," Jugnauth said at the event.

"This event marks a great moment for the remarkable and exemplary partnership between Mauritius and India," he said. (PTI)

What central projects have we stalled, Stalin asks, responding to PM's allegations

CHENNAI, Feb 29: Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin on Thursday said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi should spell out what central schemes the state government has "blocked", and said those it opposed include NEET and the CAA, keeping public welfare in mind.

The chief minister was responding to Modi's claim that there was lack of cooperation from the DMK-led TN government in implementing central projects in the state. The PM made these claims during his public address on Wednesday in Tirunelveli, in the southern part of the state.

Stalin, on his part, referred to Modi's frequent visits to Tamil Nadu, saying "the fear of defeat on his face is evident and it manifests as anger." The PM is "slandering" the DMK and its government, the chief minister alleged.

"He says we are blocking projects launched by him. It would be convenient to respond if he could list out which projects he brought that we were an impediment to," the CM said in a letter to party workers ahead of his 71st birthday on Friday. He asked if the DMK was against

AIIMS or Metro Rail and if the government had ever stayed away from allotting land to central initiatives.

"The PM is making generalised allegations," the CM remarked.

If at all the DMK was opposed to certain central initiatives, it was the National Entrance-cum-Eligibility Test (NEET) and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, as they are against the interests of students and Sri Lankan refugees, respectively, he explained.

The DMK also opposed the New Education Policy and the erstwhile three farm laws, he said, adding that the party had been forthright about its opposition on the two issues.

"Modi, who heads a heartless government that denies the due grants to a state, prevents borrowing, doesn't sanction even flood relief money, has no right to criticise the DMK," Stalin, the ruling party chief, further said.

Today, the DMK has the "duty" of "defeating fascism and communalism to uphold democracy and pluralism" in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls and to ensure the victory of the opposition INDIA bloc, he told his party workers. (PTI)

90 per cent of Himalayas will face year-long drought at 3 degrees warming: Study

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: About 90 per cent of the Himalayan Region will experience drought lasting over a year if global warming increases by 3 degrees Celsius, according to new research.

The findings, published in the journal Climatic Change, show that 80 per cent of the increased human exposure to heat stress in India can be avoided by adhering to Paris Agreement's temperature goals of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to 3 degrees Celsius warming.

The team led by researchers at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in the UK quantified how climate change risks to human and natural systems increase at a national scale as the level of global warming increases.

A collection of eight studies -- all focusing on India, Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Ghana -- shows that the risks of drought, flooding, declines in crop yields, and loss of biodiversity and natural capital greatly increase for each additional degree of global warming. It found that in India

pollination is reduced by half at 3-4 degrees global warming compared to a quarter reduction at 1.5 degrees.

Limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius allows half the country to act as a refuge for biodiversity, compared with 6 per cent at 3 degrees, the researchers said.

The team found very large increases in the exposure of agricultural land to drought with 3 degrees Celsius warming -- more than 50 per cent of the agricultural land in each of the countries studied is projected to be exposed to severe



droughts of longer than one year over a 30-year period.

However, limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius would reduce the increase in exposure of agricultural land to drought by between 21 per cent (India) and 61 per cent (Ethiopia) as well as reduce economic damages due to fluvial flooding. This happens when rivers and streams break their banks and the water flows out onto the adjacent low-lying areas. Avoided increases in human exposure to severe drought are also 20-80 per cent lower at 1.5 degrees Celsius than 3 degrees Celsius across the six countries, the researchers said.

Economic damages associated with sea-level rise are projected to increase in coastal nations, but more slowly if warming was limited to 1.5 degrees Celsius, they said.

The researchers warned that more effort is needed to reduce global warming, as currently the policies in place globally are likely to result in 3 degrees Celsius of global warming.

One paper explored the risks to plants and vertebrates due to increases in global warming, and another developed a new natural capital risk register for each of the six countries that also included the projected

changes in the risk stemming from future human population changes.

This combination shows that many areas in the six countries are already at high natural capital risk at 1.5 degrees Celsius when effects of increasing human population are accounted for.

The findings also showed that an expansion of protected area networks is necessary in order to deliver climate resilient biodiversity conservation.

"The results presented in this collection confirm the need for the implementation of climate policies aligned to the Paris Agreement limits if widespread and escalating climate change risk is to be avoided," said lead author of the paper, Professor Rachel Warren, from the UEA.

"They provide additional confirmation of the rapid escalation of climate change risks with global warming found in the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC) 2022 report, which identifies how the risk of severe consequences increases with every additional increment of global warming," Warren said.

Although these studies focus on the risks to six countries only, other nations are

projected to experience similar issues, the researchers said.

Greater emphasis needs to be placed on both climate change mitigation and climate change adaptation to avoid large increases in risk to both human and natural systems, they said.

"For example, a good way to combat the effects of climate change on natural systems and soak up carbon from the atmosphere is to restore ecosystems to their natural state, especially if warming can be held to 2 degrees Celsius or less. This has the additional benefit of restoring the natural capital bank in these areas," said study co-author Jeff Price, also from the UEA.

The work focuses on developing countries as they tend to be more vulnerable to climate change than others. Spanning the continents of Asia, Africa, and South America, the case studies present examples of both large and small countries and cover a range of levels of socioeconomic development.

The risks assessed are the additional risks due to anthropogenic or human-induced climate change corresponding to the elevated global warming in comparison with a baseline of levels of risk in 1961-1990, when warming was approximately 0.3 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

Together the studies provide a harmonised assessment for the six countries of projected changes in exposure of humans and land to climate-related hazards, such as drought, water stress, fluvial and coastal flooding, and the projected effects of climate change on biodiversity, as well as the economic and societal implications of climate risks. (PTI)

No one accused Sharad Pawar of being behind Jarange's outburst against Fadnavis: Shelar

MUMBAI, Feb 29: BJP MLA Ashish Shelar on Thursday told the Maharashtra assembly that no one had accused Sharad Pawar of being behind the threats issued by quota activist Manoj Jarange against deputy chief minister Devendra Fadnavis.

The issue came up for discussion in the House when Leader of Opposition Vijay Wadetiwar said it was against the rules to take anyone's name using the point of information clause without giving a notice.

He was referring to the comments made earlier this week in the Lower House of the state legislature over the political row on Jarange's controversial remarks.

On Tuesday, assembly Speaker Rahul Narwekar directed the government to set up an Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe Jarange's remarks against Fadnavis. The Maratha activist had alleged that Fadnavis was trying to kill him.

Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) founder Sharad Pawar, who now heads a faction of the party, had termed as "childish" the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s allegations that he was behind Jarange's controversial statements. Speaking in the assembly on Thursday, Wadetiwar demanded that the comments against Pawar made in the House be expunged, and said he was opposed to the remarks made against any community or individual. "Sharad Pawar's name was taken in the House and it is against the rule book to do this speaking on the point of information without giving a notice," he said.

Shelar said, "There is a video which says we will finish off a community and Devendra Fadnavis in three minutes. A Yuva Sena activist filed a complaint and the name of Yogesh Sawant, who is an office-bearer of NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar) party, came to light." (PTI)

No. OFFICE ORDER -SSGDI/110/Pt.V/2023/10 Dated:28/02/2024

SHORT NOTICE INVITING TENDER

Sealed tenders in prescribed form (eventually to be drawn in APWD's F2 form) affixing nonrefundable court fee of Rs.8.25 (Rupees eight and paise twenty five) only are hereby invited from registered Class-I (A,B,C), Class-II and Class -III category contractors of Irrigation Department for the following works and will be received by the undersigned up to 1.00 PM of 08/03/2024 and will be opened in the same place and date at 2.00 PM, in presence of the intending contractors or their authorized agents, Who may like to be present.

In the event of closure of office on the date due to any reason, the next working day of office will be the date of receiving and opening of tenders.

- 1.Name of Work:- Construction of Canal structure at different Chainage of D1 and D2 Canal of (ERM) Suklai Irrigation Project under PMKSY-AIBP for the year 2021-22.(in different group)
- 2.Approx Tender Value :- Rs. 54,91,109.00
- 3.Time of Completion :- 30 (Forty Five) days.
4. Earnest Money :- 2% of tendered value (1% in case of S.T/S.C/O.B.C/M.O at the time of Submitting bids.

Details particular of NIT, group list of work, term & condition and tender papers may be obtained from the office of the undersigned on payment of Rs 500.00 (Rupees five hundred) only for Class-I(A,B,C) and Rs 300.00 (Rupees three hundred) only for Class -II & Class -III Contractors in the form of Cash (Non -refundable) during office hours in all working days upto 12 noon of 07-03-2024.

Special Terms and Condition:

1. Attested copy of current years registration should be enclosed.
2. Rate should be quoted both in words and figures at place provided in the items of work and each page should be signed.
3. Attested copies of PAN card and up-to-date GST return certificate should be enclosed.
4. Current Income tax clearance Certificate to be enclosed.
5. Up to date labour license to be enclosed.
6. Chainage and quantity may vary as per site condition.
7. Bid value up to 10% below the package value shall only be considered.
8. Financial soundness certificate to be enclosed.

