

6 WORLD
 ● Putin gets 5th term in election that was never in doubt
 ● Pakistan conducts airstrikes inside Afghanistan; 8 people killed

8 NATION
 ● Cong raises questions over PM CARES Fund, asks about 'lack of transparency'
 ● Kejriwal skips ED summons in DJB case; AAP terms notice 'illegal'

HT BRIEFS
Undertrials escape

TEZPUR: Three prisoners, including one facing trial in a case under the POCSO Act, have escaped from Tezpur Central Jail in Assam, a police officer said on Monday. The undertrials fled on Sunday night, he said. "A case has been registered and investigation started," the officer said, without giving details on how they managed to escape.

STF raid

GUWAHATI: Acting on reliable intelligence regarding the circulation of Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN), a targeted raid was conducted on Monday at Rajib Gandhi Path, Near Maniram Dewan Trade Center under Gorchuk Police Station jurisdiction by the Special Task Force (STF) of Assam. During the operation, law enforcement authorities apprehended Md. Gulzar, aged 26 years, hailing from Saifi Colony, under Simbhaoli Poice Station, in Hapur district of Uttar Pradesh. Gulzar, son of Md. Ashiq Ali, was found in possession of a significant amount of counterfeit currency and other items linked to illicit activities.

CDPO held

CHIRANG: The Directorate of Vigilance & Anti-Corruption (DVAC), Assam, has cracked down on corruption following a complaint received against Brajendra Nath Das, the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) of Borobazar ICDS Project in Bijnri of Chirang district. The complaint alleged that Das demanded a bribe of ₹ 30,000 from a concerned individual for the processing of bills. Refusing to succumb to corruption, the complainant approached the Directorate, seeking legal intervention against the accused public servant. Acting swiftly, a team from the Directorate laid a trap on March 18, 2024, near the office of the Sub Divisional Officer (SDO) and Das was caught red-handed as he accepted ₹10,000 as part of the demanded bribe from the complainant within the premises of the SDO Civil office.

Electoral bonds: SBI told to make complete disclosure by Mar 21

NEW DELHI, March 18: In a third tongue-lashing to the State Bank of India, the Supreme Court on Monday told it to stop being "selective" and make "complete disclosure" of all details related to the electoral bonds scheme by March 21.

The apex court said the details to be disclosed include the unique bond numbers that would reveal the link between the buyers and the recipient political parties.

A five-judge Constitution bench headed by Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud said there is "no manner of doubt that the SBI is re-

quired to make complete disclosure of all the details" which are in its possession. The bench, also comprising Justice Sanjiv Khanna, Justice B R Gavai, Justice J B Pardiwala and Justice Manoj Misra, said the Election Commission shall forthwith upload on its website the details received from the SBI.

In a landmark verdict, a five-judge constitution bench had done away with the scheme, calling it "unconstitutional", and ordered disclosure by the Election Commission of donors, the amount donated by them and the recipients by March 13.



On March 11, the SBI, which unsuccessfully sought an extension of time till June 30 to disclose electoral bonds details, faced searching questions from the top court which wanted to know about the steps

taken to comply with its directions.

Last Friday, the SC admonished SBI for furnishing incomplete information and issued a notice to the bank to explain the reasons for the non-disclosure of unique alphanumeric numbers.

On Monday, the bench noted the submission of senior advocate Harish Salve, appearing for the SBI, that there is no reservation on the part of the bank in disclosing all the details of electoral bonds which are in its possession.

"In order to fully effectuate the order and to obviate any controversy in the future, the chairman

and managing director of SBI shall file an affidavit on or before 5 pm on Thursday (March 21) indicating that SBI has disclosed all details of the electoral bonds which were in its possession and custody and that no details have been withheld," the bench said.

During the hearing, the bench asked the SBI to disclose all conceivable information on electoral bonds, including bond numbers.

"We had asked all details to be disclosed by the SBI which includes electoral bond numbers as well. Let SBI not be selective in disclosure," (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

BJP-led state govt faces MCC violation slur

Congress, TMC move CEC on official advertisements, seek action

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 18: Assam opposition parties Congress and Trinamool Congress (TMC) have alleged that the state's BJP-led government has violated the election model code of conduct (MCC) by failing to remove official advertisements featuring the prime minister and chief minister.

