

6 WORLD

8 NATION

- Russia fires 31 missiles at Kyiv in the first attack in 44 days
- Vietnam's vice president becomes interim president
- Provided all details of electoral bonds to EC: SBI tells SC
- Electoral Bonds scheme worst corruption scam: Yechury

ED arrests Kejriwal



NEW DELHI, March 21: Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Thursday night in an excise policy-linked money laundering case, officials said.

The arrest, the first of a sitting chief minister, came hours after the Delhi High Court refused to grant protection to the AAP national convener from any coercive action by the agency. The 55-year-old leader's arrest, amid campaign for the Lok Sabha elections, drew angry reactions from his Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

Soon after the high court order, an ED team reached his residence and carried out searches. Subsequently, he was arrested, officials said.

Officials said the ED would produce the chief minister before a court here on Friday and seek his custody for interrogation.

As the ED officials carried out their action inside, additional Delhi Police personnel and Rapid Action Force (RAF) and CRPF teams were deployed around the chief minister's residence.

The additional deployment was made as the ED sought extra security measures in anticipation of protests by AAP supporters, sources said. A large number of AAP workers and leaders gathered near the chief minister's residence and shouted slogans against the ED action. During the day, Kejriwal moved the Supreme Court against the high court's order denying him any relief in the matter.

The ED's action is virtually a replay of what transpired during the arrest last week of Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) leader K Kavitha, who is now in ED custody in the same case.

The case pertains to alleged corruption and money laundering in formulating and executing the Delhi government's excise policy for 2021-22, which was later scrapped. AAP leaders Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh are in judicial custody in the case. Kejriwal's name has been (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

NIA takes custody of ISIS duo

15 days analysis of intel inputs, planning led to arrest of ISIS India head: Police

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 21: Assam Police's Special Task Force (STF) inspector general Parthasarathi Mahanta on Thursday informed that the two dreaded ISIS cadres, who were apprehended on Wednesday, have already been handed over to the National Investigation Agency (NIA) for further legal action.

Mahanta said this while addressing a press conference where he shared the process which led to the arrest of ISIS India head from Assam.

He informed that it was 15 days of meticulous analysis of intelligence inputs, scouting for local links, foolproof planning, raising a solid team and no-error execution that led to the arrest of ISIS India head from Assam.

The ISIS India head Haris Farooqi alias Harish Ajmal Farukhi and his associate Anurag Singh alias Rehan were arrested in Assam's Dhubri district on Wednesday after they had crossed over from Bangladesh.



"We got information from a central agency around 15 days back that there could be possible movement of top-rung ISIS leaders in certain parts of Dhubri. The input was credible and so the STF was involved," he added.

The STF then started working on probable areas of movement, trying to



find local links if any and prepared a plan accordingly to arrest them, Mahanta said.

"By March 18, we narrowed down our focus and we got very specific information on March 19 on their likely movement. We immediately rushed to Dhubri's Dharmasala. We saw two men



walking on the road at around 4 am on March 20 looking for transportation to go to their destination," he added.

The police already had the pictures of ISIS cadres and two of them matched with the men walking on the road, the IGP said. "We arrested them and immediately brought (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

HT BRIEFS

Teacher's attendance

GUWAHATI: In a bid to bolster accountability and streamline attendance management in the state's educational institutions, the Department of School Education, Government of Assam, has issued a groundbreaking directive mandating the use of the Shiksha Setu app for tracking daily attendance of both teachers and students. Effective from April 1, 2024, this initiative marks a significant step towards modernizing educational governance in Assam. Dr. Om Prakash (IAS), Mission Director of Samagra Shiksha in Assam, communicated this pivotal decision through an official notification addressed to key stakeholders, including Additional District Commissioners (Education), Inspectors of Schools, District Elementary Education Officers, and District Mission Coordinators across all districts.

Earthquake

ITANAGAR: In the early hours of Thursday, Arunachal Pradesh experienced two earthquakes, stirring residents from their sleep with tremors but fortunately causing no immediate harm or damage. As per the the National Center for Seismology (NCS), the first quake, measuring 3.7 on the Richter scale, struck at 01:49 am and its epicentre was pinpointed in West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh, with coordinates at latitude 27.38 and longitude 92.77. The quake's depth was estimated at 10 kilometres.

Two detained

SHILLONG: In a significant development, two individuals were detained on Thursday as part of ongoing investigations into the activities of the proscribed outfit HNLC. Revelations from their interrogation, along with several others, have shed light on the insidious tactics employed by the HNLC to manipulate innocent youth through propaganda, aiming to sustain their extortion operations, disclosed Ri Bhoi district SP, Jagpal Singh Dhanoa, on Thursday.

US recognises Arunachal as Indian territory: Official

WASHINGTON, March 21: The United States recognises Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory and strongly opposes any unilateral attempts by China to advance its territorial claims across the Line of Actual Control, a senior Biden administration official has said, days after the Chinese military reiterated its claim over the state following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit there.

Earlier this week, Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang said that the southern part of Xizang (the Chinese name for Tibet) is an inherent part of China's territory, and Beijing "never acknowledges and firmly opposes" the "so-called Arunachal Pradesh illegally established by India".

China, which claims Arunachal

Pradesh as South Tibet, routinely objects to Indian leaders' visits to the state to highlight its claims. Beijing has also named the area Zangnan. On March 9, Prime Minister Modi dedicated to the nation the Sela Tunnel built at an altitude of 13,000 feet in Arunachal Pradesh that will provide all-weather connectivity to strategically located Tangang and is expected to ensure better movement of troops along the frontier region.

Speaking at his daily press conference on Wednesday, State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said, "The United States recognises Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory and we strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to advance territorial claims by incursions or encroachments, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Congress moves EC against 'Modi Parivaar' and 'Modi ki Guarantee' advertisements

NEW DELHI, March 21: Alleging misuse of state resources for the poll campaign of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Congress on Thursday complained to the Election Commission against "Modi Parivaar" and "Modi ki Guarantee" advertisements and sought their immediate removal and action against those behind it.

A delegation of Congress leaders comprising Mukul Wasnik, Salman Khurshid and Supriya Shrinete met the Election Commission and handed over a set of complaints about alleged violations of the model code of conduct for the Lok Sabha polls and demanded immediate action.

The Congress delegation also lodged a complaint against the BJP's "false advertisements" invoking the 2G allocation issue and al-



leged that the party was pursuing a decade-old narrative that had been thoroughly discredited through a comprehensive judicial process.

The party prayed for removal of the advertisement and action against its authors and publishers.

In another complaint, the Congress sought removal of 'Modi Parivaar' advertisement, alleging that it highlights how state resources are being misused for a veiled cam-

aign advertisement.

"The brazen use of the armed forces violates multiple directives of the ECI. The fact that the Ministry of I&B is being compelled to produce and broadcast the same also needs to be addressed. We seek the removal of the advertisement and action against the guilty parties," the Congress memorandum read. In a separate complaint, the Congress demanded (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Rahul's 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' won't impact BJP's electoral prospects: Rijiju



ITANAGAR, March 21: Union minister Kiren Rijiju has asserted that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' will have no impact on the BJP's electoral prospects, and the NDA will win the Lok Sabha polls with a thumping majority.

The yatra which started on January 14 from Thoubal in Manipur, concluded in Mumbai on March 16, covering a distance of almost 6,700 km.

"Wherever Rahul Gandhi went during his yatra, the Congress will lose all the seats there as nobody takes him seriously. If he refrains from campaigning, there is a probability that the grand old party might win a few

seats," Rijiju, the Union Earth Sciences and Food Processing Industries Minister, told PTI in an interview.

The BJP leader also slammed Gandhi for his "hate speeches" against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, contending that it reflects a "deep-seated animosity".

"The heart, soul and the body of the Congress leader are filled with hatred against the PM and the BJP, which is not good for his health. Gandhi does not like Modi because he comes from a very humble and poor family. Gandhi and his people cannot come to terms with the fact that a poor common man can become the prime minister," Rijiju claimed. Modi has been elected as the PM because of his ability, and the love and blessings of people, he said.

Rijiju predicted a massive victory for the BJP in the Lok Sabha polls, asserting that it would surpass 370 seats and the NDA, as a whole, would win more than 400 seats.

The parliamentary elections as well as assembly polls in some states will be held between April 19 and June 1. Continuing his attack on Gandhi, the Union minister said: "We never take (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

SGPC delegation visits Dibrugarh jail to meet NSA detainees

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, March 21: A seven-member delegation from the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), Punjab, arrived at the Dibrugarh jail to meet with the ten members of the Waris Punjab De group, including its chief Amritpal Singh.

This visit comes in the wake of an ongoing hunger strike by the incarcerated members since February 17.

The SGPC delegates, bearing goodwill and prayers, brought prasad from the revered Golden Temple in an earnest attempt to persuade the hunger strikers to end their protest.

The primary demand of the Waris Punjab De members has been their transfer from Dibrugarh jail to Punjab.

Amritpal Singh, a prominent pro-Khalistani figure, along with his nine top aides, has been detained at the Dibrugarh Central Jail since April 23, 2023, following his arrest in Punjab.

Notably, the ten individuals namely Pappalpreet Singh, Daljeet Singh Kalsi, Kulwant Singh Dhalwal, Varinder Singh Johal, Gurmeet Singh Bhukhanwala, Harjit Singh, Basant Singh, Gurinder Singh Aujla, and



Bhagwant Singh, also known as Pradhan Mantri Bajek, are facing charges under the stringent National Security Act (NSA) along with other criminal offenses.

Addressing the media, a member of the SGPC delegation expressed their primary concern for the health and well-being of the Waris Punjab De members. "We have come here to meet the incarcerated individuals and extend our support. The prasad from the Akal Takht Darbar Sahib of the Golden Temple is a gesture of hope (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

In India, there were more than 1.6 crore and over 2.2 crore livebirths in 1950 and 2021 India's fertility rate down from 6.2 to under 2 since 1950, will fall to 1.3 in 2050: Study

NEW DELHI, March 21: India's fertility rate dropped from nearly 6.2 in 1950 to just under 2 in 2021, and is projected to fall further to 1.29 and 1.04 in 2050 and 2100, respectively, according to a new global research published in The Lancet journal.

These numbers were found to be in line with global trends, where the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was over 4.8 children per woman in 1950 and fell to 2.2 children per woman in 2021. These figures have been projected to fall to 1.8 and 1.6 in 2050 and 2100, respectively.

The study found that there were 12.9 crore livebirths the world over in 2021 -- an increase from roughly 9.3 crore in 1950, but a decline from the peak of 14.2 crore in 2016.

In India, there were more than 1.6



crore and over 2.2 crore livebirths in 1950 and 2021. The number is projected to fall to 1.3 crore in 2050.

However, even as much of the planet contends with the challenges of low fertility, many low-income

countries will still be facing high fertility issues during the 21st century, said the researchers from the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) 2021 Fertility and Forecasting Collaborators.

The high fertility in these low-income regions, particularly in some countries and territories in western and eastern sub-Saharan Africa, will result in a demographically divided world, they said.

The majority of children will be born in some of the poorest regions in the world, with low-income countries' share in the global livebirths almost doubling from 18 per cent to 35 per cent from 2021 to 2100, the researchers projected.

Further, with the worsening climate change, many of these high-fertility low-income countries are expected to also experience more frequent floods, droughts and extreme heat, all of which threaten food, water and resource security, along with dramatically raising the risk of (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Sonowal criticises Congress for neglecting development in North Bank of Brahmaputra

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, March 21: Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal accused Congress party of ignoring development of North bank of Brahmaputra for decades here at Kotoha in Dibrugarh on Thursday. Sonowal asserted that from Jonai to Dhubri, little had been accomplished to alleviate public transportation woes and enhance the quality of life.

"Under the Congress government, the residents of the North bank felt particularly marginalized and overlooked. Since Prime Minister Modi assumed office in 2014, approval for the construction of eight new bridges over the Brahmaputra has been secured, each progressing through various stages of development. This embodies the essence of 'Modi Ki Guarantee,' Sonowal said while addressing BJP party workers meet at Kotoha under



the Khowang Legislative Assembly Constituency (LAC). It is ironic but Assam failed to get much out of Congress rule, even though it sent then Prime Minister of Congress led UPA government to Rajya Sabha, the union minister said.

"Even then, the basic issues of the state like peace, prosperity, progress

remained ignored during the dark era of Congress led UPA government. Whatever the opposition says, they are hand in glove with the Congress, and people will not tolerate their misdeeds that crippled Assam. The India under Congress was marred with corruption, dynastic politics, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Former APHLC workers from Karbi Anglong join BJP, clarify allegations



HT Bureau
DIPHU, March 21: Party workers and supporters from Thesojur and Inglongkiri areas of the Lumbajong Member of Autonomous Constituency (MAC) constituency in Karbi Anglong, who were formerly associated with the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC), announced their transition to the BJP on Tuesday. They emphasised that they were previously aligned with APHLC and not affiliated with any independent party or the BJP.

Addressing concerns raised by some APHLC leaders claiming that those joining the BJP were former BJP members who had returned, Semson Bey, the former APHLC organising secretary of Lumbajong MAC Constituency Committee, clarified during a press briefing at Longsing Teron's residence on 5th Miles Lumding Road. Bey, along with 1053 other former APHLC workers, stated, "Rajen Timung, an APHLC leader, alleged that we were previously associated with the BJP, then switched to APHLC, and are now returning

to the BJP. We want to make it clear that we have never been supporters of any independent party or former members of the BJP. The 1053 individuals from Thesojur and Inglongkiri areas who have joined the BJP were formerly affiliated with APHLC."

Bey expressed frustration with the ongoing issue of the Sixth Scheduled, which he feels has misled the public. Kamsing Engti, former president of APHLC Langsoli-et Polling Station, echoed Bey's sentiments, stating that he and the other 1053 former APHLC workers made the decision to join the BJP voluntarily, without any external influence or inducement.

"We have been convinced by the development initiatives undertaken by the BJP government. Our decision to join the BJP was made willingly, not under any external influence or inducement." The newly joined former APHLC workers expressed their commitment to wholeheartedly support the BJP in the upcoming elections, particularly in the 6-Diphu (ST) Parliamentary Constituency.

KKHSOU celebrates World Poetry Day

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 21: The discipline of Assamese, PGB School of Humanities, KKHSOU commemorated World Poetry Day with a special lecture and recitals at the Conference hall of its city campus at Khanapara. The event was graced by the presence of the vice chancellor of the University, faculty members, officers, employees and scholars. The welcome address was delivered by the vice chancellor of KKHSOU, professor Rajendra Prasad Das. In his address, the vice chancellor deliberated on the significance of poetry in everyone's life. Dipak Jyoti Baruah, a distinguished professor from Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, delivered an insightful lecture on the importance of poetry. Baruah explored the essence of poetry, elucidating its mechanics, context and relevance. With a focus on both global and Assamese poetry, Baruah's discourse provided a comprehensive understanding of the art form's diverse aspects.

Renowned poet Anubhab Tulasi graced the occasion with a mesmerising recital of his own selected poems in Assamese, English, and Hindi. His evocative verses traversed linguistic boundaries, resonating with the audience and highlighting the universal appeal of poetry.

The director of PGB School of humanities and registrar (i/c) of KKHSOU, professor Pranjit Bora in his concluding remarks recited Subudh Sarkar's poetry, adding a touch of nostalgia and reverence to the event. Professor Bora's rendition underscored the timeless beauty and emotional depth of Sarkar's verses. Neeva Rani Phukan, associate professor of Assamese introduced the invited dignitaries and Sanjib Bora, assistant professor of Assamese, served as the host of the event. The celebration of World Poetry Day at KKHSOU was a testament to the enduring power of poetry to transcend languages and cultures, fostering unity and understanding among diverse audiences.

Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma Award 2024

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, March 21: Noted social activist and the founder of Parijat Academy, Guwahati, Uttam Teron, has been named for the prestigious 6th Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma Award 2024, which is regarded as the highest honour in the name of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, a social reformer.

In a press release on Thursday, Dr Ajit Boro, president of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma Trust, announced that the trust, a non-profit organisation, has approved Uttam Teron's name for the 6th Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma Award 2024. This decision was made during a meeting held on Tuesday. Teron is being honoured for his innovative initiatives for underprivileged and needy children, his selfless service to human society, and his sincere efforts for the benefit of society. The award includes a cash prize of ₹ 50,000, a citation, and a memento. The award ceremony will take place on April 18, 2024, on the occasion of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma's birthday.

Tiwa Cultural Festival set to showcase rich heritage in Morigaon

Three-day festival aims to address contemporary challenges faced by the community

HT Correspondent
MORIGAON, March 21: With the aim of globalising the rich culture of the Bhumiputra Tiwa (Lalung) living in Assam and the North East since prehistoric times and preserving, promoting, and disseminating their cultural resources, the 'Tiwa Cultural Festival, 2024' will be held on March 29, 30 & 31, 2024, with a comprehensive three-day program.

The Tiwa society is rich in ancient heritage and culture and is full of colourful cultural splendour. The Tiwa people have been governed by kings and state rule since ancient times and still represent their ancient heritage while maintaining their dignity. They celebrate various festivals like Chhagra Mishawa, Yangli Mishawa, Banjua Mishawa, Songkhangfaja Mishawa, Langkhunfaja Mishawa, Khaplangrwa Mishawa, Muinari Kasti Mishawa, Barat Festival, Jonabil Mela Festival, Pichu (Bihu), etc., with their own traditions. Such festivals are a colourful combination of songs, dances, and instruments. In the present era of unprecedented advances in science and technology, the cultural resources of the Tiwa people are facing various chal-



lenges. The Tiwa Cultural Festival, 2024, is being organised by the Tiwa Autonomous Council in collaboration with Tiwa national organisations at Morigaon Higher Secondary and Multipurpose School grounds and 'Tiwa Fa-Indraching Deuri Kshetra' for three days to do the people, 2013 Tiwa Cultural Festival Celebration Committee president and Morigaon MLA Ramakanta Deuri said at a press conference.

The Tiwa Cultural Festival will be held

Atul Bora and Keshab Mahanta attended the meeting to bolster campaign coordination

AGP leadership strategises support for BJP candidate in Jorhat LS seat

HT Correspondent
JORHAT, March 21: AGP president and working president Atul Bora and Keshab Mahanta, both ministers in the Himanta Biswa Sarma-led government, attended a meeting on Thursday with party workers and office-bearers from 10 assembly constituencies and four districts covered by the Jorhat Lok Sabha seat at the Jorhat district party office.

Party sources stated that the meeting was organised to discuss strategy on how to lend support to the BJP candidate for the Jorhat Lok Sabha constituency, Topon Kumar Gogoi, who is the sitting MP and is the candidate selected by the NDA block of which AGP is a constituent. Both leaders urged the party rank and file to

Election mascot 'BLO Baideo' released

HT Correspondent
SIVASAGAR, March 21: The Sivasagar district administration released a mascot named 'BLO Baideo' on Thursday in connection with the voter sensitisation program in the district. The mascot was formally unveiled by senior BLO Rita Mech in the presence of district commissioner Aditya Vikram Yadav IAS and a group of new voters at the office of the district commissioner. Yadav stated that the administration has introduced the mascot in the form of 'BLO Baideo' to honour the BLOs of the district who have done commendable work in updating the voter's list, including adding new names and removing those who have passed away between the two elections. The new voters expressed their happiness at obtaining the right to vote and becoming part of the significant democratic process.

Assam Union of Working Journalists' golden jubilee celebration commences

HT Correspondent
NAGAON, March 21: With a two-day-long program, the opening ceremony of the golden jubilee celebrations of Assam Union of Working Journalists was underway at Nagaon Nabarup Jatia Vidyapeeth from Thursday here.

The program was organised by the journalists' organisation in association with its district unit, Nagaon. The program of the first day initiated with opening the door of the camp of the representatives who attended the program from across the state in the evening and also ensured the registration of the attendees. Following the series of events, the executive meeting of the organisation was held, which was inaugurated by Kamal Ch Saikia, vice principal of Dr Birinchi Kr Baruah College, Puranigudam, and chaired by Madhusudan Medhi.

Unfurling 50 flags of the organisation by 50 noted dignitaries of the small town and outside, the program of the second day will be initiated on Friday. In the open session, Health minister Keshab Mahanta, Water Resource as well as Information and Public Relations minister Pijush Hazarika, local MLA Rupak Sarma, Raha MLA Shashi Kanta Das will attend the session as special invitees while Naresh Kalita, editor, Niyamiya Barta among others were present.



vigorously reach out to the people and highlight the vast development and progress that the coun-

try has witnessed under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the past 10 years. They

Kakojan College hosts ICSSR sponsored national seminar

Seminar explores critical issues of environment, sustainable development, and gender equality

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 21: The Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) of Kakojan College, in collaboration with the Assam Kaziranga University, Jorhat, organised a two-day ICSSR sponsored national seminar on the theme, 'Environment, Sustainable Development & Gender in North East India: Issues and Challenges' on March 14 & 15, 2024 at Kakojan College.

The inaugural session of this two-day seminar was chaired by Dr Rashmi Rekha Saikia, principal of Kakojan College. The inaugural speech was delivered by Dr Manjit Gogoi, principal of Jhanji Hemnath Sarma College, Sivasagar. This inaugural session was graced by Rajib Kr Kalita, senior scientist at the Rain Forest Research Institute (ICFRE), Jorhat, Dr Rakesh Rai, professor & dean, School of Social Sciences, Assam Kaziranga University, Assam, and Dr Golak Bihari Patra, associate professor & associate dean, School of Social Sciences, Assam Kaziranga University, Assam. The keynote speech of the seminar was delivered virtually by Prof B Kilangla Jamir, professor and head, department of Economics, Nagaland University, Lumami, Nagaland. Prof Jamir, in her speech, considered the critical issues of environment, sustainable development, and gender equality in the context of North East India, and reasoned that these are not isolated concerns

but interconnected facets crucial for the holistic development of the region.