**Sd/-Executive Engineer
Suklai Serfang Goreswar Division,
(Irrigation), Goreswar**

IPR(BTC)-2023-24/1490

Himachal Pradesh crisis: Six rebel Congress MLAs disqualified by Speaker

SHIMLA, Feb 29: Himachal Pradesh Assembly Speaker Kuldeep Singh Pathania on Thursday disqualified six Congress MLAs who had crossed-voted in the recent Rajya Sabha polls for the lone seat in the state.

They had also abstained from voting on Budget in the assembly, defying a party whip to vote in favour of the government on the Finance Bill. The ruling Congress had sought their disqualification on this ground.

The disqualified MLAs are Rajinder Rana, Sudhir Sharma, Inder Dutt Lakhnani, Devinder Kumar Bhutoo, Ravi Thakur and Chetanya Sharma.

Following the disqualification of the rebel legislators, the effective strength of the House has reduced from 68 to 62 while the number of Congress MLAs has shrunk from 40 to 34.

It is for the first time in the history of Himachal Pradesh that any MLA has been disqualified under the anti-defection law aimed at checking defections.

Announcing the disqualification of the six rebel MLAs at a press conference, the Speaker said they



attracted disqualification under the anti-defection law as they defied the whip and ceased to be members of the House with immediate effect.

These disqualified MLAs, who had voted for BJP candidate Harsh Mahajan in the Rajya Sabha polls were not present in the House during voting on the Budget.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Harshwardhan filed a petition before the Speaker seeking disqualification of these members under the anti-defection law on Tuesday evening for defying the whip that

required them to be present in the House and vote for the budget.

The Speaker issued show-cause notice to the MLAs and asked them to appear at 1.30 pm on Wednesday for hearing. These MLAs had left for Panchkula after the voting for Rajya Sabha polls on Tuesday and arrived for hearing on Wednesday.

After hearing the arguments of both the parties, the Speaker reserved the judgment on Wednesday and announced it on Thursday.

Senior advocate Satya Pal Jain, who appeared for the rebel Con-

gress MLAs, had argued that these MLAs were only given the show-cause notice and neither the copy of the petition nor the annexure were supplied. He said seven days' time was mandatory for replying to the notice but no time was given.

Under the anti-defection law, any elected member who gives up the membership of a political party voluntarily or votes or abstains from voting in the House, contrary to any direction issued by his political party, is liable for disqualification.

The Congress party had issued whip to the members to be present in the House during voting on passing of the Budget. These MLAs had signed the attendance register but abstained from the House during voting on the Budget, the Speaker said.

These members were issued notices for defying the whip through Whatsapp and e-mail and were asked to appear for hearing.

These MLAs had crossed-voted in favour of BJP candidate Harsh Mahajan in the Rajya Sabha elections on Tuesday. Later, they abstained from voting on the Budget in the assembly.

The House passed the Finance Bill by voice vote after Pathania suspended 15 BJP MLAs. The Speaker then adjourned the session sine die.

In a stunning upset for the ruling Congress in Himachal Pradesh, the BJP on Tuesday won the state's lone Rajya Sabha seat with its candidate Harsh Mahajan defeating Congress stalwart Abhishek Manu Singhvi and apparently setting the stage for a no-trust motion in the assembly.

In his 30-page order, the Speaker mentioned the judgments of Supreme Court and high courts under the anti-defection law. Narrating the chronology of events, he said the plea of the advocate of the rebel MLAs, Satya Pal Jain, for giving time to reply to the notice was not entertained as "evidence was absolutely clear".

The Speaker said delivering quick judgment was necessary in such cases to maintain the dignity of democracy and check "Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram" phenomenon. The judgment has no link with cross-voting by these MLAs in the Rajya Sabha polls, he added. (PTI)

Enough with 'jumlas', time to answer people now: Cong slams govt over farmers' issues



NEW DELHI, Feb 29: The Congress on Thursday accused the BJP government of not fulfilling its promises to farmers such as doubling their income and said "enough with the jumlas", it is time to answer the people now.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said 16 years ago, the Congress-UPA government had waived ₹ 72,000 crore farm loans and interest of 3.73 crore farmers. "This was the guarantee of Congress which was fulfilled. Modi ji made two big promises to the farmers -- first, cost+50 per cent of MSP and second, to double the income of farmers by 2022. Both 'Modi's guarantees' turned out to be fake, and the condition of farmers became worse," the Congress president said in a post in Hindi on X.

"Now Congress has again promised the farmers -- We will give legal guarantee of MSP to 15 crore farmer families. Only Congress fulfils its guarantee," he asserted.

In a post on X, Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh referred to Modi's virtual address the people of Madhya Pradesh and said that amidst the inevitable wave of "lies and propaganda" that will unfold, the people of Madhya Pradesh have questions for him.

"In 2014, the BJP manifesto had promised that it would ensure 'a minimum 50% profit over the cost of production' for farmers. In the Madhya Pradesh assembly elections 2023, the BJP had promised the farmers that MSP for wheat would be fixed at ₹ 2,700 and paddy at ₹ 3,100 per quintal," Ramesh said.

Today, the Union government's MSP for wheat is only ₹ 2,275 and the state government has taken no step to pay a bonus to farmers for the differential, he said. Why has the double engine sarkar failed to provide 'nyay (justice)' to our farmers, Ramesh

asked. "During the Madhya Pradesh elections a few months ago, the BJP had promised that the amount of money transferred to women under the Ladli Behna Scheme will be increased to ₹ 3,000 per month. Upon winning the election, the government has not made any steps to fulfilling the promise," he claimed.

Recently in the assembly, the state government declared that "it was not possible" to set a time limit to the promise, he said. Is this "Modi ki guarantee" or yet another "chunavi jumla (election rhetoric)," Ramesh asked.

Ramesh said the BJP promised a budget of ₹ 3 lakh crores for tribal welfare in the Madhya Pradesh elections.

"To the contrary, the last few months have seen an increase in incidence of atrocities on Adivasi in Madhya Pradesh. Just a few days ago, after Modi's rally in Jabua, ruling party workers brutally abused and beat an Adivasi youth in Betul. Does the Prime Minister have any vision for Adivasi welfare and social justice?" he said.

"Pradhan Mantri ji, enough with the jumlas, it is time to answer the people now," Ramesh said. Congress general secretary, organisation, K C Venugopal said, "15 years ago, the UPA announced a historic ₹ 60,000 crore nationwide farm loan waiver which brought immense relief to all the Annadatas across India."

"This time, we have promised a legal guarantee of MSP. We have always prioritised farmers' welfare and ensured they have a safety net during difficult times," he said in a post on X. Venugopal alleged that farmers are being "silenced, treated as anti-nationals and the promise of doubling farmers' income has fallen flat."

It is once again clear that only the Congress can truly save our farmers from their misery, he added. (PTI)

Cabinet approves amendment to MMDR Act for royalty

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: The Union Cabinet on Thursday approved the amendment in the MMDR Act to specify the royalty rate on 12 critical and strategic minerals, an official statement said.

A decision in this regard was taken at a meeting of the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Ministry of Mines said in a statement.

"The Union Cabinet... approved the amendment of Second Schedule to the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957 (MMDR Act) for specifying rate of royalty in respect of 12 critical and strategic minerals," the statement said.

The 12 critical and strategic minerals are beryllium, cadmium, cobalt, gallium, indium, rhenium, selenium, tantalum, tellurium, titanium, tungsten, and vanadium, it said.

This completes the exercise of the rationalisation of royalty rates for all 24 critical and strategic minerals, the Ministry said.

The government notified the royalty rate of four critical minerals, namely glauconite, potash, molybdenum and platinum group of minerals on March 15, 2022 and of 3 critical minerals lithium, niobium and rare earth elements on October 12, 2023.

As per the statement, the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2023, which has come into force from August 17, 2023, had listed 24 critical and strategic minerals in Part D of the First Schedule of the MMDR Act.

The amendment provided that mining lease and composite licence of these 24 minerals shall be auctioned by the central government.

The approval for specification of rate of royalty will enable the Centre to auction blocks for these 12 minerals for the first time in the country. Royalty rate on minerals is an important financial consideration for the bidders in auction of blocks, the statement said. (PTI)

PM Modi to visit Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar from today; to launch multiple development projects

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be in West Bengal on March 1 and 2 to launch multiple development projects worth over Rs 22,200 crore, a visit which becomes politically significant as well as it comes amid the BJP's sharp attack on the state government over the Sandeshkhali issue.

An official statement said that on March 2 Modi will launch many development projects, worth over nearly Rs 1.83 lakh-crore, from Bihar for across the country in his first visit to the state after Chief Minister Nitish Kumar quit the opposition bloc and joined hands with the BJP.