State Congress president Bhupen Kumar Borah and TMC state chief Ripun Bora have separately written to Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Rajiv Kumar expressing their concerns. While the Congress lodged its complaint on Sunday, the TMC sent the letter on Monday.

Borah emphasised that the presence of advertisements with the photographs of the PM, CM and others constitute a "gross violation" of the MCC and urged the CEC to take immediate action. "This is a gross violation of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). You are hereby requested to take appropriate action immediately," Borah wrote to the CEC.



Similarly, Bora pointed out numerous hoardings across the state featuring government advertisements with the PM and CM and requested the CEC to direct the state government to remove them promptly. The MCC was enforced nationwide after the Lok Sabha election schedule was announced on March 16. In Assam, the elec-

Assembly elections will be held simultaneously in Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh.

The dates of polling for the Lok Sabha are April 19, April 26, May 7, May 13, May 20, May 25, and June 1. In Bihar, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh, voting will take place on June 4. Voters in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim will cast their ballots for their Assembly elections on April 19, while Andhra Pradesh will elect its Assembly on May 13. Odisha's Assembly poll will be held in four phases, with voting on May 13, May 20, May 25, and June 1.

It is worth mentioning that this will be the first election the NDA will contest against the INDIA bloc -- the grouping of the opposition parties, regional parties led by the Congress. Narendra Modi sounded the election bugle weeks ago as he set the target of '400 paar' seats for the NDA and 370+ for the BJP alone. (With inputs from PTI)

Assam will register 3-5 lakh applications under CAA: CM

GUWAHATI, March 18: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has claimed that about three-five lakh people will apply for Indian citizenship under the CAA in the state, asserting that the applicants will comprise only those who were excluded from the updated National Register of Citizens (NRC).

He also said that seven lakh Muslims and five lakh Hindu-Bengalis, among others, were left out of the NRC list.

"Many Hindu-Bengalis had come at different points of time and stayed at refugee camps. When they applied for inclusion in NRC, they submitted a stamped paper as proof of having stayed at such camps.

"But, Prateek Hajela (former NRC state coordinator) did not accept the paper. As a result, names of many Hindu-Bengalis were not included in the NRC," Sarma said in an interview to a local television channel here.

He said that while many among the 5 lakh Hindu-Bengalis who had applied for inclusion in NRC will

submit applications under the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019, many others will take legal recourse.

Applicants excluded from the NRC also include 2 lakh "proper Assamese" like those having the Das (surname), the 'Koch-Rajibongshi' (community) and 1.5 lakh Gorkhas, the CM claimed.

"Applications under the CAA will be three-five lakh, with a 10 per cent margin of error. There won't be any 15 or 18 or 20 lakh or 1.5 crore applicants in Assam. After being in politics for so long, I have that much grip on the state," the BJP leader asserted.

The Supreme Court-monitored NRC was published on August 31, 2019 and excluded 19 lakh of the 3.4 crore applicants.

The Centre had earlier this month implemented the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, notifying the rules four years after the law was passed by Parliament to fast-track citizenship for undocumented (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



Over 1000 APHLC members join BJP in Diphu



HT Bureau
DIPHU, March 18: Opposition party workers of the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC), under the leadership of party's Inglongkiri Wing president, Longsing Teron, and APHLC's organising secretary of the Central Committee, Semson Bey, along with 1,053 members, marched into

the saffron camp at Atal Bihari Vajpayee Bhawan in Diphu.

They were welcomed by the chief executive member (CEM) of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Tuliram Ronghang, in the presence of the BJP's Karbi Anglong District Committee president, Roland Killing. Briefing the media, CEM Rong-

hang stated that more opposition leaders from the Indian National Congress (INC) and APHLC would join the BJP in the coming days.