The inaugural session was followed by four technical sessions on the first day. The resource persons for these sessions were Rajib Kr Kalita, Dr Golak Bihari Patra, Dr Ruprekha Bordoloi (retired principal, Kakojan College and professor and research supervisor at Srimanta Sankardev University, Nagaon), and Dr Lakhpriya Gogoi (assistant professor, department of English, Dibrugarh University), respectively. The second day of the seminar also had four technical sessions chaired by Dr Archana Bhattacharjee (retired head & associate professor, department of English, Kakojan College), Dr Rakesh Rai, Dr Sumbit Chaliha (principal, Bahona College, Jorhat), and Dr Kshirod Saikia (assistant professor, department of Political Science, Kakojan College), respectively. Over the course of these two days, a total of 65 re-

Margherita hosts vibrant wall painting competition

HT Correspondent
MARGHERITA, March 21: In an effort to promote voter awareness and ensure the protection of the girl child, the sub divisional officer (civil) of Margherita organised a vibrant and impactful wall painting competition. This innovative initiative aims to harness the power of art to inspire community members to exercise their right to vote. The wall painting competition, organised by the SDO (civil) Margherita, invited talented artists and passionate individuals from across the region to showcase their creativity and artistic prowess. Altogether, 29 participants got the opportunity to express the significance of voting through captivat-



ing visual narratives, fostering a sense of civic responsibility. This competition served as a platform for artists to not only showcase their talent but also contribute to greater causes - strengthening democracy and saving the girl child. By transforming blank walls into colorful canvases of democracy, participants will ignite conversations on saving the girl child and encourage voter participation leading up to the upcoming elections. The competition was judged by an esteemed panel consisting of Parikshit Thoudam (IAS), SDO (Civil) Margherita; Pranamika Konwar, Margherita election officer; Sambhavi Mishra, Margherita sub divisional police officer; and the CDPO of Margherita.

search papers were presented by 109 participants from various educational institutions. The second day of the seminar concluded with a valedictory session initiated by Dr Sikhamoni Gogoi, convener of the national seminar. It was chaired by the principal of Kakojan College, Dr Rashmi Rekha Saikia, and dignified by Dr Sumbit Chaliha, principal, Bahona College, Jorhat, as the chief guest. The glory of the valedictory session was enhanced by the presence of Dr Rakesh Rai, professor & dean, School of Social Sciences, Assam Kaziranga University, Assam, and Dr Golak Bihari Patra, associate professor & associate dean, School of Social Sciences, Assam Kaziranga University, Assam. The valedictory speech of Dr Chaliha was followed by the distribution of certificates to the participants. The session came to a close with the vote of thanks offered by Dhurbajyoti Saikia, coordinator, IQAC, Kakojan College.

Two apprehended

HT Correspondent
JORHAT, March 21: Police personnel from Titabar and Mariani Police Stations apprehended two individuals, identified as Dinesh Das and Joginder Singh, in Mariani town on Wednesday following the recovery of suspected narcotics substances from their possession.

Sources indicate that the recovered items include approximately 63 grams of suspected heroin/brown sugar, 700 nitrosen tablets, and ₹ 40,000 in cash. Both individuals have been arrested under the NDPS Act, and further investigation into the matter is underway.

Asmita Das selected for FAST-SF-2024

HT Correspondent
HOJAI, March 21: Asmita Das, currently in her second semester of the MSc Chemistry program at Rabindranath Tagore University, has been chosen for FAST-SF-2024. She is one of the 16 candidates selected in Chemistry for FAST-SF-2024 this year. Das will undergo a two-month research training at the prestigious Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) Kolkata with a fellowship. She applied for the fellowship under the mentorship of Dr Jayanta K Sarmah, associate professor in the department of Chemistry at RTU. The MSc in Chemistry Program at Rabindranath Tagore University commenced in 2020, followed by the initiation of the PhD program in the same department in 2023. The esteemed Focus Area Science Technology Summer Fellowship [FAST-SF] 2024 is an initiative of the Indian Academy of Science, an autonomous institution under the Department of Science and Technology (DST) of the Government of India, aimed at promoting the advancement of science and technology in specific regions of the country.

Journalist passes away

HT Correspondent
SIVASAGAR, March 21: Former staff reporter of The Sentinel, The North East Times, and a number of other dailies of the state, Asif Ibrahim (54), passed away following a brief illness in their rented residence at Dhai Ali, Sivasagar on March 18. Ibrahim leaves behind his wife, DIPRO, Sonari, Sayeda Hasnahana, and a son.

The son of former vice president of Mangaldoi Sahitya Sabha, Ibrahim had been living in Sivasagar for a long time. His death is mourned by the media fraternity of Sivasagar and Sonari, besides a host of organisations in Sivasagar.

Edupur Foundation and Tezpur College sign special MoU

HT Correspondent
TEZPUR, March 21: A special memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between Edupur Foundation (NGO), represented by director Amit Raj Konwar, and Tezpur College, represented by principal Dr Jyoti Kamal Hazarika, on Thursday at Tezpur College.

The MoU was signed in the presence of vice principal Rita Saikia Dutta, assistant professor Dr Rajlakshmi Sonowal, and placement manager Dipankar Bhuyan. It is worth mentioning that the organisation will provide free skill development training, computer courses, and placement assistance to the students of Tezpur College for 3 years.

Road accidents claim two lives in Sonitpur

HT Correspondent
TEZPUR, March 21: One youth died and three others sustained serious injuries in a road mishap on Wednesday night around 10.00 pm at Kawaimari area on NH-15 under the Telamara PS in Sonitpur district. Sources reported that four youths were on their way back home in a car bearing No-AS-12 AB-8584 when their vehicle hit a roadside tree after losing control, resulting in serious injuries to all of them.

However, despite being rushed to TMCH by 108, one of them identified as Ganesh Kurmi passed away on the way to Guwahati while being transported for further treatment. The deceased was the general secretary of the Missamari unit of ATSSA. Meanwhile, the three other injured youths have been identified as Kanak Das, Manoj Kurmi, and Pritam Kurmi. It's worth mentioning that Manoj is currently receiving treatment at Times Hospital here, and Pritam is undergoing treatment at TMCH. Due to his critical condition, Kanak has been transferred to GMCH for better treatment. Upon receiving the information, representatives of the frontline tea tribe community body attended the residence of the deceased Ganesh Kurmi to pay their last respects.

In another shocking incident on Wednesday night around 9.30 pm, a driver of an ASTC bus carrying medical staff from TMCH that had started its journey from Tezpur ASTC Bus Stand towards TMCH was struck near Chagoli Ahot-Tol area on NH 15, under Bebeja Police Outpost, by a truck coming from the opposite direction while he jumped off the bus. Following the incident, a sensational situation prevailed in the area, and police investigation is ongoing.

The deceased was later identified as Pradip Sarmah, who hailed from the Jamugurihat area. Both incidents have cast a pall of gloom over the greater area.

You exist only in what you do.
—Federico Fellini

Electoral bond scheme expose

The revelations surrounding the Electoral Bond Scheme have illuminated a concerning alliance between corporate interests and the Hindutva agenda, raising critical questions about the integrity of India's political and economic landscape. As the Supreme Court closely monitors the unfolding developments, it becomes increasingly evident that a thorough investigation is imperative to uncover the extent of this nexus. Since its inception in 2018, the Electoral Bond Scheme has emerged as a conduit for channelling substantial funds to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with an astonishing ₹ 8,252 crore funnelled into their coffers. This staggering amount, comprising half of the total bond redemptions, underscores a cosy relationship between the ruling party and corporate entities, effectively legitimizing what can only be described as institutionalized corruption. Scrutiny of the data reveals a pattern where corporate contributions to the BJP often coincide with favourable treatment in government contracts and regulatory matters. The case of Megha Engineering and Infrastructures Ltd (MEIL) stands out, with significant bond purchases preceding lucrative contracts such as the Thane-Borivali tunnel project and the Zojila road tunnel project. Similarly, mining companies securing clearances in environmentally sensitive areas have also been implicated in this web of quid pro quo. Furthermore, the pharmaceutical sector's involvement in the scheme raises concerns, with several companies accused of purchasing bonds to evade regulatory action for producing substandard drugs. These instances underscore the nefarious interplay between political influence and corporate interests, compromising public health and safety in the process.

Equally troubling is the abuse of governmental agencies to coerce funds from corporations under the guise of legal action. Reports indicate a systematic pattern of extortion, wherein companies facing regulatory scrutiny are pressured into purchasing electoral bonds to curry favour with the ruling party. This brazen exploitation of state apparatus for financial gain represents a gross violation of democratic norms and underscores the urgent need for accountability. Moreover, the use of shell companies to launder black money through the scheme further undermines claims of transparency and accountability. Instances where companies with negligible profits have made substantial contributions through bonds highlight systemic loopholes ripe for exploitation. The response from industry bodies and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) only adds fuel to the fire. Industry associations' attempts to block disclosure of bond identification numbers suggest a concerted effort to conceal the extent of their involvement in the scheme. Similarly, the RSS's defence of electoral bonds as a legitimate experiment underscores their tacit acknowledgment of the symbiotic relationship between corporates and the Hindutva agenda.

With the Supreme Court mandating full disclosure of electoral bond data, including unique identification numbers, to the Election Commission, a clearer picture of this nexus is expected to emerge. However, mere transparency is not enough. A court-monitored investigation is imperative to uncover the full extent of wrongdoing and ensure accountability where necessary. In light of these revelations, it is evident that the Electoral Bond Scheme has become a tool for perpetuating corruption and subverting democratic principles. Only through rigorous scrutiny and decisive action can India uphold the integrity of its electoral process and safeguard the interests of its citizens. The Supreme Court's directive for complete disclosure of electoral bond data to the Election Commission signals a critical step towards transparency. However, true accountability requires more than mere disclosure. A comprehensive investigation, overseen by the judiciary, is essential to uncovering and addressing systemic malpractice.

Electoral bonds donation is a small part of BJP's financial muscle power

The late awakening of the Supreme Court headed by the Chief Justice of India Dr. D Y Chandrachud in seeing the quid pro quo relationship between the donors and the ruling party under the Electoral Bonds Scheme 2017 is welcome. The CJ has been firm in getting all the details from the State Bank of India by March 21 since the SBI has been dilly-dallying to furnish the crucial info contained in the unique code of bond. Once it is furnished by the SBI without hiding any details, the identity of the bond purchaser and the political party beneficiary will be known.

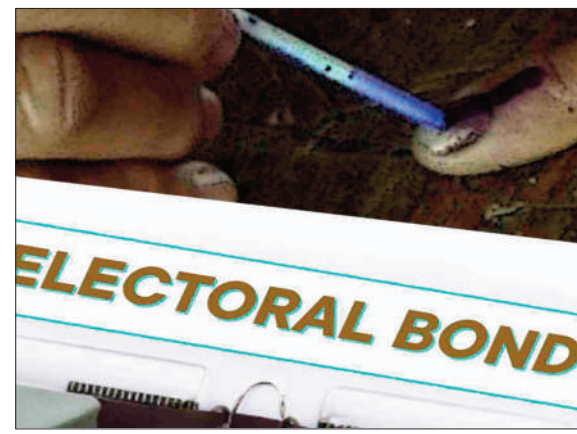
So far, the bonds details available after Supreme Court drubbing to the SBI indicate that out of the total bonds valued at Rs. 16492 crore purchased between April 12, 2019 and February 15, 2024 (the day the Supreme Court declared the scheme as unconstitutional), the BJP got 8250 crore – meaning more than majority of the value. Apart, about Rs 4,000 crore worth bonds were supposed to be purchased from the beginning of 2018 till the Supreme Court's order issued on April 12, 2019. BJP must have got a majority also from this amount.

Now as ordered by the Supreme Court, the SBI is scheduled to disclose the hidden alphanumeric code which will indicate the relationship between the purchaser and the beneficiary. So only after March 21, more details about the relationship of the purchasers and the beneficiary political parties, mainly the ruling party, will be known. The ruling government has been opposing this disclosure citing the confidentiality but the Supreme Court has been firm in getting every details and thus all pressure from the business chambers and the BJP have been ignored by the CJ.

There are some important indicators from the information so far revealed. It has been found that 21 companies bought bonds after they were raided by the central agencies. In the last ten years of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rule, this has been a common feature. The central agencies have been used against the opposition leaders as also the companies. While the opposition leaders with something to hide have been targeted to tame the rival parties, the focus on the companies is to ensure that the companies give funds to the coffers of the BJP. There are so many ways to oblige the ruling party BJP, the electoral bonds purchase is just one of them.

The elections to the 18th Lok Sabha have been declared in seven phases starting from April 19 and ending on June 1 this year. The results will be announced on June 4. The BJP will be spending huge amount for the 2024 polls, the amount collected from the Electoral Bonds scheme is only a small fraction of that, perhaps not even 10 per cent of its war chest. Its other sources mainly consist of the funds that come to the BJP war chest from overseas, mainly the USA and the diamond bourse in Antwerp which is dominated by the Gujarati Indians. Most of the brokers have close ties with the BJP and they are very rich. Apart, there are traditional traders and business houses which have been friendly to the BJP for decades.

The ground reality is that BJP and the Sangh Parivar outfit Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) have huge support base in Indian diaspora. The Congress support base is miniscule compared to them. The VHP and some other Hindu organisations control the management of the Hindu temples and trusts in US, UK, other parts of Europe as also recently in



Middle East countries. The temples and the trusts have huge funds at their disposal. The BJP which

DEGREE OF THOUGHT
By: Nitva Chakraborty

claims itself as the biggest political party of the world with membership crossing over 10 crore, can always get facility of these funds through different routes. Since the BJP rules centre, there is no threat to the Party from the agencies when there are violations. The Congress is nowhere in this race with BJP for funds from overseas.

During the last assembly elections, the BJP leadership had offered a few legislators of the then ruling Telangana Rashtra Samiti Rs. 100 crore each to crossover to BJP. This created furore in the state capital Hyderabad and as usual the BJP leaders denied this. But, this type of move by BJP was nothing new. In fact, ever since the BJP came to power in 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a deliberate policy of seeking funds from the top industrialists of the country to bolster BJP's election kitty, has been followed and in the process, the top industry people have got concessions and contracts. It has been a win-win situation for both to build conglomerate capitalism in India in partnership.

In the last five years since 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the BJP has spent crores of funds in destabil-

ising state governments in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and bought MLA's to form state governments in Goa and Manipur. The latest was in Maharashtra where it was clear as daylight that huge funds, some sources put it at more than Rs. 200 crores were mobilised in ensuring the defection of the Eknath Shinde group from the Shiv Sena led by Uddhav Thackeray. The Shinde-BJP government was formed finally.

The fear of the Indian corporates about raids by the central agencies is so overwhelming that even the young scions of the industrial families who are forward looking and do not like BJP, keep silent as they are not ready to risk the future of their companies just for the sake of some liberal personal thinking. The net result is that there is no level playing field in the elections. The BJP is in a position to spend more than ten times compared to its opposition rivals and the party has a war chest of a huge amount to engineer defections through offering massive funds, where that is needed.

In the last ten years of Modi rule, there has been an unusual concentration of wealth in the Indian corporate sector. A recent study suggests that India's twenty most profitable firms generated 14 per cent of total corporate

profits in 1990, 30 per cent in 2010 and 70 per cent in 2019. This means there was a steep jump in concentration of profits in few houses just during five years of Narendra Modi rule. This process must have accentuated in the last five years. The nexus between the ruling BJP and the leading industrial houses has further deepened before the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

Now how these profits have been made? An analysis by the eminent economist Dr. Pranab Bardhan suggests that these profits were not due to innovations or productivity rises but mainly due to market power. This means that the Prime Minister made the Indian market favourable for these selected houses for making high profits. This is a part of quid pro quo between the top industry and the Modi government. This fits in with the RSS-BJP concept about New India based on Hindutva-corporate nexus.

What is significant about the corporate concentration in the last ten years is that Modi's one nation one market concept has favoured the big companies as against the regional companies. The Modi government policies have facilitated the process of withering the market competition and as a result, after ten years of Modi rule, in key sectors like telecom, airlines, steel, cement, aluminium, there are only two to three big players who control more than 59 per cent of the market.

What is the net result of this Modi Government-Crony Capitalists bonhomie on the nature of Indian economy? As Dr. Pranab Bardhan sees it, the crony oligarchs mainly operate in non-traded goods in highly regulated sectors where getting government favours is much more important than the need to compete in foreign markets. The BJP's new

protectionist regime known as atmanirbhar or self reliance ends up making imported inputs more costly and exports less competitive. The result is a low productivity, oligarchic-autarchic economy. This is evident from the data given in The Economist which shows India's share of billionaire wealth derived from 'rent-thick' or crony sectors rose from 29 to 43 per cent between 2016 to 2021.

The wealth of the crony capitalists has grown exponentially as against the decline in the real income of the common masses during the Modi rule. The opposition parties have to focus on this quid pro quo between the Indian crony capitalists and the Modi regime and demand probe into their interlinking leading to the withering away of the level playing field. In 2019 Lok Sabha elections, Bloomberg estimated the expenses of the political parties at around US \$ 8.6 billion. 2024 Lok Sabha elections will be most costly. The figure may touch even more than US\$ 11 billion. BJP might be spending 70 per cent of this massive amount. The main opposition party the Congress will just struggle this time to finance its poll campaign. Where is the level playing field? Where is democracy?

CJ Chandrachud has set a milestone in his illustrious judicial career by mentioning of the possibility of quid pro quo in his February 15 judgement. It will be in the interests of establishing a vigorous functioning democracy in India if the apex court can expand its outreach to probe big industry – BJP nexus and how it is effectively undermining the election process. Both the Supreme Court and the Election Commission of India can play a stellar role in ensuring a fierce competitive democracy in this great nation India, if they are willing. (IPA Service)

As general elections are approaching, UK prime minister's woes are mounting

By: Tirthankar Mitra

United Kingdom Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak is in a tight spot. So is the Conservative Party which he leads as the general election is inching closer. The political fortune of Sunak and the party he leads cannot be stated to be progressing swimmingly. It seems to have sailed into uncharted waters at this point of time.

An unenviable situation has arisen after the official announcement that UK has entered into a recession. As elections are looming large, the prospects of the powers that be in UK seem to be like a candle in the wind. Sunak's pledges to boost the economy ring hollow in the face of recession. The prolonged depression in economic activities is deeper than anticipated.

Every recession comes to an end. The damage inflicted by it needs to be assessed together with the government measures to mitigate it.

Inarguably the most worrying effect of the recession in UK is the stagnation in the GDP per person. Since 2022 it has not grown any further. The records of recession can be traced to 1955. Since then it is the longest period of unbroken decline.

This also highlights the daily struggle of the average citizen of UK. Indeed if some of them especially of the older generation choose to find consolation in the days when their country held sway on the lands of palm and line, it is the only course in which they can draw their present woes in.

The GDP contracted by 0.03 per cent in the final quarter of 2023 is a pointer to the severity of the situation. As UK braces for an election it also raised a

question mark on Sunak's abilities to deliver on his promises of economic growth. It is upto Sunak and his party to turn their words into deeds in managing the economy. The challenge has never taken a greater proportion and pronouncing cosmetic solutions won't do.

Another layer to the bleak economic outlook is the prospect of a reduction in interest by the Bank of England. If borrowing and spending would be ushered in by a low interest rate, a delicate balance has to be struck to avoid increased inflationary pressure.

A cautious approach on the part of the Bank of England Governor Andrew Bailey is a telltale sign of the economic situation. The consequences of failure would bring the UK economy quite a few notches down which would do it no good at home and abroad.

Highlighting "signs of brighter signs ahead" by Chancellor of Exchequer Jeremy Hunt justifiably brings little cheer to a vast section of the electorate. For it does little to assuage concerns and troubles of the long and bitter economic downturn.

Meanwhile, the Labour Party is gaining ground in the opinion polls. Recent by-election results indicate public trust shifting towards their stewardship.

The stakes have never been higher for Sunak and his party. A coherent and effective economic plan is essential not only for the Conservative Party and its leader but for UK as a whole.

Time the UK government prioritises it's policies that benefit the most vulnerable sections of UK society. This is the only panacea to end Sunak's woes. (IPA Service)

Netanyahu under siege as big pressure mounts on him for ceasefire



By: C.J. Atkins

Hammas will win if Israel holds elections. That's essentially the claim made by Benjamin Netanyahu this weekend as he hit back at U.S. political leaders pressuring him to send his country to the polls.

Forced to respond to the explosive growth of a mass ceasefire movement in the U.S., many Democratic Party politicians have stepped up their expressions of "frustration" with Netanyahu's government and its execution of the brutal war against Gaza.

Last week, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer—the highest-ranking Jewish politician in the U.S., a longtime supporter of the State of Israel, and staunch backer of the government there following the Hamas attacks of Oct. 7—directly called for new elections in Israel.

He declared that Netanyahu had "lost his way by allowing his political survival to take precedence over the best interests of Israel" and now constitutes an "obstacle to peace" in the Middle East.

Repeating critiques commonly heard from activists in the ceasefire movement, especially those affiliated with Jewish Voice for Peace,

Schumer said that Netanyahu is part of a "radical right-wing" coalition that stands in the way of peace negotiations and a two-state solution. He said the Israeli leader "has been too willing to tolerate the civilian toll in Gaza"—now over 31,000.

Schumer specifically singled out Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and National Security Chief Itamar Ben Gvir, saying there was a "nastiness" in how they use their positions and power.

Smotrich has called for the total elimination of Palestinians from the West Bank, among other crimes. Ben Gvir, meanwhile, has been overseeing the distribution of guns to illegal Israeli West Bank settlers, prompting further violence.