While the projects to be launched from Bihar are meant for regions spread across the country, a sizeable part of them will be based in the state. The prime minister will inaugurate and lay foundation of numerous development projects worth over Rs 35,700 crore in Jharkhand too on March 1, the statement added.

In Bengal, he will attend public programmes in Arambagh on March 1 and Krishnanagar on March 2,

while in Bihar he will visit Aurangabad and Begusarai, it said.

His visit to Bengal comes amid rising political heat in the state after many women in Sandeshkhali accused ruling Trinamool Congress strongman Shajahan Sheikh and other members of the party of land grab and sexual assault, an issue seized by the BJP to corner its rival.

Giving details of the project, the PMO said Modi will inaugurate the Sindri fertiliser plant of the Hindustan Urvarak & Rasayan Ltd (HURL) in Jharkhand.

Developed at a cost of more than Rs 8,900 crore, the plant will result in adding 12.7 lakh metric tonnes (LMT) per annum indigenous urea production in the country, in a big step toward self-sufficiency in the key fertiliser.

This is the third fertiliser plant to be revived in the country after those at Gorakhpur and Ramagundam which were also inaugurated by the prime minister in December 2021 and November 2022, respectively.

The statement said the PM will inaugurate and lay the foundation

stone of several rail projects worth more than Rs 17,600 crore in Jharkhand. Another key project to be inaugurated in the state is the Unit 1 (660 MW) of North Karanpura Super Thermal Power Project (STPP) in Chatra.

Developed at a cost of more than Rs 7,500 crore, it will lead to improved power supply in the region, boost employment generation and contribute to socioeconomic development in the state.

In Arambagh in West Bengal, he will inaugurate and lay the foundation stone of developmental projects related to sectors like rail, ports, oil pipeline, LPG supply and wastewater treatment.

He will inaugurate Indian Oil's 518-km Haldia-Barauni crude oil pipeline developed at a cost of about Rs 2,790 crore. This pipeline passes through Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal and will supply crude oil to Barauni, Bongaigaon and Guwahati refineries in a safe, cost-efficient, and environment-friendly manner, the statement said.

He will also launch multiple projects

for strengthening of infrastructure at Syama Prasad Mookerjee Port, Kolkata worth about Rs 1000 crore.

In Krishnanagar, the statement said he will lay the foundation stone of Raghunathpur Thermal Power Station phase II (2x660 MW) located at Raghunathpur in Purulia district. This coal based thermal power project of the Damodar Valley Corporation employs highly-efficient super critical technology. The new plant will be a step towards strengthening the energy security of the country, it said.

Among other projects, he will inaugurate the flue gas desulfurization (FGD) system of the unit 7 & 8 of the Mejia thermal power station developed at a cost of about Rs 650 crore and the road project for four lanes of Farakka-Raiganj section of NH-12 developed at a cost of about Rs 1,986 crore.

In Bihar's Aurangabad, he will inaugurate and lay the foundation stone for several national highway projects worth more than Rs 18,100 crores. (PTI)

Cabinet ₹ 75k cr rooftop solar scheme, 1 cr households to get subsidy of up to ₹ 78k

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: The government on Thursday approved a rooftop solar scheme, PM-Surya Ghar: Mufti Bijli Yojna, with an outlay of ₹ 75,021 crore, to provide up to ₹ 78,000 subsidy for the installation of solar plants and 300 units free power for one crore households.

Briefing media after the Union Cabinet meeting, I&B Minister Anurag Thakur informed that approval has been given for the scheme for installing rooftop solar and providing free electricity up to 300 units every month for one crore households.

"The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has approved PM-Surya Ghar: Mufti Bijli Yojana with a total outlay of ₹ 75,021 crore for installing rooftop solar and providing free electricity up to 300 units every month for one crore households," an official statement said.

The Prime Minister launched the scheme

on 13th February 2024.

The scheme provides a central financial assistance (CFA) of 60 per cent of system cost for 2 kW systems and 40 per cent of additional system cost for systems between 2 kW to 3 kW capacity. The CFA will be capped at 3 kW.

At current benchmark prices, this will mean Rs 30,000 subsidy for 1 kW system, ₹ 60,000 for 2 kW systems and ₹ 78,000 for 3 kW systems or higher.

The households will apply for subsidy through the National Portal and will be able to select a suitable vendor for installing rooftop solar.

The National Portal will assist the households in their decision-making process by providing relevant information such as appropriate system sizes, benefits calculator, vendor rating etc.

Households will be able to access collat-

eral-free low-interest loan products of around 7 per cent at present for installation of residential RTS (rooftop solar) systems up to 3 kW.

Other Features of the scheme include a Model Solar Village to be developed in each district to act as a role model for adoption of rooftop solar in rural areas.

Besides, Urban Local Bodies and Panchayati Raj Institutions shall also benefit from incentives for promoting rooftop solar (RTS) installations in their areas.

The scheme provides a component for payment security for renewable energy service company (RESCO) based models as well as a fund for innovative projects in RTS. Through this scheme, the households will be able to save electricity bills as well as earn additional income through sale of surplus power to DISCOMs. A 3 kW system will be able to generate more than 300

units a month on average for a household.

The proposed scheme will result in the addition of 30 GW of solar capacity through rooftop solar in the residential sector, generating 1000 BUs (billion units) of electricity and resulting in reduction of 720 million tonnes of CO2 equivalent emissions over the 25-year lifetime of rooftop systems.

It is estimated that the scheme will create around 17 lakh direct jobs in manufacturing, logistics, supply chain, sales, installation, O&M and other services.

For availing benefits of PM-Surya Ghar: Mufti Bijli Yojana by households, the Government has launched a massive campaign since the launch of the scheme for raising awareness and generating applications from interested households.

Households can register themselves on <https://pmsuryaghar.gov.in> to avail of benefits under the scheme. (PTI)

Indian Navy to bolster anti-submarine warfare capabilities with MH 60R helicopter induction

KOCHI, Feb 29: The coast of Kochi is all set to witness the pinnacle of airborne supremacy of the Indian Navy next week when it inducts the aerial marvel, the MH 60R helicopter into its fleet, bolstering the Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) capabilities.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh will commission the newly inducted MH 60R Seahawk multi-role helicopter at the INS Garuda here on March 6, Navy officials said.

The squadron will be commissioned in the Indian Navy as INAS 334, under the Command of Captain M Abhishek Ram.

The Indian government signed a deal with the United States of America in February 2020, to acquire 24 fourth-generation MH 60R helicopters. Six of them have been delivered to the Indian Navy so far.

Speaking to PTI, Ram said the induction of these helicopters into the Indian Navy will bring about a significant surge in its maritime prowess and capabilities.

Detailing the capabilities of the new chopper, he said that apart from the ASW, it is designed for anti-surface warfare, search and rescue operations during the day and night, medical evacuation and vertical replenishment, among others.

"With this MH 60R, we have filled a major gap in our anti-submarine warfare capability. The anti-submarine capability and the sustenance of the chopper will change the way we are doing our surveillance and it will give us a larger surveillance bubble," Ram said.

He added that the newly inducted choppers have been integrated with almost all the ships under the Indian Navy and ready for operational deployments.

The MH 60R is also capable of firing torpedoes, mis-



siles and advanced precision kill weapon system rockets.

The self-protection suite on the helicopter comprises Chaff and Infrared Flares, which can be deployed automatically upon detection of a threat. Lieutenant Commandant Aneesh Ayarotil, one of the trained pilots of MH 60R said. This is the only chopper in the Indian Navy with a self-defence capability from incoming gunfire or missiles.

"We can deploy flares against the incoming heat-seeking missiles, while chaffs that contain high radar-reflecting materials can be deployed to confuse the radar-homing missiles," Ayarotil told PTI.

Ayarotil, who was earlier a Chetak pilot, said the MH

60R is one of the most advanced choppers and the systems are pilot-friendly.

"We can engage autopilot to hover and reduce the workload of the pilots," he added.

The first five batches of pilots and observers, who handle the detection and weapon systems and make the necessary tactical and navigational decisions, were trained in the US.

Ram said the rest of the training was held at INS Garuda in Kochi where a simulator is so coming up.

"This training here is more realistic because when you embark on an Indian ship, we are giving them a realistic sense of tactics. Because most of the training in the US was on the simulator and they do not let us expose ourselves much. Here we are actually doing exercises with submarines, ships, aircraft so the training becomes realistic," he said.

The new chopper can be used for rescue operations, especially in night search and rescue missions, as it has night vision goggles and forward-looking infrared facilities. The choppers have been integrated with the INS Vikrant and the Navy considers it as a milestone.

The advanced weapons, sensors and the avionics suite onboard have been tested rigorously for the past eight to nine months.

The chopper can also exchange information in real time through advanced data link systems with Indian as well as platforms from friendly foreign countries making it completely interoperable.

Currently, all six delivered Seahawks are in Kochi. It has also participated in the recently held multinational MILAN exercise on the eastern seaboard of India. (PTI)

India's leopard population rises to 13,874, dips in Shivalik



NEW DELHI, Feb 29: India's estimated leopard population rose from 12,852 in 2018 to 13,874 in 2022, but the number of rosetted felines declined slightly in the Shivalik hills and the Indo-Gangetic Plains, the Union Environment Ministry said on Thursday.