"A total of 1,053 APHLC members joined the BJP at the party office. The Aam Aadmi Party will also join either on March 23 or 24. Additionally, more than 1000 Congress workers and 500 APHLC workers from the Dhansiri constituency will join the BJP. A former minister and APHLC workers from the Chinthong constituency will join at a rally. This time, our aim is to secure the highest number of votes in India for candidate Amarsing Tisso. In the last Lok Sabha election, the incumbent MP Horensing Bey secured the highest vote share, while cabinet ministers Kiren Rijiju and Rameshwar Teli secured the second and third positions respectively in the northeast," the CEM (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

GSP to nominate retired IAS officer from 6th Diphu (ST) constituency in 2024 LS polls

HT Bureau
DIPHU, March 18: The Gana Suraksha Party (GSP), a Kokrajhar-based party, will nominate John Bernard Sangma, a retired IAS officer, as its candidate for the 6th Diphu (ST) Parliamentary Constituency in the upcoming Lok Sabha election, 2024.

Naba Kumar Sarania, president of GSP and MP from Kokrajhar, announced that his party will contest from four seats, including the 6th Diphu (ST) Parliamentary Constituency.

Notably, the Diphu seat will go to the polls on April 26 in the second phase of the Assam elections.

To introduce the party's candidate for the 6th Diphu (ST) Parliamentary Constituency, party workers and supporters organised a welcoming program for Sangma at Dimasa Club. Upon arrival, Sangma was greeted by party workers, accompanied by party president and MP



Sarania, GSP Karbi Anglong district president Soboram Hazarika, and general secretary Rajen Bordoloi.

A meeting was convened with party workers to discuss the electioneering process and strategies for garnering votes.

Speaking to the media, Sarania stated that in Assam, the GSP will field candidates in Darang, Udalguri, Kokrajhar, and Diphu, with

discussions ongoing for a candidate from Nagaon.

"The Bodos in Karbi Anglong are not entitled to enjoy ST status, while the Karbis in BTR also do not enjoy ST status. National political parties often employ a divide and rule policy with tribal people, instigating infighting among tribes for political gain. In Assam, we are committed to fostering (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

GU students, ABVP members clash on varsity campus

GUWAHATI, March 18: Students of Gauhati University (GU) and ABVP members clashed on the varsity campus in the city's Jalukbari area on Monday after the latter allegedly tore down anti-CAA posters, police said.

The BJP's student wing, however, denied the accusation. Several students sustained injuries during the chaos, prompting top officials to swiftly respond to the scene, police added.

Members of the Post-Graduate Students Union (PGSU), GU's elected student body, asserted that ABVP members tore down anti-CAA posters displayed at a university gate, sparking confrontations that escalated into a physical altercation. ABVP, which was conducting a meeting in a hall on the university premises, refuted PGSU's claim and alleged that its members faced anti-CAA slogans and were (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

The analysis also suggested that winter, overall, is warming across India Winters abruptly transitioning into summer-like conditions in north India: Analysis

NEW DELHI, March 18: An analysis of temperature data since 1970 shows that winters are quickly transitioning into summer-like conditions in north India, shortening the spring season.

Researchers at the US-based Climate Central, an independent group of scientists, conducted the analysis to place India within the context of global warming trends, focusing on the winter months (December to February).

The analysis revealed abrupt changes in temperatures occurring in late winter across north India.

The average temperatures in states in north India showed either a cooling trend or slight warming in January, followed by strong warming in February.

This indicates that these regions



are now experiencing abrupt transitions from cool winter-like temperatures into much warmer conditions traditionally observed in March, the researchers said.

To show this change, the researchers calculated the difference between the warming rates in January and February, expressed as the change in average temperature

since 1970.

The most significant jump in warming rates was observed in Rajasthan, where the average temperature in February was 2.6 degrees Celsius higher than in January.

A total of nine states and Union Territories -- Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, and Uttarakhand -- showed a January-February difference of more than 2 degrees Celsius. This supports reports that it feels like spring has disappeared in many parts of India, the researchers said.

The analysis also suggested that winter, overall, is warming across India, with every region showing a net warming trend during these months. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

APDCL employee nabbed over bribery charges

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 18: The sleuths of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption (DVAC) apprehended an Assam Power Distribution Company Limited (APDCL) employee red-handed while accepting a bribe in Assam's Nagaon district, said an official statement on Monday.

As per the statement, the accused, identified as Nanda Hazarika, worked in the post of switch board operation at the office of APDCL sub-division 2.

The accused employee was caught after he accepted a demanded bribe near his residence in Nagaon for processing an application for commercial meters.