Schumer's speech was the latest in a string of rhetorical shifts on the part of U.S. leaders that had previously been lockstep in their support of Israel in its war against Palestinians.

In early March, Vice President Kamala Harris called for an "immediate ceasefire" in Gaza. President Joe Biden said he favoured the same in his State of the Union address a few days later, and in the interim, Harris hosted Benny Gantz—a member of the Israeli War Cabinet but a rival to Netanyahu.

The Netanyahu-Smotrich-Ben Gvir regime is feeling the heat not just from its U.S. allies, though. Recent opinion polls conducted in Israel show that 65% of people want early elections and that if a vote was held today, the prime minister and his coalition would go down to defeat.

Netanyahu, of course, is well aware of how tenuous his hold on power is, and that's why he shot back at Schumer's suggestion an election should be held.

In a softball interview with Fox News this weekend, Netanyahu said the U.S. is "wrong to try to replace the elected leaders of a sister democracy and a staunch American ally...during the time of war." He said Schumer's speech would be equivalent to an Israeli leader calling for elections in the U.S. after the 9/11 terrorist attacks to remove President George W. Bush. "It's wrong," he said.

He accused Schumer—and by connection Biden since he endorsed the

Schumer speech—of helping Hamas. "The only thing we should be focused on is changing the regime in Gaza...not the duly elected government of Israel.

"We have to finish the job," Netanyahu said, repeating his intention to soon attack Rafah, the last major city in southern Gaza where over a million Palestinians have sought refuge.

If the ceasefire movement in the U.S. has its way, however, Netanyahu shouldn't expect the critiques from Washington to end anytime soon. Nor can his allies in D.C. look forward to being free of the Gaza question.

With worldwide outrage against Israel's genocidal war escalating by the day and a general election looming in the U.S., Democratic politicians can no longer ignore the demand for peace. The rhetorical shifts coming from the Biden administration and Senate leaders like Schumer are a direct result of grassroots pressure for a ceasefire.

In Democratic primaries in Michigan, Washington State, Minnesota, and elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of "uncommitted" and other protest ballots have been cast in campaigns—propelled by Arab-American voters in many instances. These results serve as a warning signal for the president that his re-election campaign is jeopardized by his continuing backing for the Israeli military.

Across the country, over 70 cities have passed resolutions calling for a ceasefire; campaigns are underway in dozens more municipalities to do the same.

In the labour movement—a key Democratic constituency—more and more unions are signing ceasefire demands, including the AFL-CIO, the country's largest labour federation.

And while the changing talk coming from Biden, Harris, Schumer, and others is welcomed, ceasefire activists in the streets and peace supporters in Congress continue to point out that more than words is needed.

The U.S. could strangle Netanyahu's war machine today if it would halt the flow of weapons.

Seven U.S. senators, led by Bernie Sanders and Chris Van Hollen, are pushing Biden to do just that, pointing to a 1961 law that requires the U.S. to stop any aid going to an ally that violates humanitarian law. As they point out, sending weapons to Netanyahu is illegal under U.S. law.

"Some people say we're not grateful enough for Schumer/Biden's harsh words

for Netanyahu," Tariq Kenney-Shawa, a policy fellow at the Palestinian Policy Network, wrote late last week. "Israel has killed 31,000 Palestinians; 2 million displaced; entire families wiped out; 13,000 children gone; thousands more torn apart. Anything short of intervention is too late."

While the ceasefire movement remains perpetually dissatisfied with how Biden continues to fund Israel's genocide and the glacial pace of its movement toward supporting a ceasefire, Republican leaders give even more reason for worry, as they have responded to recent developments by tightening their embrace of Netanyahu.

On Sunday, GOP nominee Donald Trump portrayed himself as a better friend of the Israeli state. "All of a sudden, he [Biden] dumped Israel," Trump said. "He just said essentially that Bibi Netanyahu should take a walk." He told the Israeli leader that he should "finish it quickly," referring to the war on the Palestinian people.

GOP Senate Leader Mitch McConnell, meanwhile, said the Democratic Party "has an anti-Israel problem," and pledged that Republicans would be the ally that "Israel deserves."

The relationship between Netanyahu and the Republican Party is a cozy one going back years.

In 2015, the GOP and the Israeli government conspired to torpedo President Barack Obama's nuclear negotiations with Iran; Netanyahu spoke in Congress at Republicans' invitation to undermine the effort.

Taken together, the responses and actions of Republicans show that if they take the White House and both houses of Congress in November, the ceasefire movement—and all other progressive and democratic movements—would have even less leverage to force policy changes.

That's why anti-war activists are determined to not let up in their effort to pressure Biden and the Democrats to further change course. Words without actions, they say, threaten to split the anti-MAGA coalition and throw the election to the GOP.

Layla Elabed, organizer for the "Uncommitted" Listen to Michigan campaign, summed up the danger in a recent interview: "It is our hope that Joe Biden would not risk his presidency, not risk the White House, to someone like Donald Trump." (IPA Service)

6 more years for Vladimir Putin. What it means for India-Russia ties

By: Manoj Joshi

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been returned to power for another term in what a critic sarcastically termed a "landslide" election.

Putin reportedly won more than 87 per cent of the votes, which is the highest he has won in comparison to the four previous elections he has been involved in. In 2012, Putin received 63.6 per cent of the vote and in 2018, it was 76.7 per cent. The somewhat improbable number touching 90 per cent is a sign that the Russian system is now fully autocratic. His fifth term will end in 2030.

Western countries had already dismissed the election result as a sham, but following the verdict, countries like China, India and North Korea congratulated Putin. In a message, PM Modi said he looked forward to strengthening New Delhi's "time-tested special and privileged strategic partnership with Moscow."

After the vote, Putin had a late-night press conference in which he said that among his priorities was the successful prosecution of the "special military operation"—the Russian term for its military attack—against Ukraine. In response to a question, he warned that a direct conflict between Russia and the US-led NATO alliance would bring the world one step closer to World War III and that no one wanted such a scenario.

Putin's message was that he needed to win big to lead the process of transforming Russia, winning the war in Ukraine and taking on the West in a global confrontation. Another major task before him is to pivot Russia's economy away from the Euro-Atlantic region towards the east and the south.

What Does Putin's Victory Mean for India?

At one level, nothing much, as our relations with Russia have always been good and remain so. But at another level, a lot. A feature of the Russia-India relationship has been that while it was strong on the military-trade front, it was anaemic on the side of commercial trade. The Ukraine war has had a transformative effect on this aspect.

At the political level, even as Western countries have sought to isolate Russia, India has made ef-



orts to accommodate it. The leaders of the two sides continue to engage with each other and in mid-January, Modi and Putin had a telephone call discussing Ukraine and wishing each other well for their respective national elections.

The Western embargo on Russia has led to it seeking markets in the global south. According to calculations, 80 per cent of the countries of the world do not follow the Western sanctions.

Among these is India which has taken the opportunity to import large quantities of Russian oil for domestic use, as well as re-export after refining. Paradoxically, this is happening at a time when our arms imports from Russia are declining, both out of choice, as well as compulsion as the Russians prioritise their defence production for the Ukraine war.

Just how recent this change has come about is evident from the fact that bilateral trade between Russia and India in 2021-22 was \$13 billion. By 2022-23 it shot up to \$49.36 billion, mainly on account of Indian oil imports. In the 2023-24 period alone, it is expected to reach \$65 billion. India's exports to Russia, though growing, are still just \$4 billion and is an area that has huge growth potential. Russian economic ties with India can expand from traditional exports to automotive and electronic parts and renewables, alongside India's emergence as a manufacturing hub, trading powerhouse, and services supplier.

India-Russia Ties With Respect To Defence and Trade

In the defence sector, while India is making efforts to emerge as an armaments producer, there are important areas where Russia remains relevant. These are mainly

strategic programmes relating to nuclear weapons and their delivery systems, as well as nuclear-propelled submarines.

Beyond the immediate, there have been long-term developments that could transform the India-Russia relationship. One is the Eastern Maritime Corridor (EMC) which could be used for trade in coking coal, crude oil, LNG, and fertilisers. The West Asia crisis has resulted in a sharp rise of 40-60 per cent in shipping expenses and this is where the EMC which links Chennai with Vladivostok comes in. In September 2019 Modi and Putin formally launched the corridor during their annual summit in Vladivostok.

Another important connectivity project where some developments are taking place is the International North-South Transportation Corridor (INSTC). This connects India's western ports with Bandar Abbas and Chah Bahar in Iran and thence moves north through the Caucasus to Russia and Europe.

Though several test runs have proved the viability of the corridor, the low level of India-Russia trade has led to its neglect. In addition, there are portions of the corridor which are not complete. Therefore, India has been looking at alternatives such as the US-helmed India-Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC) linking Indian ports to the Israeli port of Haifa and thence to Europe. But the ongoing Israel-Hamas war has raised a big question mark before this project.

Meanwhile, driven by its own compulsions, the Russians are now pivoting south. Strategically this has meant building up a special relationship with Iran. And as part of this, they are also interested in boosting the INSTC. A key part of this now is the 162 km railway proj-

ect linking Rasht in Iran with Astara in Azerbaijan. This way, Russia will access Iranian ports in the Persian Gulf, thus providing easier access to its trade to ports on India's west coast as well. It will also assist Russia's trade with China and Turkey.

Another Russian pivot has been to the East which is to China. In 2023, China's trade with Russia hit \$240 billion, setting a new record. This was a growth of 64 per cent compared with 2021, before the Ukraine war. China has been a major destination of Russian oil since it was hit by Western sanctions. In turn, Moscow has stepped up the import of Chinese consumer goods ranging from cars to smartphones. Beijing intends to expand energy cooperation with Russia across the board and the two sides have initiated trade in Chinese yuan. Chinese exports have helped Russia stabilise its external trade relationship.

The Challenges for India

For India, the challenge is to balance its growing strategic relationship with both the US and Russia. The Indo-US relationship increasingly involves co-production and co-development of technology products, as well as a larger Indo-Pacific congruence in balancing China. It is keenly aware that a shift away from Russia would only increase Beijing's influence over Moscow.

Some of this has to do with ongoing defence collaboration, and some of it is related to its larger perspective of preferring a multipolar world, something that Russia also advocates. So meanwhile, even though it called off the annual consultations with Russia in 2022 and 2023, India has formally maintained good political ties with it.

Given the fact that Russia is involved in the war in Ukraine, a lot of Putin's future policies depend on its outcome. Western sanctions may not have worked the way intended, but the war has caused deep damage to Russia.

The future is also clouded because of the presidential elections in the US. The election of Donald Trump could alter the situation in unforeseen ways. As for India, its approach may be seen as cynical by some, but in a world where countries are privileging their respective national interests, Indian policy, too, is following suit. (Courtesy: *The Quint*)

Three years of India-Pakistan border ceasefire: Stable and unsteady



By: Sarraj Sharma

The third anniversary of the ceasefire understanding between India and Pakistan was marked on 25 February. The ceasefire stands intact amidst immensely fraught ties between the two countries following the Pulwama terror attack in February 2019 and the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's 'special status' on 5 August 2019. Despite Pakistan's reluctance to accept the constitutional changes in J&K and no thaw in relations, there has been considerable peace on the border after the Director Generals of Military Operations (DGsMO) understanding on a ceasefire in February 2021.

The ongoing status quo has benefited both India and Pakistan, particularly the border population along the International Border (IB) and Line of Control (LoC). With almost non-existent diplomatic engagement between India and Pakistan, any semblance of peace on the border should be welcomed. Nonetheless, the silence on the border does not imply that Pakistan has stopped cross-border terror activities against India or that there is no risk of escalation between the two militaries in the future. The ceasefire has helped manage the India-Pakistan conflict, but it has not altered the dynamics of the overall peace process, or the lack thereof, in the last three years.

With a new coalition government in Islamabad and Pakistan Army Chief General Syed Asim Munir's persistently hawkish views on India, bilateral ties may not see any forward movement. However, both countries may continue to keep the ceasefire intact to focus on other urgent issues.

Concerns in India

Agreeing to a ceasefire after years of violence on the border was a significant achievement for both India and Pakistan. It saved the lives of many civilians and security personnel on both sides. Furthermore, with peace on the western front, New Delhi could focus more on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) standoff with China. For Islamabad, the ceasefire brought relief to its dwindling economy and allowed Pakistan's military establishment to address political and security crises within the country. A year prior to the ceasefire, there were close to 5,133 incidents of Ceasefire Violations (CFVs) in 2020, the highest since 2003. However, the numbers declined to roughly 670 in 2021, most occurring before the two DGsMO discussions in February.

Furthermore, there has been a noticeable improvement in the overall security situation in J&K since August 2019 and the border ceasefire in 2021. The current government has implemented a 'zero-tolerance policy' against terrorism in the region. This policy involves both central and local security agencies working in tandem to target not only terrorists but also their financial and overground networks in J&K. Consequently, schools, colleges, and local businesses in the Kashmir Valley are now functioning more normally than they were a few years ago.

However, does this improvement in J&K's security scenario and the border ceasefire suggest any change in Pakistan's decades-long policy of aiding and abetting terrorism in India? The simple answer is no.

Notwithstanding the ongoing pause in border confrontations between the two militaries, Pakistan continues its proxy war against India. Terror groups like the People's Anti-Fascist Front (PAFF) and The Resistance Front (TRF), which are proxy fronts for Pakistan-based organisations Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taayyaba (LeT), have targeted Indian security forces and civilians in J&K. In 2022, the total number of terror-related incidents recorded was 125, compared to 46 in 2023. Meanwhile, the Union Territory witnessed 31 targeted killings of civilians, mostly Hindu minorities and non-locals, by terrorists in 2022, and a total of 14 in 2023. More importantly, the Rajouri-Poonch sector in south of the Pir Panjal range is experiencing a resurgence in militancy after years of relative peace in the region, which is an "issue of concern", according to Indian Army Chief General Manoj Pande.

To address the resurging militancy in the region, the Indian Army launched an anti-terror Operation Sarvashakti in January, similar to Operation Sarp Vinash of 2003. The objective is to eliminate terrorists and local overground workers (OGWs) involved in a series of ambushes targeting Indian troops in the Rajouri-Poonch sector. These attacks have primarily occurred near the Line of Control (LoC), indicating infiltrations from the Pakistani side. Unfortu-

nately, this tactic has resulted in casualties on the Indian side, as terrorists can seek refuge in nearby dense forests or caves after attacking Indian security forces personnel. It is estimated that over 20 Indian Army personnel have lost their lives in these ambushes in the last three years. As the Kashmir zone has become quieter since August 2019, there is a deliberate attempt to shift the proxy war to the border districts of J&K. This increases the risk of jeopardising the border ceasefire.

Although cross-border terror activities from Pakistan have remained a significant factor behind the border violence between the two countries, the substantial increase in illegal drone activities has presented a new dimension of a security threat to India. These drones are primarily used for surveillance and smuggling drugs, weapons, money, and other illicit materials into different sectors of the IB and LoC on the Indian side.

The drone 'menace' has raised serious concerns within India's security establishment, particularly following the twin drone-driven blasts at the Indian Air Force's technical station in Jammu on 27 June 2021, with suspected cross-border links. According to reports, India's Border Security Force (BSF) seized or shot down 119 drones in 2023 along the western sectors, with another 400-500 sightings reported.

While there is currently no direct evidence linking drone intrusions to incidents of ceasefire violations on the IB or LoC, there is a possibility that it could contribute to future border tensions between the two countries.

Signalling from Pakistan

It is widely known that General (Retd) Qamar Javed Bajwa, Pakistan's former army chief, wanted to improve ties with India, at least temporarily. According to some Pakistani journalists, Bajwa sought to "freeze" the Kashmir issue for at least 20 years because the "Pakistan army was not capable of going to war with India." That proposal did not materialise due to reported disagreements between Bajwa and the then Imran Khan government.

Nevertheless, Pakistan agreed to at least recommit to the 2003 ceasefire understanding during Bajwa's tenure, which remains intact under the present army leadership of General Syed Asim Munir. But, does the 2021 ceasefire understanding suggest a change of heart in Pakistan's security establishment regarding India? Perhaps, the answer lies in the double-digit inflation, looming default threat, and internal political and security crises in Pakistan. Moreover, while Bajwa was publicly claiming to improve relations with India, Munir has openly ruled out reconciliation with India. It is possible that Munir's previous roles as Director General of Military Intelligence (MI) and Director General Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) sharpened his views on India. Notably, he was DG ISI during the Pulwama terror attack and subsequent Balakot military crisis in February 2019.

This is Munir's second year-in-progress as Pakistan's army chief. With a new (selected) government in Islamabad following an allegedly rigged election, Munir is in a stronger position to influence both domestic and foreign policy matters in Pakistan, including on India. Given Pakistan's dire economic situation and tensions on its western front with Afghanistan and Iran, would Munir risk breaking the current status quo with India and further destabilise Pakistan?

Making a prediction at this point is challenging. However, considering Munir's focus on revitalizing Pakistan's struggling economy through initiatives like the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), which is his pet project, he may avoid escalating tensions with India beyond a certain threshold. After all, no foreign investor would be eager to invest in a destabilised Pakistan.

In conclusion, New Delhi is aware that Pakistan's military establishment will continue its proxy war against India, employing both old and new tactics. Nonetheless, India favours a border ceasefire for as long as possible without compromising its security. Additionally, it would be prudent for India to have a stable western front to develop adequate border and military infrastructure along the LAC to deter China. Managing two active border fronts can put added pressure on the Indian armed forces. On the other hand, faced with a looming default crisis and internal security issues, Pakistan cannot afford to handle three active fronts—with Afghanistan and Iran to the west and India to the east. (Courtesy: *ORF*)

Why have non-western nations given only limited support to Ukraine against Russian war?

By: Anita Inder Singh

In March 2022, 141 member-states of the United Nations General Assembly – or 73% of them – supported a resolution calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine and reaffirming Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence.

Those votes did not imply a choice between dictatorship and democracy. Many of the 141 countries are autocracies or weak democracies. In Asia and Africa, some of them emerged as states after fighting national liberation or freedom movements against West European imperial powers. And some states face or have faced threats to their territorial sovereignty from hostile countries or secessionist movements. For them, the crucial point is that Russia's illegal invasion violates the UN Charter and the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

In fact, Latin America, Africa and Asia are split over Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, Russia's attempts to influence African countries – many former colonies of West European powers – by telling them that the former Soviet Union, its legal predecessor, supported their liberation movements, should be kept in perspective. Twenty-eight African countries supported the resolution against Russia, 17 voted against it, and eight were not present for the vote. Each group included former British, Belgian or French colonies.

Some Latin American countries, including Brazil and Argentina, supported the anti-Russia resolutions. Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela did not because they favoured Russia.

At another level, Brazil, which has received weapons from Russia as well as hundreds of the German Leopard tanks that the West has given Ukraine, is against sanctions on Russia.

Generally, many countries are most concerned about economic problems created by Russia's invasion and its blockades of Ukrainian ports – which have affected deliveries of grain, fertiliser and edible oils. Some think Western sanctions on Russia have exacerbated the difficulties.

Such divisions have more to do with national interests or political proclivities and less to do with regions or 'cultures'. Even within the European Union, Hungary, once a Soviet vassal state and now a member of the Union and NATO, opposed economic sanctions on Russia partly because it imports Russian energy; partly because the ruling Fidesz party of President Viktor Orbán admires Putin and Russia's political system. On February 23, Hungary blocked an EU statement pledging "unwavering" support for Ukraine.

Stance of India and China

Western hopes that authoritarian China, a global political and economic influence, and



India, a (weakening) democracy, both major buyers of Russian arms and energy, would use their influence over Moscow to condemn Russia's aggression are unrealistic. China and India were among the 35 countries (18% of UN member-states) which abstained from voting against Russia's illegal annexation of Eastern Ukraine. China's neutrality is easier to explain because together with Russia, it seeks to end America's Asian and global primacy. And Beijing blames the US for the war. India's abstention appears surprising, since its territorial integrity has long been threatened by China and Pakistan.

At the same time, both China and India claim to be upholding international law, the UN Charter, and the territorial integrity and sovereignty of states. Ironically, India also routinely now says it stands for a "rules based international order" – a US construct which Russia says "rejects the key principle underlying the UN Charter, which is the sovereign equality of states".

Both India and China profess to be "on the side of peace" when it is obvious that Putin is executing longstanding plans to destroy Ukraine as a sovereign state which Russia itself recognised after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991.

At the G-7 meeting in Hiroshima in May 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi counselled Zelensky that "There is no problem in the modern age, whose solution we cannot find in the teachings of Buddha." But external affairs minister Jaishankar's recent statement to Handelsblatt, the German financial newspaper, that India will not initiate mediation in Ukraine makes clear that Buddha's wisdom will have no effect on Russia's war in Ukraine.

At another level, New Delhi has never explained why Buddha's teachings haven't resolved India's old border conflicts with neighbouring Pakistan and China. All the more so as the self-styled Vishwaguru holds that its "abnormal" ties with China have been caused by the violation of border management agreements by Beijing.

At the China-led Shanghai Cooperation meet-

ing in Uzbekistan in September 2022, Modi cryptically told Putin in a widely quoted statement that now was "not a time for war", while hailing the India-Russia tie as "unbreakable". On February 20, Jaishankar told Handelsblatt that "Russia has never hurt our interests". Well, does the news that 100 unsuspecting Indians have been forced to fight for Russia in Ukraine, and that Moscow sold oil to India at 30% above the Western price cap, and insisted on payment in yuan, dirham and US dollars, rather than Indian rupees, really point to 'Russia never hurting India'?

Even more importantly, what about the view of India's military that Russian deliveries of weapons and spare parts have stalled? That alone says that Russia is not India's reliable friend. New Delhi is now looking to Western democracies, including France and the US, for arms and for collaboration in manufacturing weapons.