The "Status of Leopards in India" report, launched by Union Environment Minister Bhupendra Yadav, said Madhya Pradesh has the maximum number of leopards in the country at 3,907 (up from 3,421 in 2018).

The number of felines grew from 1,690 in 2018 to 1,985 in 2022 in Maharashtra, from 1,783 to 1,879 in Karnataka, and from 868 to 1,070 in Tamil Nadu.

"Central India shows a stable or slightly growing leopard population (8,820 in 2022 against 8,071 in 2018), the Shivalik hills and the Indo-Gangetic Plains experienced a decline (from 1,253 in 2018 to 1,109 in 2022)," the ministry said in a statement.

"If we look at the area which was sampled both in 2018 and 2022 across India, there is a 1.08 per cent per annum growth. In the Shivalik hills and the Gangetic plains, there is a 3.4 per cent decline per annum, while the largest growth rate was in central India and the Eastern Ghats of 1.5 per cent," it said.

Tiger reserves or sites with the highest leopard population are Nagarjunasagar Srisailem (Andhra Pradesh), Panna (Madhya Pradesh) and Satpura (Madhya Pradesh).

The fifth cycle of leopard population estimation (2022) in India focused on forested habitats within 18 tiger states, covering four major tiger conservation landscapes. Non-forested habitats, arid areas and the high Himalayas above 2,000 mean sea level (around 30 per cent of the area) were not sampled for this exercise, the ministry said.

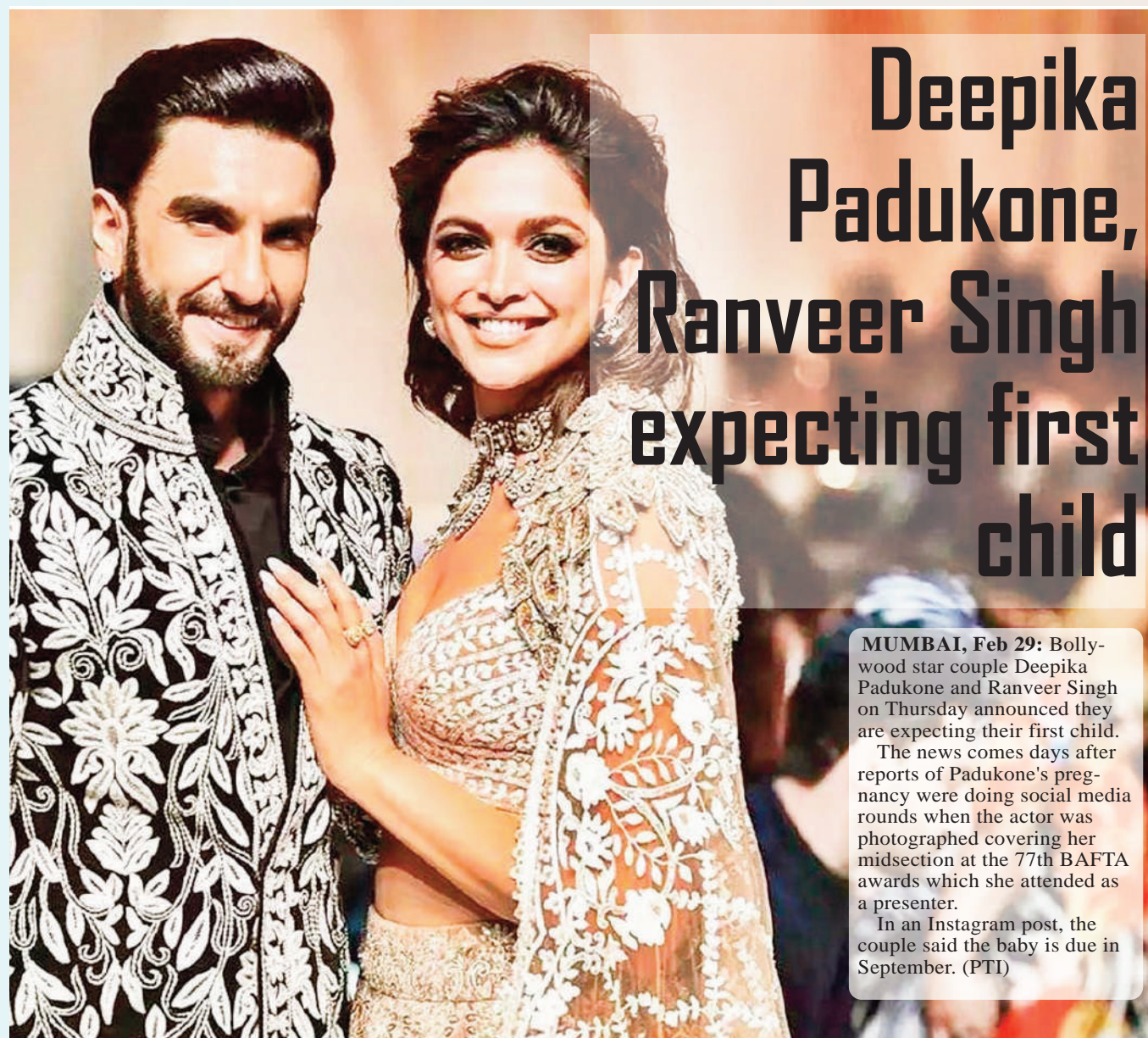
This included a foot survey spanning 6,41,449 km to estimate carnivore signs and prey abundance. Camera traps were strategically placed at 32,803 locations, resulting in 85,488 photo-captures of leopards.

The findings underscore the critical role of protected areas in conserving leopard populations. While tiger reserves serve as important strongholds, addressing conservation gaps outside protected areas is equally vital, the ministry said.

Rising incidents of conflict pose challenges for both leopards and communities. Since leopard survival outside protected areas is equally important, collaborative efforts involving government agencies, conservation organisations, and local communities are essential to enhance habitat protection and mitigate human-wildlife conflict, it said.

Yadav said the report emphasises conservation commitment beyond protected areas.

"Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's guidance, this conservation journey embodies the ethos of one earth, one family, and one future," he said. (PTI)



Deepika Padukone, Ranveer Singh expecting first child

MUMBAI, Feb 29: Bollywood star couple Deepika Padukone and Ranveer Singh on Thursday announced they are expecting their first child. The news comes days after reports of Padukone's pregnancy were doing social media rounds when the actor was photographed covering her midsection at the 77th BAFTA awards which she attended as a presenter. In an Instagram post, the couple said the baby is due in September. (PTI)

Riteish Deshmukh, Vivek Oberoi, Aftab Shivdasani reuniting for 'Masti 4'

MUMBAI, Feb 29: Filmmaker Indra Kumar on Thursday announced the fourth installment of his comedy franchise Masti, starring Riteish Deshmukh, Vivek Oberoi and Aftab Shivdasani. The upcoming movie will be helmed by Milap Zaveri. It is produced by Kumar, A Jhunjhunwala, Ashok Thakeria and S K Ahluwalia. Zaveri, best known for Satyameva Jayate and Marjaavaan, said he is looking forward to directing the project.

"At its core, Masti 4 is a celebration of friendship, marriage, mischief, and the undying spirit of laughter." "We want to go back to the OG (original) for its essence and bring back laughter with a new story that will resonate and while delivering a fresh dose of hilarity and heart," the director said in a statement. The first part of the Masti franchise released in 2004. It spawned two sequels: Grand Masti (2013) and Great Grand Masti (2016). (PTI)



Netflix announces series on 1999 Kandahar hijack, Anubhav Sinha to direct show

MUMBAI, Feb 29: The December 24, 1999 hijack of the Indian Airlines flight is getting a series treatment at Netflix with

Pahwa, Amrita Puri, and Anupam Tripathi. According to the makers, the series revolves around "the 24th December 1999

hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight IC 814 which was en route from Kathmandu to New Delhi. It was taken to Kandahar. The hijack lasted seven days and while the crew and passengers suffered, officers back home tried to find a solution to bring them home." Sinha, known for films such as "Mulk", "Article 15" and "Bheed",

said it was a responsibility to be as authentic as possible while working on the series. "When I started doing research, almost everyone remembers a few things about the hijack, and what all happened during the process. I realised it is a very complex

story and a lot of things happened in those seven days and not many people know about it.

"I met a lot of officers, passengers, the pilot, and there was a lot more to share. We have put it all in the show... We had to make it factually correct and yet dramatic and engaging... It was an interesting process," the director said at the Next on Netflix event here.

Sinha added Monika Shergill, Vice President, Content, Netflix India, had promised him that the shooting of the series will conclude within eight months but it went on for two years.

Shergill described the show as a "thrilling, propulsive rendition of the longest hijacking in the history of aviation in the world".