"A complaint was received at this Directorate of Vigilance & Anti-Corruption, Assam, alleging that Nanda Hazarika, switch board operator-1, of office of the Assam Power Distribution Company Limited (APDCL), Sub Division-2, in Nagaon (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Assam's ruling BJP-led coalition to approach voters on development agenda

GUWAHATI, March 18: The ruling BJP-led coalition in Assam will approach voters in the state on the basis of its developmental activities.

BJP state president Bhabesh Kalita and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) chief Atul Bora said they have also developed a joint roadmap to take forward the electioneering process in the state.

"The alliance partners have already been working on to reach out to the people. Today, we discussed joint strategies to take it forward," Bora said at a joint press after a meeting between the two parties.

Bora, a cabinet minister, said joint committees for coordination at different levels between the two parties are also being formed.

"People are already aware of the 'vikas yatra' (journey of development) of our government. Our candidates have good potential to win

all seats," Bora added. Kalita said, "We are confident of winning the maximum number of seats based on the development being done by our government. We will approach the voters with the development agenda."

The BJP state president said a roadmap to take forward the campaign jointly was discussed during the meeting.

"Leaders of all the allies will work together for all the candidates," he added.

The BJP has fielded candidates in 11 seats in the state, while AGP has put up its nominees in two seats.

The third ally, the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL), will be contesting from one seat.

In the outgoing Lok Sabha, the BJP has nine members out of 14 from Assam, while AGP and UPPL have no representation. (PTI)

30-share BSE Sensex settles higher by 104.99 points or 0.14 per cent at 72,748.42

Stock markets close higher in volatile trade ahead of key Fed policy meeting

MUMBAI, March 18: Benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty closed higher in a highly volatile trade on Monday as investors turned cautious ahead of the US Federal Reserve interest rate decision.

After gyrating between gains and losses, the 30-share BSE Sensex settled higher by 104.99 points or 0.14 per cent at 72,748.42. As many as 14 Sensex shares closed in the green while 16 in the red. The index moved between a high of 72,985.89 and a low of 72,314.16.

The broader Nifty of the NSE rose by 32.35 points or 0.15 per cent, to close at 22,055.70 as 21 of its components advanced and 29 declined.

The gains were primarily led by metal, auto and commodity shares while IT and Tect shares capped the upside. Reliance Industries which rebounded more than 1.5 per cent from the day's low was the major contributor to Sensex and Nifty gains. RIL settled higher by 1.45 per cent.

Tata Steel rose the most by 5 per cent among Sensex shares. Mahindra & Mahindra, JSW Steel, Tata Motors, Axis Bank, Sun Pharma, Reliance Industries and Maruti were the other biggest gainers.



IT shares on the other hand declined amid concerns over interest rates in the US market. Infosys fell the most by 1.99 per cent among Sensex shares. Tata Consultancy Services, Titan, Wipro, Hindustan Unilever and Nestle also declined.

"The Indian market followed the positive Asian peers with a mixed bias. Domestic issues, like mutual fund stress tests, hardly brought any negative views, but premium valuation remains as a concern. Midcap & small caps are attempting to scroll up, however consolidation persists," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

Policy actions, this week, from

global central banks, the US FED, BOJ, and BOE will dictate the market direction. Indication, by the FED, that rate cut may probably be in the latter half of CY24, should bring a mixed sentiment in the short term, he added.

The US Federal Open Market Committee meeting will commence on March 19 and the policy rate decision will be announced on Wednesday.

In the broader market, the BSE midcap gauge climbed 0.04 per cent while the smallcap index dipped 0.07 per cent.

Among the indices, metal zoomed 2.88 per cent, auto jumped 1.08 per cent, commodities

climbed 0.91 per cent, healthcare (0.88 per cent), realty (0.58 per cent) and consumer discretionary (0.47 per cent).

However, IT, consumer durables, teck, services and financial services were the laggards.