Additionally, India – like China – has gained far more from economic and educational ties with Western democracies than with Russia. America buys 18% of India's exports, Russia a mere 0.66%. In 2022, there were 30, 000 Indians in Russia; 200,000 Indian students in the US.

Finding its way through a maze of international interests, Ukraine could certainly tell some non-Western states that it is a victim of Russian imperialism and that, in 1991, when the Soviet Union imploded, the newly independent states were poorer than their longtime Russian overlord. So were colonies of European empires when they achieved national freedom. In 1991, Ukraine itself was one of the poorest Soviet republics. Whether Ukraine's stance might then ring some bells with the states that emerged from anti-European national movements remains to be seen.

In the face of different interpretations of "freedom", Ukraine will find it hard to court so many countries against Russia's imperialism. No surprise, then, that Kyiv feels its focus must be on the economic and military imperatives and to rely on the West, especially the US, to preserve its territorial integrity.

But let's remember that, after two years of a war aimed at extinguishing Ukraine's independence, Russia has lost more than 300,000 soldiers and 6,000 tanks, and about half the territory it annexed two years ago. In fact, it has even turned to developing countries like Iran and North Korea for arms.

Even as Ukraine fights on, those are facts that countries that supported UN resolutions against Russia should keep in mind, so that the success of expansionist powers in destroying independent states never becomes inevitable. (Courtesy: *The Wire*)

The attack came after repeated Ukraine aerial attacks in recent days on Russia

Russia fires 31 missiles at Kyiv in the first attack in 44 days, and 13 people are hurt

KYIV, March 21: Russia fired 31 ballistic and cruise missiles at Kyiv before dawn Thursday in the first attack on the Ukrainian capital in 44 days, officials said. Air defenses shot down all the incoming missiles, though 13 people including a child were injured by falling wreckage, they said.

Residents of Kyiv were woken up by loud explosions around 5 a.m. as the missiles arrived at roughly the same time from different directions, said Serhii Popko, head of the Kyiv City Administration.

Ukraine's air force said Russia launched two ballistic missiles and 29 cruise missiles against the capital.

Kyiv has better air defenses than most regions of the large country. The missile interception rate is frequently high, rendering Russian attacks on the capital significantly less successful than during the early days of the war.

An 11-year-old girl and a 38-year-old man were hospitalized in Kyiv, the city administration said. Eight other people sustained light injuries, according to Mayor Vitali Klitschko.

Ukraine's Emergency Service



said around 80 people were evacuated from their homes.

Falling wreckage from the intercepted missiles set fire to at least one apartment building, burned parked cars and left craters in streets and a small park. Some streets were littered with debris, including glass from shattered windows.

The attack came after repeated Ukraine aerial attacks in recent days on Russia's Belgorod region near the border with Ukraine. On Thursday, five people were injured in the latest attack on the Belgorod region, which damaged homes and the city sports stadium, Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov said. Russia's Ministry of Defense said

it stopped 10 rockets over the region.

Russian President Vladimir Putin had threatened Wednesday to "respond in kind" to the attacks.

At an event in the Kremlin, Putin said Russia "can respond in the same way regarding civilian infrastructure and all other objects of this kind that the enemy attacks. We have our own views on this matter and our own plans. We will follow what we have outlined."

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy urged the country's Western partners to send more air defense systems so they can be distributed across the country where missile strikes have be-

come more common.

"Every day, every night such ... terror happens," he said on Telegram after Thursday's attack on Kyiv. "World unity is capable to stop it by helping us with more air defense systems."

Zelenskyy said Russia doesn't have missiles that can evade U.S.-made Patriots and other advanced air defense weapons.

Russia has largely turned its attention to other Ukrainian cities, targeting them with drones and ballistic missiles.

On Wednesday, Russian ballistic missiles killed five people and injured nine in the eastern Kharkiv region, and strike on southern Odesa last week killed 21. (AP)

Vietnam's VP becomes interim prez

HANOI, March 21: Vietnam's Vice President Vo Thi Anh Xuan will serve as acting president after the previous president's resignation a year into the position, a Communist Party newspaper reported on Thursday.

Analysts said a permanent candidate was unlikely to be selected soon, underscoring the growing concerns among foreign investors about political instability in the Southeast Asian nation that is a growing manufacturing hub and sits at the middle of the US-China competition for global influence.

Xuan, 54, became vice president in 2021 and she will be serving as acting president for the second time, the Tuoi Tre daily reported.

On Wednesday, President Vo Van Thong resigned due to unspecified violations that hurt the perception and reputation of the party and the state, the Communist Party said. Thong's predecessor Nguyen Xuan Phuc had resigned last year to take "political responsibility" for corruption scandals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although the violations were not detailed, analysts said the party's language made it clear he was implicated in the anti-corruption campaign.

That the youngest president in Vietnam's modern history, once considered the protégé of Communist Party chief Nguyen Phu Trong, 79, became its shortest-tenured is a "political earthquake," said Nguyen

Khac Giang, an analyst at Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

And it is likely to be followed by a "very complicated" succession within the party that'll likely last until the all-important National Congress in 2026 — the party's most important meeting when the successor to the Trong, Vietnam's most powerful politician, will be determined.

The ideologically conservative Trong has held the position since 2011 and Thong's departure highlights the reach of the anti-corruption drive that has been Trong's "most important legacy," Giang added.

Concerns about Trong's health mean the largely ceremonial position of the president is crucial. The position is ranked third in terms of political power but is second in the official hierarchy and in line for the top job, Giang said.

"Until now, no one ... wanted to take the presidency position as it lacked power. But at the same time, that position will put someone in a very good position to run for the next party's leadership position," he said.

Thong resigned days after the former head of central Vietnam's Quang Ngai province was arrested on allegations of corruption that date from Thong's time as party chief in the province.

The former head was part of an investigation into a real estate firm Phuc Son Group for alleged forgery. The fact that the alleged violations were reported by the Central Inspection Commission, the Communist Party's mechanism for

carrying out the anti-corruption campaign, implied that Thong was "implicated in the anti-corruption" campaign, Giang said.

Police are investigating two projects by the Phuc Son Group and say they've found evidence of tax evasion of over USD 14 million, including the redevelopment of an old US air base.

Vietnam has tried to strike a balance between its larger neighbour China and the US while positioning itself as an ideal home for businesses looking to shift their supply chains out of China. Last year, it was the only country that received both President Joe Biden and China's President Xi Jinping on state visits.

The newly disclosed investigation is part of an anti-corruption drive Trong has described as a "blazing furnace," and it has meant greater power for both state and party enforcement agencies. It also has helped cement the top leader's authority, but Giang said party factions have also sought to use it to purge rivals.

Analysts have warned that the anti-corruption drive has hurt Vietnam's business environment, making foreign investors jittery about unpredictable economic policies.

Rumors of a potential political change flared after a state visit to Vietnam by the Dutch royal family was postponed due to "due to domestic circumstances," according to a statement from the Dutch Royal house. (AP)

EU leaders gather with Ukraine ammunition production and Gaza aid at the top of their agenda



BRUSSELS, March 21: European Union leaders gathered on Thursday to consider new ways to help boost arms and ammunition production for Ukraine and to discuss the war in Gaza amid deep concern about Israeli plans to launch a ground offensive in the city of Rafah.

Ukraine's munition stocks are desperately low, and Russia has more and better-armed troops. There is also a growing awareness that the EU must provide for its own security, with election campaigning in the US raising questions about Washington's commitment to its allies. Ahead of the summit in Brussels, EU Council President Charles Michel said the Europeans "face a pivotal moment. Urgency, intensity and unwavering determination are imperative." New plans are on the table, notably to use the profits from frozen Russian assets to buy Ukraine arms and ammunition.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will join the leaders at the start of their two-day meeting, in part to encourage some member countries to resume funding for the UN Palestinian relief agency, the main provider of aid in Gaza.

The agency, known as UNRWA, is reeling from allegations that 12 of its 13,000 Gaza staff members par-

ticipated in the October 7 Hamas attacks in southern Israel. The agency fired the employees, but more than a dozen countries suspended funding worth about USD 450 million, almost half its budget for 2024.

Early this month, the European Commission said it would pay 50 million euros (USD 54 million) to the agency after it agreed to allow EU-appointed experts to audit the way it screens staff to identify extremists. Germany, notably, has not resumed funding.

The Israel-Hamas war has driven 80 per cent of Gaza's population of 2.3 million Palestinians from their homes, and UN officials say a quarter of the population is starving. The agency is the main supplier of food, water and shelter but is on the brink of financial collapse.

Concern is mounting about an imminent Israeli ground offensive against Hamas in Rafah, Gaza's southernmost city near the border with Egypt. It's a plan that has raised global alarm because of the potential for harm to the hundreds of thousands of civilians sheltering there.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that Israel can't achieve its goal of "total victory" against Hamas without going into Rafah.

In a draft of their summit statement, seen by The Associated Press, the leaders are set to underline that such an operation "would worsen the already catastrophic humanitarian situation and prevent the urgently needed provision of basic services and humanitarian assistance".

The leaders are also expected to give a greenlight to Bosnia to open membership talks once certain conditions are met. (AP)

Leaders of over 30 countries meet in a Brussels summit to promote nuclear energy

BRUSSELS, March 21: In the shadows of a massive monument glorifying nuclear energy, over 30 leaders and delegations from around the world are backing the idea to use the controversial source to help achieve the goal of a climate-neutral globe while giving more countries an added sense of economic and security independence.

Such a summit would have been unthinkable a dozen years ago in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident in Japan, but a warming planet creating a need to phase out fossil fuels and war in Ukraine laying bare a dependence on Russian energy have turned the tables over the past half decade.

"We have to do everything possible to facilitate the contribution of nuclear energy," said Rafael Grossi, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

"It is clear: Nuclear is there. It has an important role to play," he said. (AP)

UK PM Rishi Sunak's flagship bill to fly migrants to Rwanda hits deadlock

LONDON, March 21: British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's flagship legislation aimed at flying illegal migrants to Rwanda has hit another set of parliamentary hurdles after the House of Lords delivered multiple defeats on the draft bill, sending it back to the Commons.

The Safety of Rwanda Bill will return for members of Parliament to vote on in mid-April after the Easter recess as the Upper House peers rejected the changes of the House of Commons in seven votes, with majorities ranging between 30 and 55, on Wednesday night.

They expressed support for amendments to water down the headline legislation that seeks to deem the East African country safe in law to block legal challenges to migrants being flown out to Rwanda while their asylum claims are assessed.

While the Opposition Labour Party has branded the scheme a costly "gimmick", the Conservative government has said it is a key tool to tackle soaring illegal migration via dangerous small boats crossing the English Channel.

"It is crystal clear, as we are seeing from the Labour Party's oppo-



sition in this House, that while we are committed to stopping the boats, the Labour Party would keep them coming," said Sunak in the Commons, when questioned about his Rwanda scheme on Wednesday. "Since I became Prime Minister, the number of small boat crossings is down by over a third. That is because we have doubled National Crime Agency funding and we have increased illegal immigration enforcement raids by 70 per cent. We have closed 7,500 bank accounts, deported 24,000 illegal migrants and processed over 112,000 cases — more than at any point in the last two decades," he claimed.

Labour Leader Keir Starmer accused the government of wasting taxpayer's money on the scheme, which has a reported bill of around

GBP 600 million.

"The tragedy is we know the Prime Minister does not even believe in the Rwanda gimmick... His great hope is to placate those in his party with a couple of empty planes, praying they will not notice when the flights stop going, the boats are still coming and the costs keep mounting," said Starmer.

The Rwanda bill, meanwhile, remains in a deadlock phase between the two Houses of Parliament until an agreement can be reached on the final wording. The government is expected to hold consecutive days of votes in both Houses once Parliament is back in session post-Easter next month until a consensus can be found.

This means the likelihood of the first flights of migrants taking off for Rwanda is not before June at the earliest after the bill clears its parliamentary journey and receives the King's royal assent to become law. The legislation is crucial to Sunak's stated priorities ahead of a general election, with his "stop the boats" pledge hinging on this flagship policy to fly asylum seekers out to Rwanda and show he is cracking down on illegal migration to the UK shores. (PTI)

2 Pak soldiers and 8 Baloch terrorists killed in attack on Gwadar Port Authority complex

KARACHI, March 21: At least two soldiers of the Pakistani Army were killed and eight Baloch terrorists were "sent to hell" when security personnel foiled an attempt by heavily armed Baloch insurgents to storm the Gwadar Port Authority complex in the restive Balochistan province, the military has said.

The port complex hosts several government and paramilitary offices and the strategically located Gwadar Port remains one of the focal points of the billion-dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Project.

A press release from the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the military's media wing, said a group of terrorists attempted to enter the Port Authority Colony but were successfully thwarted by security forces personnel on Wednesday.

"Own troops employed for security responded immediately and effectively engaged the terrorists, and in ensuing fire exchange, all eight terrorists were sent to hell," the statement said late on Wednesday.

Two sepoys were killed in the exchange of fire, the statement said. A large quantity of arms, ammunition and explosives was also recovered from the possession of the militants from the separatist Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA).

Balochistan, bordering Iran and Afghanistan, is home to a long-running violent insurgency. Baloch insurgent groups have previously carried out several attacks targeting the USD 60 billion CPEC projects.

The BLA is opposed to China's investments in Balochistan and accuses Beijing and Islamabad of exploitation of the resource-rich province, a charge rejected by the authorities.

Thousands of Chinese personnel are working in Pakistan on several projects being carried out under the

egis of the CPEC.

BLA's Majeed Brigade, which was formed in 2011, is a particularly lethal guerrilla cell of the BLA.

It was named after a guard of former prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was killed while attempting to assassinate the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) founder.

It has been alleged that the group also maintains sanctuaries in areas along the Pak-Iran border.

The brigade, which is the suicide squad of the BLA, mostly targets security forces and Chinese interests in Pakistan. It also claimed responsibility for the April 2022 suicide attack outside the Karachi University's Confucius Institute.

The outfit had also claimed responsibility for three coordinated attacks launched using rockets and sophisticated weapons in Balochistan's Mach town in January, some 70 kilometres from the provincial capital of Quetta. The attack comes on a

day when Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif asserted that his government will not tolerate any acts of cross-border terrorism.

Gwadar Senior Superintendent of Police Captain (ret'd) Zohaib Mohsin said the

situation is now under control. A large contingent of police and security forces had arrived at the scene when the intense firing was ongoing, he added. A statement from the United Nations Department for Safety and Security said "several explosions followed by continuous firing" were reported during the attack on the complex.

The statement confirmed there were no immediate reports of civilian casualties, elaborating that seven personnel from three UN agencies based in Gwadar and two UN agencies on missions were "safe and accounted for". (PTI)

A suicide bomber attacks a bank in Afghanistan, killing 3 people and injuring 12

ISLAMABAD, March 21: A suicide bomber carried out an attack on Thursday at a private bank in Kandahar city in southern Afghanistan, killing at least three people and injuring 12 others, officials said.

All of the victims were people who had gathered at the branch of New Kabul Bank to collect their monthly salaries, said Inamullah Samangani, head of the government's Kandahar Information and Culture Department.

Abdul Mateen Qani, spokesman for the Taliban Interior Ministry, also confirmed the attack but couldn't provide more details. He said it was being investigated.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the bombing. The Islamic State group's affiliate, a major Taliban rival, has conducted previous attacks on schools, hospitals, mosques and Shiite areas throughout the country.

Kandahar city is a spiritual and political centre for Afghanistan's rulers because the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, is based there and his decisions on major issues are implemented by authorities in Kabul, the capital.

The Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in August 2021 during the chaotic departure of US and NATO troops after 20 years. Despite initial promises of a more moderate stance, the Taliban gradually reimposed a harsh interpretation of Islamic law, or Shariah, as they did during their previous rule of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. (AP)

Cash-strapped Pakistan seeking 24th bailout, IMF confirms

ISLAMABAD, March 21 : Announcing the staff-level agreement on the successful completion of the existing short-term facility, the IMF has confirmed that cash-strapped Pakistan is seeking a 24th medium-term bailout package for a permanent push towards long-standing structural reforms.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in its end-of-mission statement on Wednesday said the cash-strapped country "expressed interest in a successor medium-term Fund-supported programme to permanently resolve Pakistan's fiscal and external sustainability weaknesses, strengthening its economic recovery, and laying the foundations for strong, sustainable, and inclusive growth", Dawn News reported.

It said the global lender's team reached a staff-level agreement with the Pakistani authorities on the second and final review of Pakistan's stabilisation programme supported by the IMF's USD 3 billion standby arrangement approved in July last year.



The statement said subject to the approval of its executive board, the staff-level agreement would enable Pakistan to access about USD 1.1 billion — 828 million special drawing rights (SDR) — by late April.

While doing so, the Fund also laid bare the broader, though well-known, conditionalities of the next programme on which "discussions are expected to start in the coming months", the statement added. As in the past programmes, four central areas would remain under focus for reforms.

The top objective of the next

medium-term programme — Extended Fund Facility of about 36 to 39 months — would be strengthening public finances, including through gradual fiscal consolidation and broadening the tax base, especially in under-taxed sectors (read real estate, retail and wholesale trade and agriculture) and improving tax administration to improve debt sustainability and create space for higher priority development and social assistance spending to protect the vulnerable.

The second objective of the next programme would be restoring the

energy sector's viability by accelerating cost-reducing reforms, including improving electricity transmission and distribution, moving captive power demand to the electricity grid, strengthening distribution company governance and management, and undertaking effective anti-theft efforts.

The third key objective is returning inflation to the target, with a deeper and more transparent flexible foreign exchange market supporting external rebalancing and rebuilding foreign exchange reserves. The fourth and last critical aim would be promoting private-led activity through the actions mentioned above as well as the removal of distortionary protection, advancement of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) reforms to improve the sector's performance, and the scaling up investment in human capital to make economic growth more resilient and inclusive and enable Pakistan to reach its economic potential.

The IMF staff-level agreement recognised the "strong programme

implementation" by the State Bank of Pakistan and the caretaker government in recent months, as well as the new government's intentions for ongoing policy and reform efforts to move Pakistan from stabilisation to a strong and sustainable recovery.

"Pakistan's economic and financial position has improved in the months since the first review, with growth and confidence continuing to recover on the back of prudent policy management and the resumption of inflows from multilateral and bilateral partners", the IMF mission chief to Pakistan, Nathan Porter, noted.

However, growth is expected to be modest this year and inflation remains well above target, Porter said. Porter emphasised that "ongoing policy and reform efforts were required to address Pakistan's deep-seated economic vulnerabilities amidst the ongoing challenges posed by elevated external and domestic financing needs and an unsettled external environment". (PTI)

Oppn leader Jitendra Chaudhury, Cong MLA Sudip Roy Barman to lead 25-member panel INDIA bloc partners form campaign committee for LS polls

AGARTALA, March 21: The Left parties and the Congress, which are constituents of the opposition bloc INDIA, have formed a committee to plan joint campaigns for the upcoming parliamentary elections in Tripura, leaders of both sides have said.

CPI(M) legislator and opposition leader in the assembly Jitendra Chaudhury and veteran Congress MLA Sudip Roy Barman will lead the 25-member panel as joint convenors.

"We are jointly contesting the Lok Sabha elections as partners of the INDIA bloc to defeat the BJP-led NDA. The state-level committee has been constituted to handle the campaign of the opposition bloc for the Lok Sabha elections," Roy Barman said during a press conference here.

Such committees will also be formed at the district and sub-division levels for better coordination

in the campaign, he said.

"We will deploy all our resources in the ensuing elections. I appeal to electors to take note of the country's disastrous situation before casting their votes in the polls," he said.

Roy Barman also attacked the NDA candidate for East Tripura Lok Sabha constituency, Kriti Singh Debbarma, alleging that she has "no commitment to the people of Tripura as she was born in Meghalaya's Shillong and completed her schooling there".

"We have not seen any contribution from her. She has no commitment to the people of Tripura. The woman, who promised to achieve Greater Tripaland, has not kept her word. Tribal people will give a befitting reply to her," he said.

Chaudhury said as an INDIA bloc partner, the Left Front will also jointly campaign with the Congress candidate in the parlia-



mentary elections.

Leaders of the Left parties and the Congress will join rallies for the submission of nominations by the INDIA bloc candidates for two Lok Sabha constituencies and the bypoll to the Ramnagar

assembly seat.

INDIA bloc candidate for Ramnagar assembly seat Ratan Das will submit his nomination paper on March 22, while Congress nominee from West Tripura Lok Sabha seat, Asish Kumar Saha,

will submit his paper on March 27.

Left Front candidate for East Tripura Lok Sabha seat Rajendra Reang will submit his nomination paper on March 28.

Roy Barman also said, "There has been a similarity in two parties when it comes to secularism and democracy even as ideological differences persist. We are not power mongers at all."

"It is the Tipra Motha, which promised to achieve Greater Tripaland and sought a constitutional solution to the problems of tribal people but forgot those promises for power," he said.

Notably, Chief Minister Manik Saha had recently said that Tipra Motha, which emerged as Tripura's main opposition party in the 2023 elections, joined his government as it realised that only Prime Minister Narendra Modi could ensure the development of the indigenous people. (PTI)

Mizoram: Congress names retired cop Lalbiakzama as candidate for LS polls

AIZWAL, March 21: The Congress on Thursday fielded Lalbiakzama, a retired Mizoram police officer and former state home secretary, as the party's candidate for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls in the northeastern state.

Polling for the lone Lok Sabha seat in the state is scheduled on April 19.

State Congress chief Lal Thanzara announced Lalbiakzama's name in the presence of party leaders and journalists at the Congress Bhavan here.

Lal Thanzara said protection and preservation of Mizo culture and religion would be the party's primary focus during the campaign, which is set to commence on March 28.

Lalbiakzama (64) asserted his commitment to the welfare of Mizoram's people if elected.