"When we started out on this story, it took us a while to get down to actually making it in the right way. It was a journey for us because it is such a journalistic sort of piece, but it is such a large story of human interest and it had to be told in the most dramatic and thrilling fashion," Shergill told PTI. (PTI)



Anubhav Sinha attached as creator and director.

The show is titled "IC 814: The Kandhar Hijack" and stars Vijay Varma, Patralekha, Pankaj Kapur, Naseeruddin Shah, Arvind Swamy, Dia Mirza, Kumud Mishra, Manoj



Farhan Akhtar, Shibani Dandekar team up for Netflix series 'Dabba Cartel'

MUMBAI, Feb 29: Filmmaker Farhan Akhtar and his wife, actor Shibani Dandekar are joining hands for "Dabba Cartel", a new Netflix series.

Directed by Hitesh Bhatia, the upcoming show revolves around five ordinary women in Maharashtra's Thane who start a drug cartel through the 'dabba' (tiffin) delivery service. It will star Shabana Azmi, Jyotika, Farhan Akhtar, Nimisha Sajayan, Anjali Anand, Gajraj Rao, Sai Tamhankar, Lillete Dubey and Jisshu Sengupta.

The first look of "Dabba Cartel", created by Dandekar, was revealed on Thursday at the Next on Netflix event here. Akhtar has backed the show via his production banner Excel Media & Entertainment. "We like narrating stories, and it's been a great association (with Netflix) and there are many more shows (to look forward to). This is an exciting show. It is a special show as Shibani is the creator of the show and this gives a special place to the



show in my heart," Akhtar said at the event. Dandekar said it was great working with her husband on the series that started off as a "tiny idea" in her head. "It has been a long process. The interesting part is when you have a tiny idea and you sit with writers, and to work with Excel Entertainment, Netflix, and Hitesh Bhatia, and it all begins to grow. "To see the show come

alive is, creatively, collaboratively. It has been an incredible surreal experience. I couldn't have asked for anything more as a creator. Working with my husband, and working with the producers, Abbas and Kassim, and Hitesh, was all wonderful. I couldn't have asked for more as a creator as I'm working with my husband," she added. (PTI)

Sunny Hinduja set for South cinema debut, to feature in Malayalam film 'Hello Mummy'



MUMBAI, Feb 29: Actor Sunny Hinduja, known for series such as "Aspirants" and "The Railway Men", will make his foray in South cinema with the Malayalam film "Hello Mummy". According to a press release issued on Thursday, the upcoming project is a comedy fantasy which will go on floors in March. Vaishakh Elans will direct the film from a script by Sanjo Joseph. It will also star

Aishwarya Lekshmi and Sharaf U Dheen. Hinduja said he aspires to explore diverse genres of cinema and extend his reach to different regions across India. "Eventually, I aim to venture into international cinema, but I believe in commencing my journey from India. Interestingly, the director of my debut Malayalam film reached out to me with genuine affection, which touched my heart.

"I don't solely select projects; rather, it's the love and support of people that guide me towards my choices. I embraced this project with enthusiasm, recognising the rich content-driven nature of Malayalam cinema," the actor said in a statement.

Hinduja is also known for his work in the web series "The Family Man" and the Hindi film "Shehzada". (PTI)

Have seen Bhansali grow as maestro: Manisha on 'Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar'

MUMBAI, Feb 29: It was great to reunite with Sanjay Leela Bhansali after a gap of 25 years, actor Manisha Koirala said on Thursday as Netflix India unveiled the character posters of the filmmaker's ambitious web series "Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar".

Bhansali, known for lavishly mounted feature films such as "Ram-Leela", "Bajirao Mastani" and "Padmaavat", is set to make his long-format debut with Netflix's "Heeramandi". Koirala, who plays Mallikajaan in the upcoming eight-part period drama set during the freedom struggle movement in India, worked with Bhansali in his feature directorial debut "Khamoshi: The Musical" (1996).

At the Next on Netflix India event, the actor said "Heeramandi" has turned out well and

the team is "dying to show it" to fans. "We all have tried to do our best because we were working with a master. To be working with Sanjay 25 years after his first film, 'Khamoshi', it can't get better than 'Heeramandi'. It's been a humongous journey, I've seen him grow as an artist, as a maestro, as a genius, he is India's best, he is the greatest filmmaker in India. We are lucky to be working, sweating and trying to perfect our act," Koirala said at the event.

Billed as a visual odyssey, "Heeramandi" brings together a powerhouse of talent and a magnificent world promising to immerse audiences in a tale of power, love and freedom set against the backdrop of pre-independent India. "Heeramandi" also stars Sonakshi Sinha,

Richa Chadha, Sharmin Segal, Aditi Rao Hydari, and Sanjeeda Shaikh.

Chadha said anyone can create beautiful costumes but only Bhansali can make an actor take eight rounds, sit and aesthetically drop a tear from the left of one's eye while wearing a lehenga worth 30 kg. The actor, who previously worked with in the 2013 film "Ram-Leela", plays Lajo in "Heeramandi". "An actor is hungry to grow, and he will push you. I met Rani Mukerji the other day and (she) said 'Till you work with Sanjay Leela Bhansali, you don't know your own potential,'" she said.

The makers of "Heeramandi" also released the character posters of Hydari as Bibbojaan, Shaikh as Waheeda, Sinha as Fareedan and Segal as Alamzeb. Bhansali was not present at

the event.

Working with Bhansali has been a wonderful dream, said Hydari. They earlier collaborated on 2018's "Padmaavat".

"When we shoot a film, we get a certain amount of time to be with a director. When you shoot a show, you get that much more time. Some look at the look, beauty, but what I find incredible about the experience is the fact his soul goes into everything he does.

"He eats, lives, and breathes his characters. There's so much passion. I'm grateful that the challenges that he throws at you, there's so much love, and pride, pushing you to do your best. I'm grateful for that experience and I hope I get it multiple times. I love him," she added. (PTI)



WPL: Kiran Navgire opens new avenue for UP Warriorz

BENGALURU, Feb 29: Kiran Navgire would not have opened but for a freak shoulder injury to Vrinda Dinesh and now her bruising fifty against the Mumbai Indians might just prompt UP Warriorz to rework their combination at the top in the ongoing Women's Premier League.

Navgire struck a 31-ball 57 and combined with Alyssa Healy (33) to help UPW overhaul a 162-run target in just 16.4 overs against the defending

champions last night.

It could shake things up in the line-up, which has till now worked around the far more traditional opening pair of Healy and Vrinda.

"When the innings ended the head coach (Jon Lewis) came up to me and said I had to open. I was happy, because I opened the batting in domestic cricket, and I had the chance to do that here," Navgire said in the post-match press meet.

Range hitters are a rare breed

in women's cricket and Navgire has opened that option for the UP outfit.

The Warriorz have been notoriously slow starters in the WPL with their middle-order batters creaking under massive run-rate pressure.

In their first match against Royal Challengers Bangalore, UP made 36 for 1 and they were 21 for three against the Delhi Capitals in the second game.

But with Navgire coming in as an opener, UP made 61 for no

loss in the Power Play segment. It was their fastest start, for that matter any team's, in this edition of the WPL.

Navgire, a big fan of former Indian captain MS Dhoni, is not new to opening the innings. She garnered instant attraction during the 2021-22 domestic season as a guest player for Nagaland.

She hammered 35 sixes in the Senior Women's T20 league that season, the most ever in the history of that tournament.

The 29-year-old, who hails from Maharashtra, also became the first Indian woman to score a 150-plus score in T20 when she blasted a 76-ball 162 against Arunachal Pradesh.

Her approach is as simple as the big shots she executes.

"I just played the ball on merit (against MI), played my natural game. If the ball is in my arc, it should go into the stands - that is my natural thought," said Navgire. Her assault on MI pacer Issy Wong in the third

over of UPW's chase underlined Navgire's growth into an all-round batter.

When Wong pitched short, Navgire stood tall and sent the ball to the mid-wicket boundary with a strong pull.

In the next ball, the England pacer pitched the ball further up but Navgire muscled it through mid-off for a four.

MI coach Charlotte Edwards admitted that they were not prepared for Navgire's aggression. "Kiran Navgire played bril-

liantly and took the game away from us in the period that she batted and we never quite recovered.

"Firstly, I don't think Navgire was going to open. The injury (to Vrinda), I guess, gave them a licence to put her up in the order. We weren't quite planning for her in the batting," said Edwards.

Now that Navgire has the licence to kill, the Warriorz can hope for a more productive WPL season. (PTI)

Murray says he's unlikely to play 'past this summer' after loss to Humbert in Dubai



DUBAI, Feb 29: Two-time Wimbledon champion Andy Murray reiterated Wednesday that he is likely to retire from tennis before the season is over.

"I'm likely not going to play past this summer," the 36-year-old Murray said after losing 6-2, 6-4 to fifth-seeded Ugo Humbert at the Dubai Championships.

After rallying past Denis Shapovalov in three sets on Monday for his 500th hard-court win, Murray hinted he was heading into the "last few months" of his career.