"European markets started Monday with modest gains ahead of policy decisions this week by Japan's central bank and the Federal Reserve," said Deepak Jasani, Head of Retail Research, HDFC Securities. After the initial downturn, Nifty oscillated sharply in a range and finally settled at 22,050 levels, Ajit Mishra, SVP-Technical Research at Religare Broking Ltd said. The recent price action in Nifty shows indecisiveness among the participants and frequent breakout failures on the stock-specific front further adding to their worries, he added.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Hong Kong settled higher. European markets were quoting in the green. The US markets ended lower on Friday.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth Rs 848.56 crore on Friday, according to exchange data.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.87 per cent to USD 86.08 a barrel. (PTI)

NexGen Energia to invest ₹ 1,000 cr in EV manufacturing unit in J&K

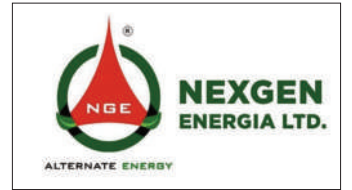
NOIDA, March 18: Sustainable energy solutions firm NexGen Energia on Monday said it will invest ₹ 1,000 crore in setting up a manufacturing unit for electric vehicles (EVs) in Jammu and Kashmir.

The Noida-based company said it is currently in talks with the authorities in the Union Territory and scouting for 100-acre land either in the Kathua industrial area or in the Kashmir Valley.

The move comes soon after the company announced ₹ 3,000 crore investment for setting up a Compress Bio Gas (CBG) plant in Gujarat. "Along with 'Make in India', we are on the way to fulfil the

dream of self-reliant India. We will establish an EV plant in Jammu and Kashmir in collaboration with the government in which we will invest ₹ 1,000 crore," NexGen Energia chairman Piyush Dwivedi told PTI. "The manufacturing unit will provide direct and indirect employment to about 1 lakh people and we aim to launch NGE's most affordable electric two-wheeler on April 15 next month for just ₹ 36,900 from our Noida unit," Dwivedi said.

The NexGen Energia chairman said last week he met with Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari at his



Delhi office where the company presented its proposals on sustainable energy solutions like increasing the use of CBG and India-made EVs. The company has a range of EVs two-wheelers and three-wheelers which is ready for launch. It will eventually start production of electric buses, trucks and cars in the future, it said. (PTI)

Venus Remedies gets marketing authorisations for 3 cancer drugs

CHANDIGARH, March 18: Pharma major Venus Remedies on Monday said it has expanded the reach of its oncology drugs in the Asia Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region with marketing authorisations from Ukraine for three cancer drugs—pallitaxel, oxaliplatin and irinotecan.

Saransh Chaudhary, President, Global Critical Care, Venus Remedies, said, "These marketing approvals mark a significant milestone in our global expansion strategy. We are looking forward to introducing the entire range of our oncology products in Ukraine in due course, thereby contributing to the advancement of healthcare and making a positive impact on people's lives."

With over two decades of presence in the Ukrainian

market, the company has 57 product registrations in Ukraine.

"This achievement has further strengthened our position in the international pharmaceutical market. It also exemplifies our dedication to advancing healthcare solutions for diverse populations," said Aditi K Chaudhary, President, International Health, Venus Remedies.

Its total volume of exports to Ukraine stands at USD 2.20 million. By strengthening its product portfolio in Ukraine, the company aims to increase this figure by 20 per cent in the next one year, a company statement said. Venus Remedies is awaiting approval from Ukraine on another 10 applications for marketing authorisations. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Electoral bonds: SBI told

the bench mentioned orally. It said the apex court had, in its verdict in the electoral bonds case, asked the bank to disclose all the details of the bonds and it should not wait for further orders on this aspect.

The bench refused a hearing on unlisted pleas of industry bodies, Associated Chambers of Commerce & Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in the case. The industry bodies, through senior advocate Mukul Rohatgi, wanted an urgent hearing on their interim application against the disclosure of bond details.

Salve told the bench it should not seem that the bank is "playing with" the court as they have no difficulty in disclosing the details of electoral bonds. Advocate Prashant Bhushan, appearing for the petitioner NGO in the case, claimed that major political parties have not given the donor details and only some parties have given it. "There is enough assistance by public-spirited citizens," Solicitor general Tushar Mehta said, claiming that these sponsored NGOs are "fudging figures".

The apex court also refused to take note of a letter by senior advocate Adish C Aggarwal, the president of the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA), seeking a suo motu review of the judgment on disclosure of electoral bond details.

"Apart from being a senior counsel, you are president of SCBA. You know the procedure," CJ Chandrachud said, adding, "You have written a letter asking me to invoke my suo motu jurisdiction. What is the locus to mention? These are all publicity-oriented stunts. We will not permit it." "Do not make me say anything more. It will be distasteful," the CJ told Aggarwal, who had written a letter in his personal capacity.