He raised concerns about the current state of the country under the BJP-led NDA rule, suggesting the possibility of a change in leadership at the Centre after the polls, particularly with the opposition's united front against BJP ideologies. Lalbiakzama's career spans notable service in the Mizoram Police Service, including missions to Bosnia and Kosovo as part of UN deployments. He later transitioned to the state home department, eventually becoming the first MPS



officer to hold the position of home secretary.

Following his retirement in 2020, Lalbiakzama joined the Congress ahead of the Mizoram assembly polls in 2023.

The ruling Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) has nominated entrepreneur Richard Vanlalhman-gaiha, while the People's Conference (PC) party has selected Mizo singer and lyricist Rita Malsawmi as its candidate. The main opposition MNF is expected to announce its candidate soon, with incumbent Lok Sabha member C. Lalrosanga opting not to contest. The BJP is also set to announce its candidate before the March 27 nomination deadline. (PTI)

Tripura CM launches door-to-door campaign for LS polls

AGARTALA, March 21: Tripura chief minister Manik Saha on Thursday launched a door-to-door campaign from Sepahijala district for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections in the state. Accompanied by BJP leader Nabadal Banik and several party activists, the chief minister commenced the campaign from the Kanchanmala area in Tripura West Lok Sabha constituency and handed over copies of a letter written by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to voters. PM Modi has written an open letter to citizens of the country, seeking support for building a 'Viksit Bharat' (developed India). "To make the BJP victorious in the parliamentary elections, I have visited three booths of Kanchanmala under the Golghati assembly constituency today. I have seen the people's faith in Modi ji and I am sure that the BJP will cross the 400-seat milestone in the Lok Sabha elections," he wrote on Facebook. During the campaign, Saha urged electors to vote for BJP candidate and former chief minister Biplab Kumar Deb in the Tripura West seat. The chief minister interacted with villagers who welcomed him by blowing conches to know their aspirations and problems, a BJP leader said. (PTI)

No nominations filed for LS polls in Manipur

IMPHAL, March 21: Even as notification allowing filing of nomination papers for contesting the 18th Lok Sabha elections from two seats in Manipur was issued on Wednesday, no candidate has filed nomination papers till Thursday. Except CPI and NPF, no other parties have declared the names of their candidates till date. CPI is the first party that declared nomination of Laishram Sotinkumar as party's officially nominated candidate for the Inner Manipur Parliamentary constituency. The party had declared its decision ahead of the announcement of the poll schedules by the ECI. The NPF had also declared K Timothy Zimik as its party candidate in the Outer Manipur (reserved) Parliamentary constituency on Wednesday. The ECI had announced a seven-phase poll for the 18th Lok Sabha elections with the first phase of polling on April 19. The polling in both the parliamentary constituencies of Outer Manipur (ST reserved) Parliamentary constituency and Inner Manipur Parliamentary constituency will take place in the first and second phases (April 19 and April 26). (NNN)

MNF to field Rajya Sabha MP K Vanlalvena for lone LS seat in Mizoram

AIZWAL, March 21: Mizoram's main opposition party Mizo National Front (MNF) will field sitting Rajya Sabha MP K Vanlalvena for the state's lone Lok Sabha seat, a senior party leader said on Thursday.

Vanlalvena, 54, was elected to the lone Rajya Sabha seat in Mizoram in June 2020.

Incumbent Lok Sabha member C Lalrosanga of MNF has opted not to contest, he said.

The senior MNF leader said the party will officially announce the name of its candidate on Friday at 11 am.

Earlier, the MNF and Congress held parleys to forge a pre-poll electoral alliance to jointly combat against the ruling Zoram People's Movement (ZPM). However, the two parties decided to go on their own after the talks did not bear fruit.

Congress on Thursday named retired Mizoram Police Service (MPS) officer and former state Home secretary Lalbiakzama, 64, as the party candidate for the lone Lok Sabha seat in the state.

Over 8.6 lakh electorates, including 4.41 lakh female voters, will exercise their franchise in Lok Sabha polls in Mizoram on April 19.

ZPM has fielded entrepreneur Richard Vanlalhman-gaiha, 46, who is a newbie in politics, while the People's Conference (PC) party named well-known Mizo

Cong announces 1st list of 34 candidates for Arunachal assembly polls

ITANAGAR, March 21: The Congress on Thursday announced the first list of 34 candidates for the upcoming assembly polls in Arunachal Pradesh, scheduled for April 19.

Among the candidates are three former ministers and three women nominees, with the majority being first-time contenders.

Notably, the names of Arunachal Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) president and former chief minister Nabam Tuki and APCC vice-president Bosiram Siram were absent from the list.

Party insiders claimed both Tuki and Siram would contest as Lok Sabha nominees from the Arunachal West and East parliamentary constituencies, respectively.

Tuki is the sitting MLA from Sagalee constituency in Papumpare district. He had represented the seat since the last six terms.

The party is yet to unveil candidates for the two Lok Sabha seats in the state. Among the prominent figures listed were former ministers Kumar Waii, Takam Pario, and Tanga Byalang.

The three women debutants are Gollo Yaping Tana from Pakke Kessang constituency,



Jemai Krong (Tezu) and Marina Kenglang who would contest from Changlang North constituency.

Some of the other first-timers are Sanhey Phutsok from Mukto constituency represented by Chief Minister Pema Khandu, Kompu Dolo (Chayang-Tajo), Tame Gyadi (Seppa East), Nabam Tado (Doimukh), Rughu Tado (Tali), Reri Kirbe Dulom (Daporijo), Yomkar Riba (Basar), Tallang Yaying (Rumgong), Takku Jerang (Panging), Bimar Dabi (Nari-Koyu) and Okom Yosung (Pasighat East).

The remaining debutants are Tapyam Pada

(Pasighat West), Karo Tayeng (Mebo), Losi Lego (Mariyang-Geku), Eri Tayu (Anini), Tobin Lego (Dambuk), Chenghe Mitapo (Roing), Bufuto Krong (Hayuliang), Bayamso Kri (Chowkhram), Shotika Hopak (Namsai), Tama Tamar Tara (Lekang), Khimshom Mossang (Nampong), Timpu Ngemu (Changlang South), Tangse Tekwa (Khonsa West), Sompha Wangsa (Kanubari) and Holai Wangsa from Pongchou-Wakka constituency.

Yumlam Achung, who unsuccessfully contested from the vital Itanagar constituency in 2019, is contesting for the second time along with Chatu Longri from Miao constituency.

In the 2019 assembly polls, the Congress contested in 46 constituencies out of the total 60 but could manage to win in only four.

The party recently received a major setback when three of its sitting MLAs - CLP leader Lombo Tayeng (Mebo), Ninong Ering (Pasighat West) and Wangliln Lowangdong (Borduria-Bogapani) - switched allegiance to the BJP ahead of the poll announcement.

Assembly and general elections will be held simultaneously in the state on April 19. (PTI)

NSCN-IM chairman highlights Naga constitution's significance

DIMAPUR, March 21: NSCN-IM chairman Q Tuccu on Thursday called upon the Nagas to reflect on the significance of the Naga constitution and the values it upholds.

This was mentioned in the speech of the NSCN-IM chairman at the 45th Naga Republic Day celebration at Council Headquarters, Hebron near Dimapur on Thursday. Speaking on the occasion, NSCN-IM chairman said that the day was a great day in the history of the Nagas.

"As we celebrate this historic day, let us take a moment to reflect on the significance of our constitution and the values it upholds. Our constitution is a beacon of hope, a symbol of our commitment to stand by our historical and political rights. Let us therefore, breathe the air of faith in our hearts and the memories in our souls of those who have shown us the way through their martyrdom. Let us salute the Naga nation today and fill our hearts with pride and hope in our Almighty God who has sustained us giving us the courage to stand by our rights," the NSCN-IM top leader said.

Q Tuccu then urged the Nagas to remember their patriotic leaders and give their gratitude to many people who fought for "our God given rights under the banner of our flag".

He said, "The Naga flag brings us all together as a nation. Let me remind you that from the day NSCN entered into political talks with the Government of India we made our stand very clear that no attempt should be made to bully the Nagas into submission. We took the bold stand to tell the government that the blunder of history should not be repeated by introducing another 16 point type of solution".

Having taken such a stand, it was no doubt a tough negotiation all the way as the Government of India was desperate to have its own way imposed on the Nagas, the NSCN-IM leader said.

"We stood the ground, not submitting to their self-

centred and domineering narrative. Our perseverance was ultimately rewarded when the final breakthrough came in 2002 when the unique history of the Nagas and the situation was given official recognition by the Government of India. This changes the power dynamics of NSCN and boosts up their morale. It was a turning point and milestone as the absolute truth of the historical and political rights of the Nagas was placed beyond the contestable spectrum," he added.

However, Tuccu said it took them more than a decade of tough talking to take forward the Indo-Naga political talks based on the unique history of the Nagas. "No wonder the Prime Minister Narendra Modi demonstrated a high level of initiative to solve the Naga political issue through his dynamic leadership as he started doing the spadework towards signing the peace agreement with NSCN to end the seven decades old Naga issue once and for all. Finally, the world was awakened when the high profile signing ceremony of Framework Agreement of August 3, 2015, was broadcast live in TV channels to make the world bear witness to the historic agreement," he recalled.

"Significantly, this agreement made an indelible impact on the Indo-Naga political talks as we remained resolute to stand by the Framework Agreement in the face of the flagging attention by the Government of India," the NSCN-IM chairman added.

Q Tuccu then said the NSCN is not ready to stand by and tamely accept defeat to surrender the rights of the Nagas. "Let us together carry on the essence of Naga republic beyond this moment. Let us exercise our duty to uphold the values as we continue with this timeless tradition as it symbolizes the achievement of Naga independence and the establishment of our government to assert our political identity. The Naga Republic Day also highlights the democratic values and principles of the Naga constitution, which serves as the guiding document for the nation," he said. (NNN)

2 drug peddlers arrested, heroin recovered in M'laya



SHILLONG, March 21: Two alleged drug traffickers have been arrested along with heroin from Happy Valley in Shillong in Meghalaya.

They have been identified as Joshua Khiantge (36) and Joel (29). Both are from Damchhara in North Tripura, East Khasi Hills SP Rituraj Ravi said.

11 soap boxes containing heroin weighing 139.98 gms, one Aadhar card, one PAN card, one mobile phone and one Tata Sumo vehicle bearing the registration number 'ML 05 N 0515' were seized from their possession, the police officer said.

He also informed that a case under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act is being registered, and further investigation in the matter is under progress. The operation was conducted by Shillong ANTF under the leadership of Sandra Nongdhar, MPS. (NNN)

'World Poetry Day' celebrated in USTM

Noted Assamese poet Anis Uz-Zaman highlighted importance of preserving folk culture, unique expressions

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 21: The department of English of the University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya (USTM) organized a function at the university premises on the occasion of 'World Poetry Day' on Thursday.

The English department organized the programme in association with the Literary Forum and Poetry Consortium. The theme of 'World Poetry Day' this year is 'Standing on the Shoulders of Giants', which honours iconic writers of the past whose trailblazing works enlarged poetry's footprint across cultures.

Noted Assamese poet and translator Anis Uz-Zaman graced the occasion as the special guest. He was conferred the prestigious 'Gangadhar National Award for Poetry' in 2022 by the Sambalpur University. The poet was accompanied by his wife and distinguished



academician, Shamim Akhtar on the occasion.

The event was also attended by G D Sharma, vice-chancellor of USTM and R K Sharma, advisor at the university.

Addressing the gathering Anis Uz-Zaman stressed on the importance of preserving our folk culture

Rights team evaluates welfare schemes in Peren



HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, March 21: A Nagaland State Human Rights Commission (NSHRC) team paid a two-day visit to Peren district to evaluate various government welfare schemes and their implementation in the district from a human rights perspective.

The team was led by NHRC chairman Justice Songkhupchung Serto and accompanied by its member R Nzanbemo Lotha, secretary Limanla and other officials.

On its arrival in Jalukie town on the first day of the visit on Wednesday, Justice Serto held a meeting with the principal and staff of the Government Higher Secondary School, Jalukie wherein concerns were raised by the latter regarding shortage of teachers for mathematics and science, shortage of classrooms, lack of adequate infrastructures and educational facilities, hostel facilities for students belonging to economically poor background and the overall functioning of the school.

While stating that the science stream offers diverse career opportunities, he emphasised the importance of introducing science stream at the higher secondary level in the school. He also suggested the school to construct overhead water tank, which can be utilised in school bathrooms and toilets.

The team then visited the Jalukie Community Health Centre to particularly take stock of the medical services and facilities available in the hospital and also interacted with Peren chief medical officer and staff of the centre.

On the second day on Thursday, the team visited the Jalukie Police Station and had a lengthy interaction with the police personnel. It organised an awareness programme on the role of human rights commissions in advancing and protecting human rights at Jalukie town women welfare hall with civil society organisations, student body, women organisation, various government departments, village heads, village council chairmen, administrative officers and police personnel.

Delivering a keynote address in the awareness programme, Justice Serto spoke on the functions and roles of the commission as well as on how to file a complaint if the authorities failed to prevent the violation of human rights.

In his address, NHRC member Lotha said the Human Rights Commission basically is like a court, which was established to protect and promote human rights. He said no fee is charged when any complaint is addressed to the commission.

Lotha exhorted the gathering to come forward and file a complaint if they are deprived of their rights or if their rights are violated.

Later, the team visited the GHSS, primary health centre and police station at Athhibung.

their creativity.

The welcome address was delivered by Mitali Goswami, the head of the department of English of the university. GD Sharma in his speech spoke about the role of poetry in capturing the complexity of human emotions and also emphasized the importance of translation and the role of technology in developing translation interfaces.

R K Sharma recalled his fond college memories with guest Anis Uz-Zaman, who was his college mate, and also recited a few lines from the famous Assamese poem Dhulikona Moi written by Chandrabhar Baruah.

As part of the celebrations, an inter-university poetry writing competition was also organized on the theme nature and poetry, the winners of which were also awarded during the event. The winners also recited their poems on the occasion.

Provided all details of electoral bonds to Election Commission: SBI tells SC

NEW DELHI, March 21: The State Bank of India told the Supreme Court on Thursday it has provided the Election Commission all details of electoral bonds, including the unique bond number that would reveal the link between the purchaser and the recipient political party.

In a compliance affidavit filed ahead of the 5 p.m. deadline set by the apex court, the SBI chairman said the complete bank account numbers and KYC details of the political parties which redeemed the bonds have not been made public as it may compromise the security of these accounts.

The SBI also said KYC details of purchasers have also not been made public for security reasons.

It said complete bank account numbers and KYC details were not necessary for "identifying the political parties".

The affidavit said the SBI has revealed information which will show the name of the purchaser of the bond, its denomination and specific number, the name of the party that encashed it, the last four digits of the bank account number of political parties that redeemed the bond and the denomination and unique number of the bond encashed.

In a third tongue-lashing to the SBI, the apex court had on March 18 told it to stop being "selective" and make "complete disclosure" of all details related to the electoral bonds scheme by March 21.



A five-judge constitution bench headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud had said the details to be disclosed include the unique bond numbers that would reveal the link between the buyers and the recipient political parties.

In the compliance affidavit, the SBI said it has provided all details of the electoral bonds which were in its possession to the EC.

"The complete bank account numbers and KYC details of the political parties are not being made public as it may compromise the security of the account (cyber security)," it said.

"Similarly, KYC details of purchasers are also not being made public for security reasons, apart from the fact that such information is not fed/collated in the system. However, they are not necessary for identifying the political parties," the affidavit filed by bank chairperson Dinesh Kumar Khara said.

It said in the details disclosed regarding purchasers and redemption by political parties, "the prefix and the bonds number is in fact the alphanumeric number".

"It is respectfully submitted that SBI has now disclosed all details and that no details (other than complete account numbers & KYC details) have been withheld from disclosure in terms of the di-

rections contained in... the judgment dated February 15, 2024 read with order dated March 18, 2024 passed by this court," the affidavit said.

On March 18, the apex court had said there was "no manner of doubt that the SBI is required to make complete disclosure of all the details" which are in its possession.

It had said the EC shall upload the details forthwith on receipt of the communication by SBI.

In a landmark verdict delivered on February 15, a five-judge constitution bench had scrapped the Centre's controversial electoral bonds scheme that allowed anonymous political funding, calling it "unconstitutional", and ordered disclosure by the EC of the donors, amount donated by them and the recipients by March 13.

Ordering the closure of the scheme, the top court directed the SBI, the authorised financial institution under the scheme, to submit by March 6 the details of the electoral bonds purchased since April 12, 2019 till date to the Election Commission.

On March 11, the apex court had trashed SBI's plea seeking an extension of time and ordered it to disclose the details of electoral bonds to the EC by close of business hours on March 12. (PTI)

Cong criticises PM Modi, ask him to deliver on promise of granting statehood to Ladakh

NEW DELHI, March 21: The Congress on Thursday asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi if he has any intention of upholding his "guarantee" to the people of Ladakh on grant of statehood and self governance.

In a post on X, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said "since the prime minister has put off his Bhutan photo-ops today, we hope he can devote some time to Ladakh".

Modi's visit to Bhutan, which was scheduled for Thursday, has been rescheduled due to inclement weather conditions in the Himalayan nation.

"Since February 3rd, when there was a complete shutdown of Ladakh by the locals, the people of Ladakh have been protesting in large numbers against the Modi Sarkar's heavy handed 'rule by bureaucracy,' which has made a mockery of local elected institutions," he said.

The courageous environmental activist Sonam Wangchuk has brought the agony of the people of Ladakh to national and global attention, he noted.

Posing a set of four questions the people of Ladakh have for the PM, the Congress leader said the people of Ladakh are demanding constitutional safeguards for the Union Territory of Ladakh, including statehood and inclusion in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

Incidentally, he said, the BJP had promised Ladakh's inclusion in the Sixth Schedule in its manifesto for the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections and



the 2020 Ladakh Hill Council Polls.

"Does the Prime Minister have any intention of upholding his 'Modi ki guarantee?' If not, why did he make the promise in the first place? Ten years after he first took office, why is this issue still pending," he asked.

Ramesh also said that since the dissolution of the BJP-PDP Government in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir in 2018, the people of Ladakh have had no representative government at the state-level.

"On August 5, 2019, by converting Ladakh into a separate Union Territory without a legislative assembly, the Modi Sarkar closed the possibilities of any self-government for the people of Ladakh.

"What vision did the Prime Minister have for Ladakh when he declared it a separate Union Territory? Were the people of Ladakh ever consulted during the development of this vision," he asked.

Ramesh also alleged that under Prime Minister Modi's governance, "India has lost prime pasture land in the Changthang plains in the north of Ladakh to Chinese encroachment.

In addition to a national security crisis, this is also a serious socio-economic issue for the nomads of Ladakh".

"The prime minister, however, gave a clean chit to China on June 19th, 2020, at the all-party meet on China, when he declared that not a single Chinese soldier had crossed over into Indian territory," he said, asking whether the people of Ladakh are lying while claiming that their lands had been encroached upon by the Chinese PLA.

Ramesh claimed that the proposed Ladakh Industrial Land Allotment Policy 2023 has suggested single-window clearance committees that have only government officials and an industry representative.

There are no Council members, civil society groups, and panchayat representatives in these committees, he claimed.

"The document does not even lay out the environmental or cultural criteria for considering an industrial project, nor does it provide for any public consultation.

"In a sensitive ecosystem such as Ladakh, in a region populated by nomadic tribes and other sensitive demographic groups, what is the cynical motive that underlines this proposed Land Allotment Policy? Is it yet another attempt by the Prime Minister to favour his industrialist friends at the cost of the people," Ramesh asked, using the hashtag "#ChuppiTodoPradhanMantriji". (PTI)

Shobha Karandlaje booked for MCC violation

BENGALURU, March 21: Union Minister and BJP leader Shobha Karandlaje has been booked for alleged model code violation over her recent remarks on the people of Tamil Nadu, Election Commission officials here said. The move comes a day after the EC directed the Karnataka chief electoral officer (CEO) to take immediate and appropriate action on the DMK's complaint regarding the violation by Karandlaje, who is BJP's Lok Sabha candidate from the Bangalore North constituency. The poll panel also sought a compliance report on the matter within 48 hours.

DMK, the ruling party in Tamil Nadu, had sought action against Karandlaje for alleging that a person from Tamil Nadu was responsible for the IED blast at the Rameshwaram Cafe in Bengaluru

on March 1. In its complaint, the DMK said that the minister's statement generalised the people of Tamil Nadu as "extremists".

According to the CEO, the Bangalore District Election Officer has filed an FIR against Karandlaje under sections 123 (3A), 125 and 123 (3) of the RP (Representation of the People) Act at Cottonpet police station here. This is the first action ordered by the EC against a key political figure in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

During a protest in Bengaluru on Tuesday, Karandlaje had said that law and order in Karnataka has "deteriorated". People who come from Tamil Nadu plant bombs here, those from Delhi chant "Pakistan Zindabad" slogans and some who come from Kerala were involved in "acid attacks", she claimed. (PTI)

Electoral Bonds scheme worst corruption scam, state funding of polls needed: Yechury

NEW DELHI, March 21: The electoral bonds scheme is the "worst mega corruption scam" in independent India and has led to "mafia-style extortions", CPI-M leader Sitaram Yechury has said.

The Left leader, whose Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) was among the petitioners in the case in Supreme Court that led to scrapping of electoral bonds, said their opposition to the scheme is based on principles and that state funding of polls can lead to transparency.

"Electoral bonds have turned out to be the worst mega corruption scam in independent India. Precisely what we had anticipated would happen through these electoral bonds is now being revealed. I had said it would be like mafia-style extortion. That can be seen now with these revelations that have come," Yechury told PTI. The CPI-M leader said he had

warned that there will be "quid pro quo sweetheart deals" when the scheme was first announced.