And he expanded a bit on those plans after losing to Humbert, although he stopped short of setting a firm timeline.

"I get asked about it after every single match that I play, every single tournament that I play. I'm bored of the question, to be honest," Murray said. "I'm not going to talk more about that between now and whenever the time comes for me to stop. But, yes, I don't plan on playing much past this summer."

Humbert didn't face a break point before converting his first match point to reach the quarterfinals and secure his first career win over Murray, who lifted the trophy in Dubai in 2017. Murray, the 2012 and 2016 Olympic champion, told BBC Radio earlier Wednesday that he wants to play at the Paris Games, which run from July 26-Aug. 11.

"Hopefully I can get the chance to compete at another (Olympics)," said Murray, who also won the U.S. Open in 2012.

Also, top-seeded Daniil Medvedev recovered from a set down to overcome Lorenzo Sonego 3-6, 6-3, 6-3 to reach the quarterfinals.

Medvedev opened his title defense Tuesday by beating Alexander Shevchenko 6-3, 7-5 in his first match since losing the Australian Open final to Jannik Sinner.

Medvedev will next face eighth-seeded Alejandro Davidovich Fokina, who advanced after Jakob Mensik retired with an injury. Davidovich Fokina led 7-6 (7), 1-0 when Mensik stopped.

Jiri Lehecka saved five match points before rallying to beat fourth-seeded Karen Khachanov 6-7 (6), 7-6 (5), 6-4 and Sebastian Korda cruised past Botić van de Zandschulp 6-1, 6-0. Lehecka next faces seventh-seeded Alexander Bublik, who progressed with a 7-6 (8), 7-6 (2) win over Tallon Griekspoor.

Korda will play second-seeded Andrey Rublev, the 2022 champion. Rublev advanced to the quarterfinals for the fifth straight time after eliminating Arthur Cazaux 6-4, 6-4. Third-seeded Hubert Hurkacz advanced with a 7-6 (5), 6-4 win over Christopher O'Connell, and he gets Humbert next. (AP)

YOUNGSTERS DELIVER AGAIN FOR LIVERPOOL

MAN UNITED AND CHELSEA GRAB LATE WINNERS IN FA CUP

LONDON, Feb 29: Manchester United and Chelsea kept alive their hopes of silverware this season by scoring late winners in the FA Cup on Wednesday. Liverpool also advanced to the quarterfinals, with its youngsters coming through big again for Jurgen Klopp.

Casemiro stooped to head in an 89th-minute goal to seal United a 1-0 win at Nottingham Forest and a last-eight meeting with great rival Liverpool, whose youthful team beat second-tier Southampton 3-0 thanks to goals by 18-year-olds Lewis Koumas and Jayden Danns. Chelsea — fresh off a loss to Liverpool in the English League Cup final — left it even later than United to secure its progress, with Conor Gallagher coming off the bench to score in the 90th minute for a 3-2 victory over Leeds. Chelsea will play another second-tier team, Leicester, in the last eight.

Wolverhampton beat

Brighton 1-0 in an all-Premier League matchup and will be at home to Championship team Coventry in the quarterfinals.

Winning the FA Cup could salvage disappointing seasons for United and Chelsea. Who knows, it could also keep their under-pressure managers in their jobs.

Neither team put in a convincing display in the fifth round, but they are still alive in the famous old competition and have home draws to look forward to after late winners from midfielders.

Casemiro got between two defenders and stuck out his head to divert a low free kick that had been whipped in from the left wing by Bruno Fernandes. The Brazil international got a kick in the face for his efforts — blood was seen pouring down his cheek afterward — but, more importantly, a crucial goal.

After a morale-sapping loss to Fulham in the league on Satur-

day, another defeat would have left United in a mess heading into Sunday's Manchester derby against City. Instead, United manager Erik ten Hag was quick to point out that his team has now won seven of its nine games in all competitions in 2024.

"This team, what they showed today, they have to show it every game," Ten Hag said. "We found a way to win."

Chelsea manager Mauricio Pochettino has come under renewed pressure in the wake of his expensively assembled team's loss in the League Cup final. Now he is one game away from a return to Wembley Stadium, this time for the FA Cup semifinals. Gallagher ran onto Enzo Fernandez's pass, span his marker and converted a rising shot to put out a spirited effort from a Leeds team whose priority this season is securing an immediate return to the Premier League. (AP)

Elena Norman did commendable job as CEO: HI chief Dilip Tirkey

ROURKELA, Feb 29: She might have left under acrimonious circumstances, but Hockey India president Dilip Tirkey on Thursday praised outgoing CEO Elena Norman, saying that he appreciates the Australian's contribution towards the growth of the sport.

The former captain, however, rejected Norman's claim of factionalism in HI, saying all is well within the federation.

"Since taking over, we have done good work and I appreciate it. We have seen the performance of the teams in the past two years. Our CEO has done commendable work for Indian hockey. We appreciate her efforts and contribution," Tirkey said here in a media interaction.

Tirkey's comments came a day after he and Singh issued a joint statement denying Norman's assertion of a rift between them. Norman resigned on Tuesday and in an interview to PTI she alleged that there was factionalism in the body. The 49-year-old Australian suggested that Tirkey and Singh were at loggerheads and also com-



plained of a difficult work environment.

"There are two factions in Hockey India. There is (President) Dilip Tirkey and I and there is (Secretary) Bholanath Singh, (Executive Director) Cdr. R K Srivastava and (Treasurer) Sekar J Manoharan," she had said. Norman's resignation came close on the heels of Indian women's hockey team coach Janneke Schopman's decision to quit. She also complained of a difficult work environment. The Dutch coach had accused HI of giving step-motherly treatment to women's hockey.

But Tirkey lauded Schopman's contribution and vowed to provide all possible help to the women's team to make a fresh start.

"The women's team did well in 2023. The girls have done really well. They won the 2023 FIH Nations Cup. Their performance has been good in the Asian Champions Trophy and Asian Games as well.

"They played well in the Olympic Qualifier too but it was purely bad luck. But I have been making a note where we made mistakes, and what demands we couldn't fulfil in time, we are assessing," the former India captain said.

The HI chief said the federation's main focus right now is on preparing the men's team for a podium finish at the Paris Olympics.

"The men's team has already qualified, and we now are thinking of how they can perform better (in Paris)," Tirkey said.

"Side by side, the women's team is also on our mind. We are working on how to make better future plans for them." (PTI)



Spain beat France 2-0, win inaugural edition of Women's Nations League final

SEVILLE (SPAIN), Feb 29: Spain hasn't lost momentum since winning its first World Cup title, defeating France 2-0 on Wednesday to also win the inaugural edition of the Women's Nations League.

Ballon d'Or winner Aitana Bonmati and Mariona Caldentey scored a goal each for Spain in front of 32,657 fans at La Cartuja Stadium in southern Spain. It was a record crowd for Spain's women's team in the country.

Spain also holds the men's Nations League title, having beaten Croatia in the final in June.

"We have a very good present and a very good future," women's team coach Montse Tomé said. "I have a group with very experienced players and with new young players coming up. It's a very positive mix. They have a winning mentality."

France haven't had a shot on goal and that's also a credit to all of the players.

Bonmati, named the player of the match, volleyed in a low cross in the first half and Caldentey doubled the lead shortly after the break in a dominant performance by the hosts. "Happy to win another title," Bonmati said. "It may seem that what we have achieved is easy, that we have an obligation to win everything, but this is not something easy. And here we are lifting another trophy." It was Spain's first victory over France.

"They'll be the team to beat at the Olympics, it won't be easy," France coach Hervé Renard said. "We are going to have to keep improving, learn lessons and keep moving forward. Let's say we have taken one step but we haven't taken the second. There's still a lot of work to do."

Spain had its breakthrough tournament at the World Cup in New Zealand and Australia, winning the title in its third appearance.

The celebrations were marred by one of the country's worst crises, though, as the then-president of the Spanish soccer federation, Luis Rubiales, kissed player Jenni Hermoso on the lips during the awards ceremony to spark an outrage in soccer and Spanish society in general. Rubiales eventually resigned, and prosecutors later accused him of sexual assault.

"Today we get to celebrate again. We deserve it," Hermoso said. "We try to enjoy ourselves but we also have the responsibility that there are so many people behind us who want to follow in our footsteps. We are so proud that there are so many girls who want to be champions in the future."

Spain defeated the Netherlands 3-0 in last week's semifinal, a result that also secured the team a place in the Paris Olympics.

France was already qualified for the Olympics as the host country.

"We didn't play a good game against a team that are world champions and flying high in women's football," Renard said. "You have to be aggressive and keep the ball when you get it, but we lost it again straight away."

Spain scored a competition-high 28 goals, seven more than any other team. It also had the most total attempts at 131. Alexia Putellas, the former Ballon d'Or winner, did not enter the match for Spain. She hasn't played for club or country since undergoing arthroscopic surgery on her left knee last year. (AP)

New records, tales of grit emerge at Khelo India University Games 2023

GUWAHATI, Feb 29: It has been tales of grit and determination at the Khelo India University Games (KIUG) Ashtalakshmi 2023, which comes to an end on Thursday, with new meet records achieved and paths set for future star players of the country.