Solicitor General Mehta said on behalf of the Central government, "I completely disassociate myself with what Aggarwal has written. It is completely unwarranted and ill-advised". He also said that after the apex court's verdict on electoral bonds, "witch hunting has started at some other level, not at the governmental level". Those before the court started giving press interviews, "deliberately embarrassing" the court and this creates a non-level playing field, Mehta said.

The solicitor general also referred to social media posts and said that these were intended to cause embarrassment. He stressed that the Centre's case was that they wanted to curb the black money. To this, the CJ said, "Mr solicitor, we are only concerned about enforcing the direction which we issued. As judges, we decide according to the Constitution. We are governed by the rule of law. We are also the subject matter of comments in the social media and the press." "Surely, as an institution, our shoulders are broad enough. Our court has an institutional role to play in a polity which is governed by the Constitution and the rule of law. That is the only job," Justice Chandrachud said. The apex court also refused to entertain an application seeking disclosure of the details of electoral bonds sold from March 1, 2018, to April 11, 2019. (PTI)

Over 1000 APHLC

mentioned. He also added that the BJP's focus is on development. The program was attended by MLAs Bidyasingh Englang, Darsing Ronghang, MP candidate Amarsing Tisso, executive members of KAAC, members of the Autonomous Council, and others.

GSP to nominate retired

unity among all tribes and communities," Sarania emphasised. Sarania further informed that GSP is contesting 50 seats across India, including states such as Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Maharashtra, and the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

The GSP aims to build a robust regional force by uniting both tribal and non-tribal communities in Assam.

GU students, ABVP

obstructed from entering the premises. Injured students received treatment at a nearby hospital, police said. "Our top officials promptly arrived at the scene, and the situation has now been brought under control," they added. (PTI)

Winters abruptly transitioning

Manipur experienced the largest change in average winter (December to February) temperature since 1970 (2.3 degrees Celsius) while Delhi had the smallest change (0.2 degrees Celsius). The country's southern part has also been experiencing strong warming in December and January.

Sikkim (2.4 degrees Celsius) and Manipur (2.1 degrees Celsius) recorded the largest changes in temperature in December and January, respectively. "The cooling in central and northern Indian states during January, followed by very strong warming in February, creates the potential for a quick jump from winter to spring-like conditions," said Andrew Pershing, vice-president for science at Climate Central. Global average temperatures have risen by more than 1.3 degrees Celsius since 1850, exacerbating climate impacts, with 2023 being the hottest on record.

The CO2 spewed into the atmosphere, largely due to the burning of fossil fuels since the start of the Industrial Revolution, is closely tied to it.

Climate science says the world needs to slash CO2 emissions by 43 per cent by 2030 to limit the average temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius, the guardrail to prevent worsening of climate impacts. The business-as-usual scenario will take the world to a temperature rise of around 3 degrees Celsius by the end of the century, scientists have warned. (PTI)

APDCL employee nabbed

district, had demanded ₹ 19,000, from the complainant for processing application for commercial metre of the complainant. Later, the said public servant reduced the amount of bribe to ₹ 3,500," the statement added. It further claimed that unwilling to pay the bribe, the complainant approached this Directorate for taking necessary legal action against the above-mentioned public servant.

"Accordingly, a trap was laid on 18/03/2024 by a team from the DVAC in Nagaon town. Nanda Hazarika was caught red handed near his residence at Nagaon, immediately after he accepted ₹ 3,500 as demanded bribe from the complainant," it added. The tainted bribe money has been recovered from his possession and has been seized accordingly, in presence of independent witnesses. "In this connection, a case has been registered in ACB police station and necessary legal follow up action is underway," it said.

Assam will register 3-5 lakh

non-Muslim migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan who came to India before December 31, 2014.

The NRC was updated on the basis of the Assam Accord, which sets midnight of March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date for granting citizenship to Bangladeshis who had entered the state. Sarma claimed that so far, no applications under the CAA have been made in the state, while in Gujarat, 12 families applied through the designated portal and were granted citizenship.