"Instead of tackling black money or curbing it, you are actually allowing money laundering to be done, whereby you allow black money to be converted into white and legitimately be donated. Companies have bought electoral bonds multiple times more than their annual profits," he said.

He said shell companies have been used for money laundering and pointed out at donations by companies that have been under the net of various probe agencies.

"A new thing which has been revealed is that companies that are under the scanner for violating quality controls and norms for production, particularly drug companies, pharmaceutical companies, have used the electoral bond rules to buy their peace

and not be prosecuted. And this is dangerous," he said.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has denied any link between the functioning of investigative agencies, including the ED, and electoral funding to the ruling party, saying these allegations are just assumptions.

In its landmark verdict on February 15, the apex court had scrapped the Centre's electoral bonds scheme that allowed anonymous political funding, calling it "unconstitutional" and ordered their disclosure.

The electoral bonds scheme was introduced on January 2, 2018. Electoral bonds were pitched as an alternative to cash donations made to political parties as part of efforts to bring transparency to political funding.

Asked what can be the way for ensuring transparency in polls funding, he said, "If you want to make political

funding transparent, corporates must fund, but not political parties directly."

"So it is a question of corporates funding our elections, funding our democracy, but it should go to a state fund. And there should be a system of state funding of elections," he said.

He said a law can be made on corporate funding of democracy, on the lines of the corporate social responsibility law, and they can donate to a fund.

"Let the corporations donate to that fund. Let there be supervision of that fund by a government agency, publicly transparent, and fix up the norms, the rules by which the parties will receive that funds," he said.

Yechury also accused the BJP of being brazen in not providing a list of those who have donated the bonds, and said its claim of being against corruption is just rhetoric. (PTI)

Model Code: EC asks govt to stop sending 'Viksit Bharat' messages on WhatsApp

NEW DELHI, March 21: The Election Commission Thursday directed the Centre to immediately stop delivering bulk WhatsApp messages to people under the "Viksit Bharat Sampark" initiative to highlight the government's achievements.

The direction was issued to the Secretary, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, after the Commission received complaints about the matter.

"The move is a part of a series of decisions taken by the Commission to ensure a level-playing field," the Commission said.

Asking the government to ensure there is "no further delivery" of the bulk WhatsApp messages to people, the Commission sought an "immediate" compliance report on the matter from the ministry.

The ministry had informed the Commission that the messages along



with a letter from Prime Minister Narendra Modi were sent before the Model Code of Conduct came into force on March 16 with the announcement of Lok Sabha poll schedule.

"... due to system architecture and network limitations it is possible that some letters have a delayed delivery," the ministry said in a communication to the Commission.

The poll authority had received several complaints that such messages highlighting the government's initiatives were being delivered on

citizens' phones despite the announcement of parliamentary elections 2024 and the MCC coming into force.

The Congress and the Trinamool Congress had raised objections to the message and requested the Election Commission to act against this "blatant violation" of the Model Code of Conduct.

On Tuesday, the Chandigarh Chief Electoral Officer had referred to the Election Commission for "appropriate action" a complaint regarding bulk WhatsApp messages.

According to an official statement on Tuesday, after examination of the complaint, the district media certification and monitoring committee found prima facie evidence of a violation of the Model Code of Conduct.

The complaint was received through the eVIGIL mobile application of the poll panel. (PTI)

Anand Sharma differs with Cong: Caste census neither panacea nor solution for unemployment, inequality

NEW DELHI, March 21: Senior Congress leader Anand Sharma has written to party president Mallikarjun Kharge saying a caste census cannot be a panacea nor a solution for unemployment and inequalities in society.

Sharma's letter comes at a time the Congress has intensified its demand for a nationwide caste census and promised to carry out the exercise if elected to power in the Lok Sabha elections.

In his letter to Kharge, Sharma said the Congress has never engaged in nor endorsed identity politics and the departure from the historic position of the party is a matter of concern for many.

He also said that the articulation of party position should be balanced and should eschew the radical posturing of regional and caste-based organisations.

It needs mention that the last



census to enumerate caste differentiation was in 1931 during the British colonial regime, he wrote.

After independence, a conscious policy decision was made by the government not to canvass caste-related questions in the census, except for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, which is collected by the states.

"All Census Commissioners, after independence, have recorded their reasons and disapproval of a National Caste Census citing overlap, duplication, data lacking in ac-

curacy and doubtful authenticity.

"In my considered view, a caste census cannot be a panacea nor a solution for unemployment and prevailing inequalities. A fundamental departure from time honoured policy on this critical and sensitive subject has major long-term national implications," Sharma said.

As a party with inclusive approach, Sharma said, "The Congress should strive to reclaim its role as builder of national consensus and build a harmonious society. The articulation of party position should be balanced and eschew the radical posturing of regional and caste based organisations."

The Congress has firmly believed in transparency, democratic discussion and respected freedom of expression, he said, adding that he is writing this in that spirit. (PTI)

Over seven decades since first Lok Sabha polls, national parties count falls from 14 to 6

NEW DELHI, March 21: Fifty three political parties had contested the first Lok Sabha polls in 1951. The number of political parties today stands at over 2,500.

However, the national party count has gone down to six from 14 in over seven decades.

Contesting the general elections in May to elect the 18th Lok Sabha will be six national parties. The journey of political parties all these years has been an interesting ride from mergers to emergence of new players while some of them have ceased to exist.

A total of 53 political parties contested the first election, of which 14 were considered "national parties" while the rest were considered "state" parties.

According to the book "Leap of Faith", published by the Election Commission of India to document journey of elections in India, prior to the 1953 polls as many as 29 political parties had demanded the status of a national party.

"A decision was made to grant

the status to only 14 of them. However, the election results proved sobering for most of them and only four of them were permitted to retain the national status," the book reads. The four national parties by 1953 were the Congress, the Praja Socialist Party (formed following the merger of the Socialist Party and the Kisan Mazdoor Party), the CPI, and the Jana Sangh.

The parties which lost their national tag were Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha (HMS), All India Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), All India Scheduled Castes' Federation (SCF), All India Forward Bloc (Marxist group) (FBL-MG) and the All India Forward Bloc (Raukar group) (FBL-RG), Krishikar Lok Party (KLP), Bolshevik Party of India (BPI), and Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI).

The Socialist Party and Kisan Mazdoor Party had contested the first elections separately and they later merged to form the Praja So-



cialist Party.

The number of political parties reduced to 15 in the second elections in 1957 when the four national parties remained in fray. However, the next elections in 1962 saw 27 parties contesting and the number of national parties rose to six with the Socialist (SOC) and Swatantra (SWA) parties contesting the polls. The Congress's do-

minion persisted for a long time after the first general election, winning 11 of the 14 elections until 2014, when the tide turned in favour of the BJP.

The CPI formed the principal opposition in the next two Lok Sabha elections after the 1951 polls. However, in 1964, the Soviet and Chinese communist factions within the party split, giving rise to

the CPI (Marxist). Thereafter, the new CPI(M) continued to secure more votes than the CPI in the country's general elections.

"The Socialist Party had its roots in the Congress Socialist Party, a left-wing faction within the Indian National Congress formed by Jayaprakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohiya and Acharya Narendra Dev which separated from the former shortly after independence," Pradeep Gupta, chairman of Axis India, told PTI.

"Despite Narayan's popularity on account of his role in India's freedom struggle, the Socialist Party's election haul was unimpressive and thus, after the election, it merged with JB Kripalani's Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP) to form the Praja Socialist Party (PSP)," he added.

Gupta explained that at the time, Narayan, too, stepped back from the PSP and only re-entered national politics once again in the mid-70s when he led the movement against Indira Gandhi, whose

government he alleged was corrupt and undemocratic. Narayan subsequently led the calls for Gandhi's disqualification prior to her declaration of the Emergency in 1975, for which he was arrested.

Upon being released from jail, Narayan and other PSP leaders joined hands with several other groups to form the Bharatiya Lok Dal which, following the Emergency in 1977, along with practically the entire opposition in the country, banded together to form the Janata Party to oppose the Gandhi-led Congress. Several parties including the BJP and the Samajwadi Party can trace their lineage back to the Janata Party.

The last number of contesting parties till date were in 1992 Lok Sabha polls with seven national parties -- BJP, Congress, CPI, CPM, Janata Dal, Janata Party and Lok Dal.

According to ECI reports, the 1996 general elections saw a participation of 209 political parties including eight with the national

tag -- Congress (INC), All India Congress (Tiwari), BJP, CPI, CPM, Janata Dal, Janata Party and Samata Party.

In 1998 polls, the participating political parties were 176 including seven national parties -- Congress, BJP, BSP, Janata Dal, CPI, CPM and Samata party.

In 1999, 160 political parties were in the poll fray including seven national parties -- BJP, Congress, BSP, CPI, CPM, Janata Dal (Secular) and Janata Dal (United).

In 2014, 464 political parties participated in the contest out of which six were national. The parties were -- BJP, Congress, CPI, CPI-M, NCP and BSP.

The All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), got elevated to the status of a national party in 2016, and contested the 2019 polls, with its newly acquired status.

In 2019 elections, seven national parties contested the polls -- BJP, Congress, BSP, CPI, CPI (M), NCP and AITC. A total of 674 parties had contested. (PTI)

FRIDAY, MARCH 22, 2024

Cong demands access to its bank accounts, Sonia says systematic effort by PM to cripple party

'The party in power amassed funds through electoral bonds while freezing the Congress' accounts to create hurdles for it in fighting polls'

NEW DELHI, March 21: Putting the spotlight on its precarious finances ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, the Congress' top brass on Thursday demanded immediate access to its frozen bank accounts to ensure a level playing field as Sonia Gandhi accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of a "systematic effort" to cripple the party.

In a rare press conference along with party chief Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi said electoral bonds have, on the one hand, benefitted the BJP hugely and, on the other, finances of the principal opposition party are under "determined assault".

This is truly unprecedented, she asserted. The move to freeze the party's accounts, the leaders said, had not just impacted the Congress but democracy in India.

"We can do no campaign work... Our ability to fight elections has been damaged," former Congress president Rahul Gandhi said while launching a scathing attack on the government over the issue of freezing of the party's accounts due to an Income Tax returns issue.

"All our bank accounts have been frozen. We can do no campaign work, we cannot support our workers, we cannot support our candidates, our leaders cannot fly from

one part of the country to another... they can't take a railway train and this has been literally two months before the election campaign," he added. Eight of the 11 accounts of the party are frozen, sources said.

What is interesting, the former Congress president said, is that there are institutions in this country that are supposed to protect the democratic framework of the country, there are the courts, there is the Election Commission and nothing is happening.

He said 20 per cent of India votes for the Congress which is not even able to pay Rs 2 for anything.

"We have already lost a month. We are unable to get slots for advertising, we are unable to put advertisements in newspapers, so what sort of democracy is this," he said.

"It has been orchestrated to cripple us in the elections. Even if our bank accounts are unfrozen today, a huge amount of damage has been done to Indian democracy," Rahul Gandhi claimed.

Terming the freezing of accounts a "criminal action" against the Congress by the prime minister and Home Minister Amit Shah, he said, "There is no democracy in India today and the idea that India is the world's largest democracy is a complete lie."



This is not the freezing of the Congress' bank accounts, this is freezing of the Indian democracy, he said.

Kharge appealed to the constitutional institutions of the country that if they want free and fair elections then they should allow his party to access bank accounts without any restriction.

"The Income Tax claim will ultimately be settled as per the decision of the court. Political parties do not pay tax, BJP never paid it, even after this if we are being asked for it, then we will wait for the final decision of the court," he said.

Adding her voice to the chorus of condemnation by party leaders, Sonia Gandhi said the issue being taken up today is "very, very serious" and affects not just the Congress but "impacts our democracy itself most fundamentally".

"A systematic effort is underway

by the prime minister to cripple the Indian National Congress financially. Funds collected from the public are being frozen, and money from our accounts is being taken away forcibly," she said.

"However, even under these most challenging circumstances, we are doing our best to maintain the effectiveness of our election campaign," she said.

The three senior leaders were flanked by Congress general secretary Jai Ram Ramesh and AICC treasurer Ajay Maken at the press conference.

"The BJP has looted donations given to the Congress party by the common public by freezing our accounts and forcibly withdrawing ₹ 115.32 crore from them," Maken alleged.

The party in power, Kharge said, amassed funds through electoral bonds while freezing the Congress' accounts to create hurdles for it in fighting polls.

"Those in power should not have direct or indirect control over constitutional bodies," he said, adding that those in power should have monopoly over resources.

The facts that have come out about electoral bonds after the intervention of the Supreme Court recently are very worrying, Kharge

said. "A question mark has been put on the image of fair elections and healthy democracy that our country had built in the last 70 years," the Congress chief said.

Under the electoral bonds scheme, the ruling party pocketed more than ₹ 6,000 crore in its account, he claimed.

"Conspiracy has been hatched to freeze the bank accounts of the main opposition party so that we are not able to contest the elections fairly... this is a dangerous game played by the ruling party," he said, adding that this will have far-reaching effects.

"But it is clear that creating obstacles in contesting elections by rendering any political party helpless in this manner can never be called a free and fair election," Kharge said.

The Delhi High Court earlier this month refused to interfere with the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal's order declining to stay a notice issued by the Income Tax department to the Congress party for recovery of outstanding tax of more than ₹ 100 crore.

The party had earlier said the I-T tribunal order freezing its funds was "an attack on democracy" as it had come just ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. (PTI)

CBI, Europol sign working arrangement to boost cooperation in criminal investigations

NEW DELHI, March 21: The CBI and Europol on Thursday signed a working arrangement enabling "wide cooperation" in tackling over 30 different crime categories that includes providing "advice and support" in criminal investigations when needed, the Indian federal agency said.

The arrangement signed through virtual meeting between CBI Director Praveen Sood in New Delhi and Europol Executive Director Catherine De Bolle in the Hague also enables wide cooperation between all law enforcement agencies in India and those of 27 European countries that Europol represents as well as third countries and organisations associated with Europol, the CBI said. The "comprehensive" arrangement includes 26 detailed articles enumerating modalities for "wide ranging cooperation" in over 30 different crime categories.

The arrangement aims cooperation in jointly tackling organised crimes, financial crimes, frauds, corruption, terrorism, cybercrime, human trafficking, drug trafficking, money laundering, environmental crimes, illicit trafficking in cultural goods, including antiquities and works of art, etc. "It establishes clear mechanisms for communication, cooperation, and collaboration, ensuring that respective law enforcement agencies can seamlessly collaborate, share best practices, and support each other," a CBI spokesperson said in a statement.

In addition to exchange of information, the cooperation includes the exchange of specialist knowledge, general situation reports, results of strategic analysis, participation in training activities as well as providing advice and support in individual criminal investigations.

"This arrangement promotes direct cooperation between both organisations to build on their respective mandates, strategies and to explore the potential for synergies," the statement said.

CBI Director Sood expressed his appreciation for the collaborative spirit demonstrated by both parties.

"This working arrangement is an outcome of years of negotiation between CBI and Europol to reach this common ground. This moment marks a significant milestone in our ongoing efforts to combat crime and enhance cooperation between our agencies," he said.

Sood said the international dispersal of crimes, criminals and proceeds of crimes have necessitated need for expeditious international cooperation. (PTI)

Goa oppn parties claim BJP failed to save Mhadei river; want PM's guarantee over water sharing

PANAJI, March 21: Opposition parties in Goa have accused the ruling BJP of failing to stop neighbouring Karnataka from diverting Mhadei river water and demanded Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "guarantee" on it.

Revolutionary Goans Party Chief Manoj Parab said on Thursday that the BJP-led government in Goa and at the Centre haven't succeeded in saving the water body.

Parab claimed environmentalists have exposed that Karnataka has dug up canals to divert water from the Kalsa tributary to the Malaprabha basin.

"We want only guarantee from BJP. Let saving Mhadei water from being diverted be 'Modi ki Guarantee' on behalf of BJP to the voters (of Goa)," he said.

Parab said PM Modi should address a public meeting in Goa and assure the people of the coastal state that Mhadei river water won't be diverted.

The issue was initially raised by the Goa Forward Party on Wednesday when its chief Vijai Sardesai demanded an immediate statement on Mhadei on behalf of the government.

"The government is acting deaf, blind and dumb on Mhadei," said Sardesai in a release. "In a move that should shock every self-respecting Goan, Karnataka has started the construction of a nullah to divert water from Kalsa to Malaprabha basin. Perhaps as instructed by the top engine," he said.

Sardesai alleged that the Goa government was looking the other way and misleading the Goans by painting a rosy picture.

"I have been demanding every day that the WRD (Department of Water Resources) minister convene the House Committee, but despite assurances given even in the assembly, the Goa government is not bothered to do so," he claimed.

Sardesai alleged that Goa's "abject" surrender to Karnataka once again exposes its willingness to overlook the impending water disaster facing poor Goans so that BJP wins all 28 Lok Sabha seats in Karnataka.

BJP Goa president Sadanand Shet Tanavade termed the allegations a political stunt.

"The matter is in the court. BJP governments are committed to save Mhadei from being diverted," he said. (PTI)

New climate action plans must cover all gases, sectors of economy: COP Presidencies Troika

NEW DELHI, March 21: The next round of countries' national climate plans to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius should cover all greenhouse gases, including methane, and sectors of economy, the presidencies of the previous COP and the next two UN climate change conferences said on Thursday.

The Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) should include policies which deliver 60 per cent emission reduction compared to 2019 levels, before 2035, the COP Presidencies Troika said at the opening segment of the two-day Copenhagen climate ministerial which began in the Danish capital on Thursday.

The ministerial meeting is the first major climate gathering since COP28 in Dubai last December and an opportunity for climate leaders to set expectations and priorities for COP29 in Azerbaijan in November.

The discussions will have a strong focus on the next climate finance goal - the biggest issue on the COP29 agenda - and the next generation of national climate plans (NDCs) that all countries are required to update by early 2025.

COP28 President Sultan Al Jaber said the next round of NDCs represent

"a critical tool for correcting course" on climate action.

"Parties must do the work now to ensure that their NDCs meet the urgency of the moment - and are submitted at least nine months before COP30," he said.

"NDCs should be economy-wide and cover all greenhouse gases - including methane," he said.

The COP28 president called for attendees to "follow the science" and ensure energy transition pathways are "just, orderly and responsible".

The COP Presidencies Troika also issued a letter to Parties, committing the three Presidencies' host countries to submit 1.5 degrees Celsius aligned NDCs by early 2025.

The Troika has also submitted a letter to United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to "ensure there is a unified, coherent, and effective technical support framework to member states, particularly developing countries, to prepare and implement the next generation of their NDCs".

The ministerial meeting will focus on the next climate finance goal - the biggest issue on the COP29 agenda - and the next generation of national climate plans that all countries are required to update by early 2025. (PTI)

Second accused arrested for Budaun double murder, kids stabbed multiple times

BUDAUN/BAREILLY (UP), March 21: The brother of the main accused in the chilling murder of a neighbour's two children in Budaun was arrested after he surrendered at a police post in Bareilly, police said on Thursday.

The postmortem report of the slain children has revealed that the assailant stabbed the elder brother 13 times and his sibling 11 times, officials said, adding injury marks have been found on the neck, chest and other parts of bodies of the two children.

Javed, who had been absconding since the murders in Baba Colony on Tuesday, surrendered at Satellite police outpost of Baradari police station in neighbouring Bareilly district, Budaun Senior Superintendent of Police Alok Priyadarshi said.

"Javed, the brother of main accused Sajid, was arrested by a police team in nearby Bareilly district. He is being brought to Budaun for further questioning," the SSP said.

A video clip that surfaced online purportedly showed Javed pleading with a group of people confronting him to take him to the police.

In the video, Javed says that he fled to Delhi after the incident and returned to Bareilly to surrender before the police. The video was apparently shot at an autorickshaw stand close to the police post.

"I have nothing to do with the incident. He (Sajid) was my elder brother. He did that but I have nothing to do with the incident," Javed is heard saying in the video.

Bareilly SSP Dhule Sushil Chandrabhan told PTI that the district police handed over Javed to the Budaun police after completing formalities.

The Budaun police have taken Javed to places associated with the crime. Sources said that he would be produced in the court later.

Sajid, who had recently opened a barber shop in the locality, entered the house of the family known to him on Tuesday and allegedly attacked Ayush (12), Ahaan alias Honey (8) and Yuvraj (10) with a knife. Ayush and Ahaan died on the spot, while Yuvraj was admitted to the hospital.

Hours after the double murder, Sajid was gunned down in an encounter with the police.

Police have registered a case against both Sajid and Javed

under Section 302 (murder) of the Indian Penal Code.

The Budaun district administration has also ordered a magisterial inquiry into Sajid's police encounter.

"The report on the encounter has to be submitted in 15 days," Budaun District Magistrate Manoj Kumar said.

On Wednesday evening, the police had announced a reward of Rs 25,000 for Javed's arrest.

Meanwhile, the children's father, Vinod Kumar, praised the police for Javed's arrest and called for stringent punishment to him.

"He should be asked who were involved with him because this incident is not of a single person," Kumar told PTI videos.

"He is equally involved in the crime. They can cut anyone's neck. Strictest action should be taken against him. He must be encountered or given capital punishment," he said.

The father also asked for police security for his family.

Kumar's wife Sangeeta told reporters that she wants police to interrogate Javed before her so that she could know "why my sons were killed".

Kerala Health Department withdraws social media ban amid criticism

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, March 21: Facing criticism from the medical fraternity, the Kerala Health Department on Thursday retracted an order issued on March 13 that prohibited its officials from engaging in social media activity or creating YouTube channels.

In the latest order issued on Thursday, the director of Health Services stated that the circular issued on March 13 was being withdrawn retrospectively due to administrative reasons.

The decision to rescind the controversial circular followed intense backlash from various medical professional bodies, notably the Kerala Government Medical Officers Association

(KGMOA).