The athletics section boosted of at least four new KIUG records at the events played at the Indira Gandhi stadium here.

Pole vaulter M Gowtham of University of Madras cleared the distance of 5m to take home the men's pole vault gold medal.

Javelin thrower Jyoti of Chaudhary Devi Lal University, who had won the gold medal in the National Open Athletics meet in Bengaluru in October last year, came up with a throw of 53.16m in her fourth attempt to clinch the women's javelin throw gold, and also set a new meet record.

In the women's 800m event, Panjab University's Amandeep Kaur clocked 2:11.27s to clinch the gold medal with a new

Games record, while Vikash of Chandigarh University registered a new Games record in men's 1500 m clocking 3:50.70s to take the gold.

Chandigarh University looks poised to top medals' tally with 28 golds in its kitty already, followed by Lovely Professional University with 17 golds and Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, with 12 golds.

The KIUG 2023 were held in 18 venues across seven cities of North East, with Guwahati hosting the opening ceremony which was attended by Union Sports and Youth Affairs Minister Anurag Thakur, among others. More than 4,500 players from over 200 universities competed in this fourth edition of KIUG.

The KIUG is a part of the Indian government's Khelo India initiative that was launched in 2016, focussing on promoting grassroots sports and identifying young talents from across the country.

For some like Mrinal



Chauhan of Lovely Professional University, a second spot in the Recurve men on debut at the KIUG was no mean feat.

With limited financial means to pursue archery which involves high cost training equipment as his family depends on the earnings of his father's stationery shop, Mrinal's early struggles are now nearly over.

Support through the (Tagert Olympic Podium) TOP scheme,

a flagship initiative by the ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs, meant that he could take forward his passion, honing his skills at the Tata Archery Academy in Jamshedpur.

"TOPS has allowed me to dream bigger, aim higher. Now, I don't have to dependent on my father for my financial needs as I get stipend every month," the 20-year-old said, adding that the Games were also a vital prepa-

ration for the upcoming trials leading to the Paris Olympics qualification events.

Jyoti Kattimai of Karnataka University may have failed to make a podium finish, but her story of fighting tough financial constraints to make this far is an inspiration in itself.

With her father working as a scrap dealer and mother as a housekeeping staff in the same sports hostel in Dharwad where Jyoti trains, it has been a tale of long struggle for the 24-year-old.

Jyoti's family of eight members (including four sisters) expanded to 13 after two of her elder sisters returned home with their children after a few years of marriage, and the family just about pulling along.

She may have had to remain contend with the fifth spot in the 800m for women, but Jyoti hopes to keep on pursuing her game with her coach Shama Patil being her biggest support, who also sponsors her university fees. (PTI)

KL Rahul ruled out of fifth Test, Bumrah returns: BCCI

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: Senior India batter KL Rahul will not feature in the fifth and final Test against England in Dharamsala owing to an injury while pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah will return to the team, the BCCI said on Thursday.

Rahul, who continues to feel sore in his right quadriceps, has travelled to London to get an expert opinion on his injury.

The wicketkeeper-batter became unavailable after the series-opener in Hyderabad in January and as per the BCCI, he was 90 per cent fit before the third Test in Rajkot earlier this month.

"Mr. KL Rahul, whose participation in the final IDFC First Bank Test was subject to fitness, has been ruled out of the fifth and final Test in Dharamsala. The BCCI Medical Team is closely monitoring him and coordinating with specialists in London for further management of his issue," the Board said in a release.

Meanwhile Bumrah, who was released from the squad for the fourth Test in Ranchi in line with the team's workload management policy, will link up with the squad



in Dharamsala for the final Test, beginning March 7.

India have already taken an unassailable 3-1 lead, following the victory in the fourth Test in Ranchi.

Rahul's absence from the final Test means Rajat Patidar remained with the squad but the MP batter

can't be sure of his place in the playing eleven, having aggregated only 63 runs in six innings.

All-rounder Washington Sundar has also been released from the squad.

"He will join Tamil Nadu – his Ranji Trophy side – for their Ranji Trophy Semi-final fixture against

Mumbai, starting March 2nd, 2024. He will join the India squad after the completion of the domestic fixture for the fifth Test, if need be," the BCCI said.

Rahul needs to be fully fit before the IPL where he will lead Lucknow Super Giants and is expected to bat in the middle order to bolster

his chances of making the India squad for the T20 World Cup in the USA and the Caribbean.

It is the same quadriceps injury that had sidelined Rahul for almost four months last year.

Having got injured during the IPL, Rahul returned to action during the Asia Cup in September last and made instant impact. In the Test tour of South Africa last year, Rahul was the only century-maker for India in the drawn series.

The BCCI also said senior pacer Mohammed Shami is recovering well after undergoing a surgery on February 26 for his right heel problem.

"He is recovering well and will soon head to the National Cricket Academy (NCA) in Bengaluru to commence his rehabilitation process," the Board said of Shami.

India's updated squad for fifth Test: Rohit Sharma (C), Jasprit Bumrah (VC), Yashasvi Jaiswal, Shubman Gill, Rajat Patidar, Sarfaraz Khan, Dhruv Jurel (WK), KS Bharat (WK), Devdutt Padikkal, R Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, Mohd. Siraj, Mukesh Kumar, Akash Deep. (PTI)

Apply to all, else it won't get results: Irfan questions denial of contracts to Iyer, Kishan

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: Former India pacer Irfan Pathan has questioned the BCCI's decision to deny central contracts to Ishan Kishan and Shreyas Iyer for ignoring a diktat to play Ranji Trophy, saying that players like Hardik Pandya have not been judged on the same parameter.

The BCCI on Wednesday terminated Kishan and Iyer's central contracts, while Pandya, who has not featured in Tests since 2018, secured a place in Grade A.

"If players like Hardik don't want to play red ball cricket, should he and others like him participate in white-ball domestic cricket when they aren't on national duty?" he questioned BCCI's decision, in his post on X.

"If this doesn't apply to all, then Indian cricket won't achieve the desired results!" he added.

The 25-year-old Kishan did not turn up for Jharkhand throughout the team's campaign in Ranji Trophy despite not being on national duty since leaving from the tour of



South Africa in December last, citing personal reasons.

He has instead focussed on preparing for the IPL next month. He is competing in the ongoing DY Patil T20 Tournament in Mumbai and will be turning up for the Mum-

bai Indians in the IPL.

Iyer did not make himself available for Mumbai's Ranji quarterfinal against Baroda after being excluded from the Indian team following the second Test against England, citing a groin injury.

He, however, has been picked for the Ranji semifinals starting March 2 and will be back to lead Kolkata Knight Riders in the IPL beginning on March 22.

Irfan believes that the duo will come back strongly.

"They are talented cricketers, both Shreyas and Ishan. Hoping they bounce back and come back stronger," he said.

The exclusion of Iyer and Kishan is being seen as a stern message to young players unwilling to put in the hard yards in first-class cricket, while chasing white-ball glory and lucrative IPL contracts.

On Wednesday, former India coach Ravi Shastri also backed the embattled duo.

"In the game of cricket, comebacks define the spirit. Chin-up, @ShreyasIyer15 and @ishankishan51! Dig deep, face challenges, and come back even stronger. Your past achievements speak volumes, and I have no doubt you'll conquer once again," Shastri had posted on X. (PTI)

Shafali fifty headlines DC's march to 192/5 against RCB

BENGALURU, Feb 29: Opener Shafali Verma made a fluent fifty to steer Delhi Capitals to a hefty 194 for five against Royal Challengers Bangalore in their Women's Premier League match here on Thursday.

Verma (50, 31b, 3x4, 4x6) and Alice Capsey (46, 33b, 4x4, 2x6) added 82 runs for the second wicket as the Capitals recovered well from the early loss of their skipper Meg Lanning.

Marizanne Kapp (32, 16b, 2x4, 3x6) and Jess Jonassen (36 not out, 16b, 4x4, 2x6) also played blunders towards the end to give a fillip to the Capitals as they added 58 runs for the fifth wicket in a little over four overs.

Royal Challengers were forced to rest all-rounder Ellyse Perry because of an illness, and brought in Nadine de Klerk. (PTI)

Shreevats Goswami alleges match-fixing in Kolkata league cricket; CAB says it's probing

KOLKATA, Feb 29: Wicket-keeper-batter Shreevats Goswami, who was a member of the 2008 Under-19 World Cup-winning team, on Thursday alleged that a match in the Cricket Association of Bengal's (CAB) first division league seemed fixed from the manner in which some dismissals took place during the game.

Goswami shared videos of a game between Mohammedan Sporting and Town Club on his Facebook page.