"Till the first phase of elections here on April 19, it will be almost 40 days since implementation of the CAA. But, not even 50,000 applications will be registered in Assam (till that time)," the chief minister asserted.

He maintained that the CAA will be a "game changer and a boom" for the BJP. Earlier, soon after the act was implemented, Sarma had said he will be the first to resign if even one person, who has not applied for NRC in the state, gets citizenship. (PTI)

NESFB launches enhanced fixed deposit schemes

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 18: North East Small Finance Bank (NESFB) has launched an upgraded suite of fixed deposit (FD) schemes, heralding a new era of savings growth in the region's financial arena. With a focus on bolstering financial security, particularly for senior citizens, NESFB has introduced competitive rates of up to 8.50% for the general public and an impressive 9.25% for seniors. These revised FD rates underscore NESFB's commitment to nurturing financial stability and prosperity, especially among the elderly demographic in the Northeast. Fixed Deposits are positioned as a dependable avenue for income generation during retirement, akin to a pension, providing a steady financial stream for senior citizens. NESFB's revamped FD offerings cater to a spectrum of customer needs, presenting varied tenures with attractive interest rates. Regular citizens stand to benefit from rates ranging between 7.75 per cent to 8.50 per cent contingent on the tenure, while senior citizens enjoy rates spanning from 8.50 per cent to 9.25 per cent across different schemes.

The bank's competitive rates, subject to specified terms and conditions, are designed to furnish customers with augmented financial prospects and security. In line with its commitment to inclusivity and accessibility, NESFB plans to leverage its expansive branch network to ensure widespread availability of its new offerings across urban and rural sectors of Assam. Moreover, the bank remains steadfast in its pursuit of introducing innovative financial products and services, propelled by digital capabilities, to enable customers in achieving their financial aspirations efficiently and contribute to the socio-economic advancement of Assam.

Grand re-launch of BPCL retail outlet

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 18: In a dazzling celebration of its 18th Anniversary, M/s Nes Jorabat, the flagship retail outlet of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL), unveiled its revamped look and extended facilities on Sunday. The event, attended by esteemed guests including Zubeen Garg, renowned Singer & Pride of Assam, and A L Hek, Minister of Govt. of Meghalaya, marked a significant milestone in the history of fuel retailing in the region. The re-launch showcased Nes Jorabat's commitment to excellence and customer satisfaction, as it revealed a dedicated section catering to Small Vehicles such as SUVs, Cars, and Sedans, with future plans for the installation of CNG facilities. The Meghalaya Minister, reflecting on the outlet's inception 18 years ago, lauded its contribution to local employment, particularly highlighting the empowerment of over 150 local attendants, notably Khasi girls.

India's new EV policy to help launch eco-friendly premium-quality SUVs

NEW DELHI, March 18: Vietnam's electric car maker VinFast Auto on Monday said India's new electric vehicle policy that provides import duty concessions for companies setting up manufacturing units in the country with a minimum investment of USD 500 million will allow it to introduce a wide variety of eco-friendly premium-quality SUVs at inclusive prices.

The Indian government's new electric vehicle (EV) scheme aims to drive large investments in manufacturing, create competencies and upskilling, set up a robust supply chain and offer consumers world-class, zero-tailpipe emission vehicles, VinFast India CEO Pham Sanh Chau said in a statement. "This forward-looking policy helps us introduce a wide variety of smart, green, premium-quality SUVs, at inclusive prices, along with outstanding aftersales policies," he added.

Chau further said, "With a long-term growth commitment in India, we have pledged an expenditure of USD 500 million, which includes the electric vehicle manufacturing facility in Tamil Nadu."

In February this year, VinFast --



a major competitor to American EV had stated that it would invest Rs 4,000 crore over the next five years in the initial phase, which will generate 3,500 jobs in the Turticorin region.

The plant will have a capacity to produce 1.50 lakh vehicles once it becomes operational.

Ola Electric Founder and CEO Bhavish Aggarwal in a post on X, also lauded the new EV policy, saying it is a win for the Make in India initiative.

"Great to see the Indian government's progressive decision to lower import duties on EVs for companies investing in India. This

is a win for the #MakeInIndia initiative & strengthens our manufacturing ecosystem, propelling India towards a greener future. India will become the global EV hub of manufacturing and technology!" he wrote.