The March 13 order issued by the Health Services director had emphasised the potential risk of violations associated with government officials' social media usage and expressed concern regarding the possibility of financial gain through platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, which contradicted existing regulations.

Earlier, the KGMOA had condemned the circular, characterising the Health Department's restrictions on social media activity as an infringement upon the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression enshrined in Article 19(1)(A) of the Constitution.

"It is highly objectionable that

such an extremely reactionary order has been issued at a time when many health workers, including government employees, are making tireless efforts through social media to educate the public against false and unscientific propaganda in the field of health, to impart science-based knowledge and above all to protect public health," the KGMOA had said.

The KGMOA had criticised the Health Department's approach, likening it to "killing a rat by burning a house," and urged authorities to promptly retract the "black law" and adopt measures that align with the principles of the modern era while upholding dignity. (PTI)

BRO commences work to reopen Leh-Manali national highway in Ladakh

LEH, March 21: The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has commenced work for the reopening of the strategic Leh-Manali national highway in Ladakh union territory, officials said on Thursday.

The highway, which lies across high-altitude areas in the Himalayas, remains closed for several months during peak winters due to heavy snow.

"Project Himank has commenced snow clearance works to clear the accumulated snow and restore access to the Ladakh region from Manali side," a defence spokesperson said.

A team of engineers of the Border Road Task Force (BRTF) have been tasked with snow clearing and provided with advanced equipment, he said.

The extreme cold climatic conditions, gusty

winds and sub-zero temperatures in treacherous terrain at altitudes ranging beyond 17,000 feet makes the work more challenging, the spokesman said.

"Despite this, the team of BRO is working tirelessly to reopen the highway and timely restore the crucial link to Ladakh," he added.

This 427-km long highway connecting Ladakh to the rest of India via Manali in Himachal Pradesh has strategic importance for the movement of the armed forces and their supplies to forward areas in Ladakh, apart from connecting the people of Ladakh to the rest of India.

Every winter, this national highway witnesses extreme weather conditions leading to heavy snowfall and avalanches, which leads to road closure, the spokesperson said. (PTI)

First under-river metro: How specially-designed German TBMs helped connect Kolkata with Howrah

KOLKATA, March 21: As the country's first under-river metro train operations started in Kolkata, project experts recounted some unforeseen challenges faced during its construction and the role that two specially-designed German-made tunnel boring machines played to overcome them.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the 4.8-km-long underground stretch on March 6 and commercial operations on it began on March 15. The stretch, part of the 16.6-km East-West Metro Corridor, connects Kolkata with Howrah through a tunnel that runs 13 metres below the Hooghly river bed, or 38 metres below the ground level.

Afcos Infrastructure Limited, which won the contract for India's first under-river metro tunnel through an international bidding in 2010, said the tunnel boring machines (TBMs) and their backup facilities, costing about Rs 140 crore and weighing more than 550 tonnes, were unique in many ways and made a huge contribution in the construction.

"The soil of Kolkata and



Howrah is very treacherous and unpredictable. It is because the Hooghly river, which is now concentrated to a particular path, had a bigger presence in the city in the past so even today there are underground narrow channels and aquifers spread all across the city with connection to the river," Tamal Biswas, Project Manager, Afcos Infrastructure Limited, said.

"A team of experts studied the soil conditions and other factors before placing an order to a German firm to manufacture two

TBMs with several special features specific to the project requirements. We found that it was safe to move the TBMs 31 metres to 39 metres under the river portion. Throughout the alignment, the depth of tunnelling is maintained as 16m to 39m."

Besides, Afcos also collaborated with Russian, South African and European engineers who had expertise to construct under-river tunnels.

"In the initial period, we recruited three to four foreign experts to understand the concept of tunnel

because we were new to this field," another expert associated with the project said.

In the normal course of underground tunnelling, the boring machine starts from one underground station and keeps boring to the other station. Then it is taken out, serviced properly and again placed down to resume boring up to the next station.

"In our case, the TBMs were put down 16 metres below the ground at Howrah Maidan metro station and it kept moving underground a distance of 4.8 km covering three stations Howrah (at 30m depth), Mahakaran (at 24m depth) and Esplanade (at 28m depth) without being taken out because these stations were not ready by that time," the expert said.

According to an Afcos official, the TBM had another special feature allowing it to be converted into a submarine in case the river water entered the tunnel and flooded it.

"This would have saved the lives of people working in the tunnel as well as protect the tunnel structure already built," the official said.

Afcos officials fondly remembered an engineer whose sudden death in a road accident before the start of the construction emotionally motivated them to name the TBMs after his two daughters - Prerna and Rachna.

"We bought these two TBMs in June 2011 but they were lying idle till 2016 as there was no work happening due to various issues and pending finalisation of alignment. In 2015, almost a year before the construction work started, we lost one of our engineers, Bimal Saha, in a road accident when he was on his way to the office," Biswas said.

"The incident saddened the whole team. He was a dedicated person and a very sincere official so to pay a tribute to him, we decided to name these two TBMs after his daughters - Prerna and Rachna."

According to Biswas, the TBMs' particulars were so unique and specific to the East-West Metro Corridor that they could not be used in any other underground metro tunnel work going on at several cities in the country without extensive refurbishment. (PTI)

10 INDIAN CITIES SCREENING FILMS SHOWCASING LGBTQIA+ NARRATIVES TILL MAR 24

NEW DELHI, March 21: Five short films from India, Spain, the Philippines, the UK and the US showcasing LGBTQIA+ narratives that resonate with resilience and authenticity are being screened in 10 cities across India. British Council in partnership with British BFI Flare: London LGBTQIA+ Film Festival launched the 10th edition of the 'Five Films for Freedom' last week. In India, in partnership with The Queer Muslim Project, 12 screenings for the films will be held. At the launch event in Delhi, the first screening was held, showcasing diverse narratives and fostering dialogue on LGBTQIA+ issues. "We are very happy to be working together with BFI Flare, and The Queer Muslim Project once more on 'Five Films For Freedom', a celebration of diversity and cross-cultural understanding," said Alison Barrett, director (India) of British Council. "At British Council, we think there are no boundaries to love. 'Five Films For Freedom' respects creativity and expressiveness and stands in solidarity with the LGBTQIA+ community. We are proud of our continued support of this programme, which not only spotlights fresh stories but also creates new connections and understanding," she added. The films selected for screening are "The First Kiss", directed by Miguel Lafuente (Spain); "Little One", directed by Clister Santos (Philippines); "Compton's 22", directed by Drew de Pinto (US); "Cursive", directed by Isabel Steuble-Johnson (UK); and "Halfway" directed by Kumar Chheda (India). Chheda said there could have been "no greater joy than to see my film reach audiences around the world". These films will be promoted across the British Council's extensive global digital networks and made accessible via BFI Player. In India, the films are being screened till March 24 in Delhi, Kolkata, Gangtok, Agartala, Shantiniketan, Bengaluru, Chennai, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, and Goa. (PTI)

Was impossible to make 'The Goat Life' 10 years ago: Prithviraj Sukumaran

MUMBAI, March 21: Actor Prithviraj Sukumaran says it took him and director Blessy a decade to mount their passion project "The Goat Life", a real-life survival drama, as revenue models in Malayalam cinema weren't as streamlined back then as they are today.

Based on the 2008 bestselling novel "Aadujeevitham" by Benjamin, the film follows Najeeb, a Malayali immigrant labourer who finds himself forced into slavery as a goatherd in the secluded farm of Saudi Arabia.

It was never about funds, said Prithviraj as Blessy has also pulled double duty as a producer.

"Even in 2009, Blessy's vision for the film was grand. Back then, it was impossible to do the filming in Malayalam and he hoping to find some sense in the business model. It took us 10 years to finally get to a point where we could think of doing this and maybe think of making the money back.

"The revenue streams have opened up and the industry has changed. Finances were never in question because Blessy is producing it himself and I know, in all honesty, that he has put his life savings into it," the Malayalam star told PTI in an interview here.

Prithviraj said he had also heard about Benjamin's book as it became a smash hit soon after it hit the stands, and it was Blessy who handed him a copy of "Aadujeevitham". "I was in the middle of doing multiple films at that time, and I had not yet got the time to get around reading it. But Blessy gave me a copy, and that's the copy I read, and that was in back 2009," he recalled. The actor, known for films such as "Ennu Ninte Moideen", "Kaaviya Thalaivan", "Lucifer", and

"Aiyya", described "The Goat Life" as a glorious manifestation of the "alternate human spirit".

"The fact that this is a true story and there is someone who lived through this and survived. This who's amongst us alive and well today to be able to tell the tale is just incredible. "The crew was stranded in the Jordan desert for 70 days from March to May 2020 due to pandemic's restrictions.

"We had to suspend shooting for almost two years. Then we got back to finish the shoot. We went back to Algeria and Jordan, and then to Kerala. I guess that is the story that this film had to live through. This film had to be made," he said.

To prepare for the role, the 41-year-old actor said he met with Najeeb, whom he described as the "epitome of human strength".

"I've met him more than once. Imagine the amount of strength he must have carried within himself, the faith he must have had to (keep)."

Prithviraj, who is also distributing the film in Malayalam through his banner Prithviraj Productions, said Malayalam cinema is slowly finding a distribution network.

"The Malayalam industry is still very much in the nascent stage with our distribution networks and systems, especially outside Kerala, which we call the rest of India market, and the rest of the world market.

"We have a fairly healthy network in place in UAE and GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries, and North America's fast catching up.

Once we achieve full potential, the numbers are going to shoot up. Because thankfully, we make great content, and I believe when great content travels well, it will be received."

The actor, who will next be seen in "Bade Miya Chote Miyan", said he is happy to be working at a time when somebody sitting in Srinagar can find out about a fantastic Malayalam film that is available on a streamer.

"That's where this sort of diffusion of talent and the migration of content is becoming easier, more consistent, more regular. In the not-too-distant future, we will all be just making Indian cinema, which is great," he added.

Produced by Visual Romance, "The Goat Life" also features Amala Paul, K.R. Gokul, as well as Hollywood actor Jimmy Jean-Louis and Arab actors Talib al Balushi and RikAby in pivotal roles.

Academy Award winners A R Rahman and Resul Pookutty have given music and sound design, respectively. The film is set to release in theatres worldwide on March 28. (PTI)



Want to do a romantic Bollywood movie, says Ankita Lokhande

NEW DELHI, March 21: After "Manikarnika" and "Swatantra Veer Savarkar", actor Ankita Lokhande says she wants to star in a contemporary Bollywood romance.

Lokhande, who was last seen in Bigg Boss 17, is now awaiting the release of "Swatantra Veer Savarkar" with Randeep Hooda. The film is set to release on Friday.

"Whatever characters I am playing right now, they are powerful. (But) I personally wish to play something that is more of me, which is modern-age and more commercial. A Bollywood film where I am dancing and romancing. That is my thing. I want to do such films," Lokhande told PTI in an interview.

The actor said she agreed to play Yamuna Bai in the biopic without even reading the script.

"I always knew who Veer Savarkar was and portraying his wife's character was something for which I couldn't say 'No'. But when I got to know more about Yamuna Bai, I was more fascinated."

The actor credited Hooda for his thorough research on the project.

"I have gone through a few researches. Randeep was already there and he researched a lot about each and every character. I got to know more about Yamuna Bai because of him."

Lokhande, 39, rose to fame with her role in serial "Pavitra Rishta" which also featured late actor Sushant Singh Rajput. She made her Bollywood debut with "Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi".

Hooda has also written and directed "Swatantra Veer Savarkar". (PTI)

Maisy Stella boards untitled thriller starring Anne Hathaway and Ewan McGregor

LOS ANGELES, March 21: Singer-actor Maisy Stella is set to star alongside Anne Hathaway and Ewan McGregor in an untitled project from Bad Robot and Warner Bros Pictures. Stella, the breakout star in 2024's Sundance Film Festival hit "My Old Side", will play the third lead in the movie after Hathaway and McGregor.

According to Variety, David Robert Mitchell of "Under the Silver Lake" will direct the film.

Details of the plot are being kept under wraps but it is said to be a thriller.

Mitchell will direct the project from his original script and will produce alongside J J Abrams and Hannah Minghella for Bad Robot and Matt Jackson of Jackson Pictures.

Jake Weiner and Chris Bender of Good Fear Content are attached as executive producers. Sheila Walcott and Zach Hamby will oversee the movie for the Warner Bros Motion Picture Group. (PTI)



EWAN MCGREGOR, WIFE MARY ELIZABETH WINSTEAD HAD INTIMACY COORDINATOR FOR SEX SCENES IN NEW SHOW

LOS ANGELES, March 21: British star Ewan McGregor has revealed that he and actor-wife Mary Elizabeth Winstead had roped in an intimacy coordinator for filming intimate scenes for their new show "A Gentleman in Moscow".

In an interview with the British news outlet Radio Times, the 52-year-old actor said they felt the need for a professional as it was "odd" for them to be "intimate in front of the camera".

"It's still necessary, because it's also about the crew, and it's odd to be naked in front of people, it's odd to be intimate in front of the camera," McGregor said.

"If you were doing a dance scene, you'd have a choreographer," he added. "It's an important part of the work now, because it's somebody that the director and actors meet in the middle."

For McGregor, it's also crucial that productions hire intimacy coordinators because in the past, a young actor — similar in age to his 22-year-old daughter Esther — may have felt pressured to perform in "unnecessary" scenes.

"My daughter is 22. If an older, famous director goes to a 22-year-old and says, 'I want you to be naked in this scene,' that actress might feel, 'Oh, my God, I've got to do it, my career might depend on it,'" McGregor said. "And then five years after that, she could look back and go, 'I wish I hadn't. Why am I naked in that scene? It's unnecessary.'"

McGregor plays Count Alexander Rostov in "A Gentleman in Moscow," while Winstead portrays Anna Urbanova, described as "a glamorous, independent and self-made film actress, at the height of her fame."

Per the official logline, the series "follows Count Alexander Rostov (McGregor) who, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, finds that his gilded past places him on the wrong side of history. Spared immediate execution, he is banished by a Soviet tribunal to an attic room in the opulent Hotel Metropol, threatened with death if he ever sets foot outside again. As the years pass and some of the most tumultuous decades in Russian history unfold outside the hotel's doors, Rostov's reduced circumstances provide him entry into a much larger world of emotional discovery. As he builds a new life within the walls of the hotel, he discovers the true value of friendship, family and love."

"A Gentleman in Moscow" premieres March 29 on Paramount+ with Showtime. (PTI)



IPL 17: Four men, four narratives and a Cup on the horizon

NEW DELHI, March 21: The never-ending speculation surrounding Mahendra Singh Dhoni's retirement, Virat Kohli's 16-year-itch, the second chance that life has offered Rishabh Pant and Rohit Sharma's bleeding heart will make for intriguing sub-plots in the annual carnival called the Indian Premier League starting on Friday.

Known to do the unexpected, Dhoni stepped down as captain on the eve of the IPL opener against Royal Challengers Bengaluru, handing over the reins to Ruturaj Gaikwad, a man he mentored for the leadership role. But the 42-year-old will once again smile wryly when asked if it's his last year.

His heir apparent Pant, literally back from the brink after a life-threatening accident, will be desperate to show the world that he can still hit those one-handed

sixes with elan.

In between, he could also be slipping in those quotable quotes behind the stumps that are considered broadcast gold.

Rohit will be the last person to show his scars hidden behind the typical 'Mumbaiya' nonchalance as he gets down to enjoying his evening dates at the Wankhede albeit without the captain's title. The partisan crowd would nonetheless look forward to those pulled sixes.

As for King Kohli, he would be in pursuit of that elusive jewel in his crown. By his own admission, he has been longing for a big title and his own passionate approach to the game would be a key factor in deciding whether the RCB men manage to emulate the women this year. A bigger prize is also at stake for at least 10 to 12 other players, who will be vying for

eight slots in the New York-bound flight that will take off at the end of May for the T20 World Cup in the USA and the Caribbean. There will be unbelievable comebacks by some, a few new stars will emerge, there will also be those usual rags to riches stories and all of it could unfold in a matter of four minutes, the time it takes to deliver one over.

Just like overnight stars, the merciless social media will find villains too.

The likes of Pat Cummins (SRH) and Mitchell Starc (KKR), who raked in big money during the auction, will shoulder a massive burden of expectations through the season.

For every six that they concede at the death or each yorker that turns into a full toss, the two will be reminded of salaries which are north of USD two

million. Away from the money talk and purely on cricketing prowess, CSK would be the favourites for a sixth IPL title with a squad that has all bases covered.

Rachin Ravindra was a breakout World Cup star and now he has the chance of becoming a T20 superstar.

Deepak Chahar, the much-maligned seamer who is often accused of making CSK his first priority, would like his wrists to do the talking for him and with new captain Ruturaj Gaikwad, Moeen Ali, and Ravindra Jadeja in the mix, anything can happen.

And how can one forget Dhoni, the smiling assassin. All it takes is one six in T20 cricket and Dhoni's love affair with the maximum is eternal.

For Mumbai Indians, it has been a story of all or nothing.

Five titles till 2020 and three years of lull forced them to

change a captain, who can still whip up crazy sentiments.

It will be a tightrope walk for Hardik Pandya the leader.

For other captains, they need to win the on-field games but Pandya needs to win the dressing room too. There will be seniors with bruised egos, knowing that a shot at leadership has bypassed them. They could well be difficult to handle.

If he wins that dressing room, half of his battle will be won as MI do have a solid batting lineup even if the bowling looks weak. For RCB, the greatest inspiration could be the women's team that gave the men a crash course on how to play calmly at the business end where Kohli and Co. have faltered.

Kohli wouldn't mind 200 runs less but he would badly want that trophy. Dhoni has laid his hands on it five times, so has

Rohit Sharma.

But what would rankle Kohli is the fact that even KKR has won it twice under his bete noire Gautam Gambhir.

However, Kohli alone cannot win it. The Dinesh Karthiks, the 'Faf' du Plessis, the Glenn Maxwells and likes of Akash Deep need to believe that 'E saala Cup Naam de' (This time Cup is Ours).

Gambhir, who is now back in the KKR camp, would be as ambitious if not more.

No one has forgotten the ugly war of words that broke out between him and Kohli. In his familiar KKR dugout, Gambhir the coach could make a difference. A middle-order comprising Shreyas Iyer, Nitish Rana, Rinku Singh and Andre Russell can send shivers down any bowling attack's spine. And then comes Starc, who would need to

justify his nearly Rs 25 crore deal. The team that Gambhir quit, Lucknow Super Giants has a new coach in Justin Langer and it would like to do better than Play-offs this time but with a bowling attack that doesn't exactly inspire confidence.

Ditto for Delhi Capitals although Pant's comeback could well be the most emotionally charged story of this IPL.

Gujarat Titans, the team of the last two seasons, might not make it this time with no Pandya or Mohammed Shami, who is out injured, in its lineup.

Rajasthan Royals with Yashasvi Jaiswal, Sanju Samson, Dhruv Jurel and Jos Buttler will be serious contenders.

Sunrisers Hyderabad, despite having Pat Cummins as captain, and Shikhar Dhawan's Punjab Kings are not expected to go the distance. (PTI)

Sharath to be India's flag bearer, Mary Kom appointed chef de mission for Paris Games

NEW DELHI, March 21: Veteran table tennis player and CWG champion Sharath Kamal will be India's flag bearer at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games while legendary boxer MC Mary Kom was on Thursday appointed the chef de mission of the country's contingent.

The 41-year-old table tennis player symbolises "the unity and spirit of our contingent as they compete on the Olympic stage", the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) said in a statement while making the announcement.

Six-time World Champion Mary Kom, bronze medallist at the 2012 London Olympics, will be assisted by luger Shiva Keshavan, who has been appointed the deputy chef de mission.

"Mary Kom's unparalleled dedication to sports and inspiring journey makes her a natural choice to guide and mentor our athletes at the Olympics," IOA said. "Keshavan, a former Olympian in luge, brings a wealth of experience and knowledge to support the team's management and coordination efforts."

Olympic bronze medallist in rifle shooting Gagan Narang will oversee India's operations at the shooting range, which is very far



from the main venues.

India will be sending its largest-ever shooting contingent to Paris with 19 quotas already in pocket. "His (Narang's) meticulous approach and understanding of athletes' needs will

ensure a conducive environment for our shooters," the statement added. "These appointments represent a blend of experience, expertise, and leadership that will contribute significantly to the success of our athletes on



the global stage, the statement added.

Commenting on the appointments, IOA president PT Usha, said, "We are delighted to have such a distinguished and capable team of officials leading our

contingent for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. Their expertise, dedication and passion for sports will undoubtedly inspire our athletes to achieve their best and make the nation proud." (PTI)

CSK weren't ready to move on from MS Dhoni in 2022: Stephen Fleming



CHENNAI, March 21: Chennai Super Kings were not ready to move on from MS Dhoni despite appointing Ravindra Jadeja as their skipper in IPL 2022, admitted head coach Stephen Fleming after the five-time winners made the leadership change with Ruturaj Gaikwad taking charge, here on Thursday.

On the eve of the IPL 2024 season-opener against Royal Challengers Bangalore here, CSK announced that opening batter Gaikwad will take over the captaincy reins from Dhoni.

In 2022, CSK entered the IPL with Jadeja as their skipper but it was a move that backfired, with Dhoni taking back the captaincy role.

"We weren't ready to move away from MS (Dhoni) in 2022. Dhoni has a good sense of the game, but we want to develop the young players for the role. We are well prepared this time," Fleming told the media here

ahead of CSK's clash against RCB.

"(The) last time MS (had) left captaincy, (it) was shocking to us and we weren't aware that MS would step down. But this time we knew," Fleming said.