He alleged that Mohammedan Sporting batters seemed to be intentionally getting out to concede seven points to Town Club which is associated with former Team India manager Debabrata Das, who is the current CAB secretary. Das was the Indian team's administrative manager during the tour of England in 2022.

"This is a Super Division match in Kolkata Club Cricket, two big teams doing this, any idea what's going on here?" Goswami posted.

In the first video, a right-handed batter is seen leaving the ball coming straight to his stumps as he then walked off the field.

Bajrang refuses to appear in selection trials under WFI, moves court against selection competition

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: Rejecting the Wrestling Federation of India's invitation to compete in the upcoming national trials, ace Indian wrestler Bajrang Punia has moved an urgent joint petition in the Delhi High Court, seeking a stay on the selection competition here on March 10-11. It has been learnt from reliable sources that Bajrang, Vinesh Phogat, Sakshi Malik and her husband Satyawart Kadiyan moved the court on Wednesday and the matter will be heard on Friday.

While Bajrang did not confirm filing a petition, he questioned the government's silence on the issues concerning Indian wrestling.

The Indian team for the Asian Wrestling Championships Olympic Qualifier in Kyrgyzstan next month will be selected on the basis of the trials at Delhi's IG Stadium. Bajrang told PTI from Russia, where he is training for the last two months, that he has spent a fortune abroad but he won't com-

pete in trials if they are conducted by the Sanjay Singh-led WFI.

"I would not spend Rs 30 lakh on my training if I were to not compete in the trials, but how the suspended WFI is conducting the trials? I don't get what the government's compulsion is (on allowing WFI to conduct trials)?" Bajrang said.

"I don't understand how a sports body suspended by the Indian government issue a circular and announce the trials. Why is the government silent? We will appear in the trials only if the ad-hoc panel or the government conducts it. How can a suspended body announce the trials?" he asked.

WFI president Sanjay Singh had appealed to the protesting wrestlers to forget the past and appear for the trials.

The trio had led a prolonged protest at Jantar Mantar, demanding the arrest of then WFI president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh,

who they had accused of sexual harassment.

Bajrang, the Tokyo Olympics bronze winner, said that not just him but Sakshi Malik and Vinesh Phogat will also skip the trials.

"This decision to not appear in trials is a joint decision taken by us. We are together in this," he said. PTI tried to reach out Sakshi and Vinesh for confirmation but the former did not return calls and the latter could not be contacted.

Asked specifically if they have moved court against the trials, Bajrang denied the development but a source in the WFI confirmed to PTI that four wrestlers have approached the Delhi High Court.

The United World Wrestling (UWW) had lifted the suspension on the WFI earlier this month but the government, which had also suspended the national sports federation (NSF) for flouting rules, has not yet made such a decision. (PTI)

Even Rohit, Kohli should play domestic cricket when free: Kirti Azad

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: Member of the 1983 World Cup-winning team Kirti Azad on Thursday backed the BCCI's directive for cricketers to play Ranji Trophy, saying it's a good move and the rule should be applicable to every India team player, including Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli.

The out-of-favour duo of Ishan Kishan and Shreyas Iyer were excluded from the list of centrally-contracted players after they ignored the directive to play Ranji Trophy.

"It (directive) is a very good move. Everybody should be playing Ranji Trophy cricket, but currently the emphasis is on the IPL. It is good, it is entertaining but the real cricket is the (five days) cricket. Playing in domestic cricket is good, it keeps you in touch.

"But whenever you are free, even if you're a Rohit Sharma or a Virat Kohli, you should go back and play domestic cricket for the state. That (state) gave you the opportunity to be a player, get selected and then play for the country.

He felt that penalising just Ishan and Iyer wasn't right.

"Just to penalise the two is not correct, I think everybody should be penalised. Everybody should be seen with the same mirror," Azad told PTI. Video.



Azad declined to comment on whether this was the potential end of the road for Ishan and Iyer after their names were excluded from the list of centrally-contracted players.

"My question is, they are playing enough domestic cricket? Are they playing T20

Athletes in country to be issued digital certificates, says Anurag Thakur

NEW DELHI, Feb 29: Sports Minister Anurag Thakur on Thursday announced that the government will issue digital certificates to registered athletes across the country, a move which would ensure a transparent account of their participation and performance.

The digital certificate will have dates of the athletes' participation in competitions and serve as proof of their achievements.

"With athletes at the heart of our progressing and growing sporting ecosystem, the sports ministry has made a crucial decision to promote the 'issuance of digital certificates to athletes'," wrote Thakur on 'X'.

The ministry has directed all National Sports Federations (NSFs) to only release merit and participation certificates through the DigiLocker. The minister had first announced his plan to simplify things for athletes and National Sports Federations (NSFs) during the National Sports Day on August 29 last year.

On Thursday, the minister said, "Keeping up with our policy of 'athlete-first', NSFs have been advocated to issue certificates to athletes via DigiLocker, an initiative of Ministry of Electronics and IT."

He said the digital certificates will add a new aspect to sports administration and management of sportspersons.

"This decision has been taken to ensure the accessibility, security and

veracity of documents and promote transparency and efficiency in the sports administration of the NSFs. This will further lead to ease of living for our sportspersons across the nation.

"From June 1 this year, only certificates issued by the (sports) federations through DigiLocker shall be valid and no physical certificates issued will be recognised for government and other benefits. We have advised the federations that their affiliated units must also start issuing the certificates through the DigiLocker from January 1 next year," added Thakur.

Enumerating the benefits of issuing sports certificates through DigiLocker, Thakur said it will make access and sharing of certificates easy, eliminate the need for physical copies, provide a secure environment for storing and verifying documents and ensure their integrity and authenticity.

This, he said, would streamline the certificate issuance process and reduce administrative burden.

"These certificates are proof of the athletes' commitment, effort, and accomplishments in their respective sports, and are currently distributed through outdated and inefficient, conventional methods," he said, adding that NSFs must put in place technology-based tools and solutions to serve the interest of sports, especially athletes. (PTI)

National camp for senior wrestlers to begin after trials: WFI



NEW DELHI, Feb 29: The Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) is gearing up for the senior National camp after almost 15 months with Delhi likely to replace Patiala as the venue because of the ongoing farmers' protest. The WFI-organised National camps are on hold since January 2023 when the country's three elite wrestlers accused then WFI president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh of sexual harassment, a controversy that pegged back Indian wrestling. The National camp will commence soon after the trials, scheduled at the IG Stadium here on March 10 and 11.

The ad-hoc panel, which was entrusted with managing the day-to-day affairs due to the suspension of the WFI, had started the training camp for men (Rohtak) and women (Patiala) after conducting its own Nationals in Jaipur.

The WFI, after United World Wrestling (UWW) lifted its suspension, announced the trials to select the national teams for the Asian Wrestling Championships in Bishkek (April 11-16) and the Continental Olympic Qualifier in the Kyrgyzstan capital (April 19-21).

"After we conduct these trials, the top-four in each category will be invited to be part of the National camp," WFI president Sanjay Singh told PTI.

"We have not yet finalised the venues for the camps," the sports

administrator from Varanasi, added. It has been learnt that the SAI centres in Sonapat will, as usual, be the venue for the men's camp and the IG Stadium here could host the women's camp.

"The Lucknow SAI centre is out of question and we have to choose between Patiala and Delhi. As of today, the restriction on movement in and around of Punjab will make it a bit inconvenient for everyone to reach Patiala. So, probably, we can request the government to provide the IG Stadium for the women's camp," said a WFI source.

The four-best wrestlers at the recently concluded Nationals in Jaipur (conducted by the ad-hoc panel) and Pune (conducted by WFI), have been invited to compete in the trials.

Those who did not compete in either Nationals but are good performers will also be allowed to compete.

"We will invite not just the winners of the trials but also the finalists and the semifinalists for the national camp. If the runner-up or number 3-4 are not interested, which happens sometimes, then that camp spot will be offered to the next best wrestler and so on," informed the source.

It has also been learnt that the WFI has decided to conduct the U15 and U20 Nationals from March 28 to 30 in Noida.

The winners, finalists and the two semifinal winners will later be asked to join the National camp. (PTI)

like me and Ravi Shastri.

"All these senior Test team players would play for their sides, would play for the pride of their state which seems missing in the youngsters nowadays," he added.

He questioned why India players had issues playing domestic cricket while England cricketers willingly played county cricket when not in the national side.

"Look at county cricket: there are 20-plus counties and there are numerous three-day and four-day games along with T20 cricket, but every player is involved there. If a player is left out of the Test squad, then he returns to play for his county.

"So why can't we have our players playing those domestic matches, that's the big question," he added.

He praised players like Dhruv Jurel and Sarfaraz Khan for finding the balance between T20 cricket for their IPL teams and playing Ranji Trophy.

"There are players like Jurel, Sarfaraz who do play T20 cricket but, at the end of the day, are also representing their states in the Ranji trophy. The bowlers also get into the rhythm of bowling longer spells when they regularly play domestic cricket. It (Ranji) is not a form of slam-bang and thank you," he said. (PTI)