"We have been working hard to prepare leaders. We have been slow on life after MS Dhoni. But trusting the youngsters has paid off well for us. I have already had a word with the youngsters like Rutu (Gaikwad) about leadership and captaincy. It is a great opportunity for him to lead the team," Fleming said.

Fleming said Dhoni had looked promising in practice matches in the lead up to the IPL and hoped he would not have any fitness-related issues during the tournament.

"MS has done well in the practice games and I hope that we will have his services for the rest of the season," he said. (PTI)

Powerlifters Ashok, Parmjeet qualify for Paris Paralympics

NEW DELHI, March 21: Asian Games bronze medallist Ashok and Parmjeet Kumar qualified for the Paris Paralympics by winning a silver medal each at the Para Powerlifting World Cup in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt on Thursday.

Competing in the 41kg category, Manpreet Kaur earned a bronze medal after lifting 86kg.

In a display of sheer strength and determination, Ashok lifted an impressive 192kg and 196kg respectively, which gave him the silver medal.

After his second attempt was declared a 'no lift', he cleared 196kg in his third.

In the fiercely-contested 49kg category, Parmjeet lifted 160kg and 166kg in his first two attempts and narrowly missed out on the gold.

Ashok said after his effort, "To participate in the Paralympics is the dream of every para athlete, and I am elated to have taken a significant step towards realising that dream. I am determined to achieve greatness and bring glory to my country." (PTI)

Shubhankar shoots 68 as Kiradech leads in Singapore

SINGAPORE, March 21: India's Shubhankar Sharma overcame an early double bogey to card 4-under 68 and was placed tied 21 on a tight leader board after the first round of the Singapore Classic here on Thursday.

Shubhankar, who is preparing for his home event next week's Indian Open started from the tenth and double bogeyed the 11th hole. Back-to-back birdies on next two holes repaired that damage but he again dropping a shot on 16th before picking two more birdies in succession to turn in 1-under and made it a hat-trick of birdies with another one on the first.

Two more gains on the third and fourth and yet another one on eighth saw him rise to 5-under. Just as he was cruising he bogeyed the closing ninth for a

68, which had a total of eight birdies, two bogeys and one double. Kiradech Aphibarnrat started the DP World Tour's Asian Swing in brilliant fashion as an eight under par round of 64 earned him a share of the first round lead.

The 34-year-old mixed a single bogey with nine birdies to set the target—and the course record—before being joined by Malaysian Gavin Green and England's Jordan Smith on eight under par after the opening day at Laguna National Golf Resort Club. The DP World Tour's Asian Swing, consisting of five events on the Asian continent, begins this week and continues with Hero Indian Open.

Four-time winner Aphibarnrat made the perfect start to proceedings in Singapore. (PTI)

World Aquatics boss in India, Swimming Fed top brass clueless

NEW DELHI, March 21: India has huge potential but the lack of leadership and proper infrastructure is impeding the country's swimmers from achieving Olympic glory, said World Aquatics (WA) president Husain Al Musallam on Thursday.

Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) interim chief Randhir Singh also criticised the swimming scenario in the country, saying as a sport it has lagged behind other Olympic disciplines. The comments were made at an event where no high-ranking Swimming Federation of India (SFI) official was present, leaving SFI secretary-general Monal Chokshi "very surprised".

"I am very surprised (by the development)," Chokshi, when asked if he was invited for the meet, told PTI.

Pointing out several deficiencies in India's aquatics system, Al Musallam, who also met Indian Olympic Association (IOA) chief PT Usha here, said, "From the sport I come from as Water Aquatics president, I believe India has a huge potential to be at the podium at the Olympic Games and the World Championships (in swimming)."

"But (they) need a lot to work on, not just the infrastructure but to change the methods of training, taking care of athletes, high-level competition, organisation at the national level and also to take the best from outside... World Aquatics needs India to be one of the top nations in the world."

"I am not far away from the Indian sport and the Indian Olympic movement. But I can't see good leadership, good management. India deserves a lot for the youth, the athletes and you have a good potential to be



one of the top nations in the world." Echoing similar views, Singh said, "swimming is a sport in our country which is lagging behind many sports we have taken up. "Shooting and archery are doing well; wrestling and boxing all are doing good. Only in swimming we are not going anywhere. Some proper development should be done and that's one of the reasons he (Al Musallam) is here."

However, SFI secretary-general Chokshi was clueless about the visit of the WA president.

"Al Musallam must have come to India on Randhir Singh's invitation. They are in the OCA together," he said.

While Al Musallam is the OCA director general as well, Randhir is its interim chief.

"We have the World Aquatics, Asian (swimming) federation and OCA elections happening, so there would be some meetings slotted. Officially, they had not scheduled any discussion with SFI," said Chokshi.

Asked when the talk largely centered around swimming, shouldn't SFI officials have been invited, he said, "Al Musallam has come for a meeting with Randhir Singh and with the IOA president in context to their personal whatever agendas they may have."

"But it is right that if he is going to address issues related to swimming, then SFI should have been there. Still, I don't know what the agenda was. Was there an official conference related to swimming?" Reminded that he spoke mostly on swimming, Chokshi said, "Since he is the swimming president, he will speak on swimming only." The WA president asked India to "show its potential" in organising international competitions.

"India, in my opinion, with a new look in sport and new look in the dynamic economy should aim to also organise some international event with latest technology, cost-effective and add positive impact on society, (PTI)

Former Pakistan captain Saeed Ahmed passes away

LAHORE, March 21: Saeed Ahmed, the former Pakistan Test captain and a dashing batsman of his time, passed away here after leading a largely reclusive life away from cricket since his retirement. He was 86.

Ahmed played 41 Test matches, scoring 2,991 runs with five centuries and 16 half-centuries. He also took 22 wickets with his off-spin bowling.

Ahmed made his Test debut against the West Indies during the famous drawn Bridgetown Test in 1958 when he was 20 and played his last Test for Pakistan in Melbourne against Australia during the 1972-73 tour.

However, his Pakistan career had an undignified end during that tour.

The Pakistan board believed that Ahmed faked a back injury to avoid playing against Dennis Lillee on a green top at Sydney after his altercation with the pacer in that Melbourne Test.

Ahmed was subsequently recalled from the tour on disciplinary grounds and he was never selected for Pakistan again.

ground, and penchant for big scores.

In his debut Test against the Windies, Saeed featured in a 150-plus runs partnership with Hanif Muhammad, who made his historic 337 in the second innings to help Pakistan walk away with a draw.

Muhammad batted for 970 minutes during that knock, while Ahmed made a resolute 65. He was Pakistan's sixth Test captain and replaced Muhammad as skipper of the side during England's tour of Pakistan in 1969. He only led Pakistan for three Tests and all were drawn.

PCB chairman Mohsin Naqvi said: "The entire cricketing fraternity is saddened over the demise of one of our former Test captains. We are conveying our deep condolences to the family of Saeed Ahmed."

"He served Pakistan with all his heart and the PCB honours his record and services for the Test team."

Saeed's half-brother, Younus Ahmed, also played four Tests for Pakistan. He was called up by Imran Khan to the 1987 tour of India and played in a Test. (PTI)

Dhoni 'hands over' CSK captaincy to Gaikwad day before IPL opener

CHENNAI, March 21: The legendary Mahendra Singh Dhoni on Thursday "handed" over the Chennai Super Kings captaincy to opener Ruturaj Gaikwad on the eve of the IPL opener here, a stunning decision that is bound to send speculation swirling on his playing future with the franchise.

In a post on X, the Indian Premier League made the announcement a day before CSK take on Royal Challengers Bengaluru. The five-time champions issued a brief statement soon after.

"MS Dhoni has handed over Chennai Super Kings' captaincy to Ruturaj Gaikwad ahead of the start of TATA IPL 2024. Ruturaj has been an integral part of Chennai Super Kings since 2019 and has played 52 matches in IPL during this period. The team looks forward to the upcoming season," said CSK.

There is speculation that Dhoni will

retire at the end of the season and therefore the franchise felt the need for a smooth transition in the stalwart's presence as a player.

Gaikwad, who has played six ODIs and 19 T20s for India, made his CSK debut in 2020 and has gone on to represent the team in 52 games.

"Whatever Dhoni does, it is in the best interest of the team. I got to know of the decision just before the captains' meeting. You have to respect his decision, it is his call," CSK CEO Kasi Viswanathan told PTI.

The stylish opener had a memorable run last year, aggregating 590 runs in 16 games at an impressive strike rate of 147.50. His breakout year was 2021 when he amassed 635 runs in 16 games.

The 27-year-old from Maharashtra is not new to captaincy, having led the Indian team to the gold medal in the



Asian Games last year. CSK and Dhoni share an unbreakable bond and the World Cup-winning captain is expected to keep a significant role in the franchise going forward albeit not as a player.

regaining full fitness, he is expected to bat higher up this edition.

Former India pacer Irfan Pathan met Dhoni recently and claimed that the latter appears to be in good shape following the knee surgery.

"Last year, Dhoni said he was giving a gift to his fans with his cricket. I met with him a few days ago, he was playing pickleball for two hours non-stop. His knee was as fit as it ever was. It's an exciting time for fans; he now has his vintage old look. Will we get the vintage old Dhoni too?" Pathan asked on Star Sports.

"His role has changed in the past two years. He comes in lower-order, plays lesser deliveries but hits the big shots, the strike rate is high. It's a small innings but a memorable one. "I think there won't be much of a change in that this year. He will continue to play that role," said Pathan. (PTI)

Dhoni officially announced his retirement from international cricket on August 15, 2020 but has kept playing the IPL.

The 42-year-old, who played with a dodgy knee last season, underwent a surgery after leading CSK to their fifth title.

Dhoni has played as many as 250 IPL matches, scoring more than 5000 runs at a strike rate of 135.92.

Due to his knee issues, Dhoni pushed himself down to number 8 in the batting order last season but after

Eventing National Championship begins in New Delhi



NEW DELHI, March 21: Close to 200 riders will compete in the Eventing National Championship, the Equestrian Federation of India (EFI) announced on Thursday.

The first leg of the competition began today and the second and final leg will commence on March 28.

The Eventing competition, also known as Horse Trial, comprises three disciplines -- Dressage, Cross Country and Show Jumping.

In Eventing, Show Jumping competition unfolds on day three.

"We will have around 36 teams and close to 200 riders competing over three days.

Competition will be in Pre-Novice, Novice and CCN categories. We have an excellent jury, headed by Col. (retired) Dushyant Bali. I am sure we will see some interesting and exciting action in the championships," Col Jaiveer Singh, Secretary General EFI, said.

In Show Jumping, the horse jumps over coloured poles with a maximum time allowed and the objective is to jump a clear round inside the time limit. On the last day, it becomes challenging because the horses get tired and that leads to more mistakes.

In Cross Country, horses and riders negotiate a course of natural obstacles over several miles. The obstacles have to be jumped within a time limit. The horse should be bold, straight and fast for cross country.

In Dressage, the rider-horse combo performs in an arena of 20m x 60m, bordered by a low rail which the horse must stay within. The arena has 12 lettered markers placed symmetrically indicating where the movements are to start and where the changes to pace are to occur and where the movements will end. (PTI)

More than happy to help Shubman in any way I can: Williamson

NEW DELHI, March 21: With the IPL season set to roll on Friday, one captain who has 100 Tests under his belt is willing and ready to mentor a newbie captain who will be taking over a leadership role for the first time.

The unassuming Kane Williamson says he will be happy to help his Gujarat Titans captain Shubman Gill in any way he can as he considers the Indian a "great thinker", a huge compliment coming from someone who is a bonafide legend in international cricket.

"He (Gill) is a great player and like I said a great cricketing brain, and I would certainly encourage him to walk that path and take his decisions. No doubt what he will look to do the same," Williamson told PTI in an interview.

The 24-year-old Gill was handed Gujarat Titans' reins after incumbent Hardik Pandya made an abrupt exit from the franchise for his former team and spiritual base Mumbai Indians.

The dashing right-hander only recently recovered from a poor run of form when he came good in the home Test series against England, hitting two hundreds in the series.

He is set to explore the uncharted territory of captaincy in the IPL and Williamson promises to lend a helping hand whenever Gill needs.

"I will be more than happy to help Shubman in any way I can and Shubman knows that," said Williamson. The Titans have had couple of great IPL seasons in 2022 and 2023. They won the title in 2022 and lost to Chennai Super Kings in a last-ball thriller the next year.

Williamson said that the youngster, who is widely regarded the next Indian batting superstar, has the calibre to navigate his way through choppy waters.

"As for the team and myself, I would generally like to share some ideas. It is a long season ahead. It will be quite a journey



and we will all be learning through it," said the veteran, who captained New Zealand to 22 wins in 40 Tests.

With no Mohammed Shami available due to recuperation from heel surgery, it won't exactly be a walk in the park for Gill but Williamson said such challenges are a routine for any captain.

"Obviously, there has been a few changes in the camp, that's a challenge for every team as every year you have some adjustments to make, really exciting opportunity for Shubman and we need to focus what's there in front of us," he said.

The support staff comprising

head coach Ashish Nehra, Cricket Director Vikram Solanki and Mentor Gary Kirsten are also there to help Gill ease into his role. As far as his own batting position is concerned, Williamson hinted that it would be his usual No. 3 slot.

"I think it will be a top order option. There are so many quality players, whether that's local Indian players, who have been exceptional or the overseas ones. So, it will come down to balance and I think a top order option," he said.

Williamson quite liked the idea of bowlers being allowed two bouncers per over from this IPL as he feels it will ensure a

more balanced contest.

"I think it is a good addition and it will bring slightly different dynamic to the game. It is a nice extra option for the fast bowlers," said Williamson.

However, at smaller grounds, rule might just aid the batters.

"There could be smaller grounds around country and some very good surfaces which offer some high scores. Also addition of Impact Players, weighed more towards the runs side of the things. So, it is a nice addition and will play a role for sure." In the middle of last year, Williamson had a horrifying knee injury which required Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL) reconstruction and since his comeback, he is just happy to play the game he has always loved.

So, is there anything left to achieve for a man who has played 100 Tests, notched up 32 tons in the traditional format, won a World Test Championship title, and has been a part of the greatest ODI World Cup final? He paused and smiled.

"It is an interesting question. It is about having to remind yourself that you love this game as well. There's always more of those tournaments and more of those things.

"So just kind of trying to stand alone and appreciate where you are after having an injury, coming back. Just being grateful to be back playing and doing your bit for team, whatever team that is," he said.

But he has the grace and humility to accept reality as well.

"Perhaps I am slightly closer to the end than start and but you know it is a journey that you look back upon and appreciate.

The only time he struggled to answer a question was when asked what makes him the most loved cricketer in the game?

"I think just kind of you to say that. I play for a team (New Zealand) and may be who I am. From a cricketing perspective, trying to commit to what that group is trying to do," he signed off. (PTI)

Mithun Manhas, Nikhil Chopra, junior selector Krishan Mohan in race to become BCCI selector



NEW DELHI, March 21: Former India spinner Nikhil Chopra, Delhi veteran Mithun Manhas and current junior selector Krishan Mohan are in the race to become a BCCI selector for the senior national team.

The BCCI had invited the applications for the single position in the five-man selection panel back in January.

Currently, West Zone is represented by two men Salil Ankola and chairman Ajit Agarkar. Ankola is likely to make way for a selector from North Zone, which is not represented in the panel following the resignation of Chetan Sharma.

Former Punjab cricketer Mohan, who is part of the junior selection panel since September 2021, is among the aspirants who have applied for the job.

Former India wicketkeeper Ajay Ratra has also thrown his hat into the ring.

The application deadline was January 25 but with the IPL starting Friday, the board still

has enough time to fill the vacancy. The Cricket Advisory Committee headed by Ashok Malhotra is expected to interview the shortlisted candidates in the near future.

"There are a few strong candidates who are in the race and they include Mithun, Chopra and Mohan," said a BCCI source.

Mithun played as many 157 first class games for Delhi and was a regular in the IPL from 2010 to 2014. Recently, R Ashwin spoke glowingly about Mithun's special abilities with the bat ahead of his 100th Test in Dharamasala.

Ratra, a level 3 coach, was with the A team on the tour of South Africa last year.

Chopra, who played one Tests and 39 ODIs for India, is now a well known commentator.

The applicant should have played either 7 Tests or 30 first-class matches. A candidate with experience of 10 ODIs or 20 first-class matches will also be considered. (PTI)

With Gaikwad at helm, CSK eye strong start against RCB

CHENNAI, March 21: The high-stakes match between cross-city rivals Chennai Super Kings and Royal Challengers Bengaluru here on Friday will not only usher in IPL 2024 but also a new dawn for the defending champions with iconic MS Dhoni handing over the captaincy to Ruturaj Gaikwad.

Dhoni is expected to retire at the end of this season and it seems the unanticipated move, just a day before the start of new season, has been taken for a smooth transition.

But beyond the emotional whirlpool that surrounds Dhoni handing over captaincy to Gaikwad, CSK and RCB will have to find some early answers to some deep questions as they attempt to enter a rarefied territory.

The Super Kings are five-time champions, and a sixth title will put them in a space where no team has entered so far, not even Mumbai Indians, who also have five IPL trophies.

On the other hand, the Royal Challengers, who recently grabbed their maiden title through Women's Premier League, will be eager to add a first IPL title to their shelf.

However, they have their own challenges to master.

The Super Kings have been the torch-bearers of success in



the IPL under Dhoni, whose IPL career has reached its final chapter.

While his cricketing brain is still immune to advancing years, the passing summers have caught up with his reflexes as a batsman.

So, the younger names will have to step up. The CSK have placed enormous faith in new recruit Rachin Ravindra in the absence of Devon Conway, who will miss the initial part of IPL due to a thumb injury.

The CSK have more Kiwi flavour in Daryl Mitchell, a

hard-hitting middle-order batter and a handy seamer.

In batting, they can also look to bank on the experience of Ajinkya Rahane and the exuberance of opener Gaikwad, who is entering the IPL after top-scoring for Maharashtra in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy.

It will be interesting to see how he manages the task of leading CSK, a legacy team that carries massive levels of expectations from fans every season.

However, Gaikwad has a winning formula at his hand, laid out

so successfully over the years by Dhoni.

It's the presence of a clutch of all-rounders and spinners who can use the abrasive Chidambaram Stadium pitch to the hilt. The likes of Ravindra Jadeja, Mitchell Santner, Moeen Ali, Maheesh Theekshana can make even the best dance to their tunes here.

The CSK also have two wily domestic campaigners in pacers Deepak Chahar and Shardul Thakur.

However, Sri Lankan slinger Matheesha Pathirana will miss

initial matches after failing to recover from a hamstring injury he suffered during the recent T20I series against Bangladesh.

But those little scratches on the CSK machine do not make the task of RCB any easier. To understand it better, RCB have not beaten CSK at this venue since 2008.

Skipper Faf du Plessis and star batter Virat Kohli, who is returning to competitive cricket after a two-month break, will once again have to shoulder the batting responsibility.

They are set to open together, but this time the addition of Cameron Green might act as a protection plan if one of them or both of them fail to get going. Green can also chip in as a bowler.

Then there is always Glenn Maxwell, whose high-return outings in last year's World Cup might not have been forgotten.

They have a mix of extreme pace and skills in the fast bowling unit through Mohammed Siraj, Lockie Ferguson, Alzarri Joseph, Akash Deep and Reece Topley, but none of them are particularly good in death over situations.

The RCB spin attack, though, wears a thin look in the absence of leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga, who was released

ahead of the auction.

They will have to hope for Maxwell to deliver the goods with his off-spin but others like Karn Sharma, Himanshu Sharma and Mayank Dagar are either short of match practice or untested.

Squads:
CSK: Ruturaj Gaikwad (C), MS Dhoni, Moeen Ali, Deepak Chahar, Tushar Deshpande, Shivam Dube, Rajvardhan Hangargekar, Ravindra Jadeja, Ajay Mandal, Mukesh Choudhary, Ajinkya Rahane, Shaik Rasheed, Mitchell Santner, Simarjeet Singh, Nishant Sindhu, Prashant Solanki, Maheesh Theekshana, Rachin Ravindra, Shardul Thakur, Daryl Mitchell, Sameer Rizvi, Mustafizur Rahman and Avانش Rao Aravelly.

RCB: Faf du Plessis (c), Glenn Maxwell, Virat Kohli, Rajat Patidar, Anuj Rawat, Dinsh Karthik, Suyash Prabhudessai, Will Jacks, Mahipal Lomror, Karn Sharma, Manoj Bhandage, Mayank Dagar, Vijaykumar Vyshak, Akash Deep, Mohammed Siraj, Reece Topley, Himanshu Sharma, Rajan Kumar, Cameron Green, Alzarri Joseph, Yash Dayal, Tom Curran, Lockie Ferguson, Swapnil Singh and Saurav Chauhan. Match starts: 8:00 PM. (PTI)

PCB in touch with Langer, Kirsten among others for Pakistan head coach role

KARACHI, March 21: After Shane Watson turned down the offer, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) is in contact with several foreign coaches, including Justin Langer and Gary Kirsten, to work with the national team as head coach on a long-term contract. According to the "Jang" newspaper, the PCB has contacted high-profile names such as Langer, Kirsten, Mike Hesson, Matthew Hayden, Eoin Morgan and Phil Simmons.

The PCB Chairman, Mohsin Naqvi said he wanted a foreign coaching and support staff to work with the Pakistan team because of the upcoming ICC events including the T20 World Cup and the Champions Trophy. Zaka Ashraf, the former PCB chairman, had sidelined foreign coaches, Mickey Arthur, Grant Bradburn and Andrew Putterick after the World Cup in India, opting to turn towards domestic former players as coaches. The foreign coaches were released from their contracts with three month's salaries under a mutual agreement.

"It is because of the PCB's poor track record in appointing and sacking coaches -- foreign and local -- in the past that others are now very reluctant to accept any offer from the PCB," a board official conceded. (PTI)