Commenting on the policy, Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) President Vinod Aggarwal said a holistic view has been taken by the government of India in the best interests of the country.

"The Indian automobile industry and members of SIAM will adapt to this new policy and remain committed to bring new, innovative,

and aspirational products and work towards developing a robust EV ecosystem in the country," he added.

Last week, the government approved an EV policy, under which import duty concessions will be given to companies setting up manufacturing units in the country with a minimum investment of USD 500 million, a move aimed at attracting major global players like US-based Tesla.

The companies that would set up manufacturing facilities for EV passenger cars will be allowed to import a limited number of cars at lower customs/import duty of 15 per cent on vehicles costing USD 35,000 and above for five years from the date of issuance of the approval letter by the government.

At present, cars imported as completely built units attract customs duty ranging from 70-100 per cent, depending on the engine size and cost, insurance and freight value less or above USD 40,000.

The policy seeks to promote India as a manufacturing destination for EVs and attract investment from reputed global EV manufacturers. (PTI)

Rupee falls 4 paise to settle at 82.90 against dollar on firm crude oil prices

MUMBAI, March 18: The rupee declined by 4 paise to settle at 82.90 (provisional) against the US currency on Monday on firm crude oil prices. Gains in domestic stock markets and foreign fund inflows capped the rupee's losses, analysts said.

The local unit opened firm at 82.84 to a dollar at the interbank foreign exchange market and inched up to the day's high of 82.83 in early deals.

However, the rupee gave up early gains as the US dollar and bond yields remained at higher levels ahead of the Federal Reserve's meeting this week.

The rupee dropped to a low of 82.91 before settling at 82.90, down by 4 paise over the previous close. On Friday, the rupee had settled at 82.86.

The US dollar index, which measures the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was almost flat at 103.40.

Brent Crude, the global oil benchmark, gained nearly 1 per cent to trade above the USD 86-level in global markets.

Anuj Choudhary Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, said the rupee

depreciated on a strong US Dollar and surge in crude oil prices.

"The US Dollar strengthened on rising market expectations of a pushback in rate cut by the US Federal Reserve. We expect the rupee to trade with a slight negative bias on the strong Dollar and some selling pressure from foreign investors."

Worries over rising global crude oil prices may also weigh on the rupee, he added.

Meanwhile, domestic stock markets closed higher in a volatile market. Benchmark BSE Sensex climbed 104.99 points to settle at 72,748.42, while broader Nifty rose by 32.35 points to 22,055.70.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth ₹ 848.56 crore on Friday, according to exchange data.

FIIs bought shares worth ₹ 40,710 crore in the first fortnight of the month amid an improvement in the global economic landscape and robust domestic macroeconomic outlook. (PTI)

Toyota Tsusho, Secom to establish 2nd multi-super specialty hospital in India

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 18: In a strategic move aimed at bolstering healthcare infrastructure in India, Sakra World Hospital, a pioneer in the medical industry, has announced plans for a cutting-edge facility in Bengaluru. Celebrating its 10th anniversary, the renowned MNC hospital group revealed its visionary expansion project, supported by Japanese innovation and technology, through a collaboration between healthcare major Secom Medical System and trading conglomerate Toyota Tsusho. The momentous event, graced by esteemed dignitaries including Tatsuro Fuse, Executive Director of SECOM Co., Ltd. & Chairman of SECOM Medical System Co. Ltd. Japan, and Hiroshi Yonenaga, Division CEO Senior Executive Officer of Toyota Tsusho Corporation Japan, showcased Sakra's commitment to advancing healthcare services in India. The new facility, set to be constructed in Banaswadi, Bengaluru North, will boast a remarkable 500-bed capacity, representing a significant investment of ₹ 1,000 crore. Speaking at the event, Tatsuro Fuse expressed pride in the collaboration between Secom Medical System and Toyota Tsusho, emphasizing their dedication to delivering world-class healthcare solutions in Bengaluru. The expansion underscores Sakra's unwavering commitment to meeting the healthcare needs of both local and international communities.



Senior leaders gather to inaugurate office, express confidence in joint candidate

NDA alliance launches election steering committee office in Kokrajhar

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, March 18: State cabinet minister and senior BJP leader, Ranjeet Kumar Dass, formally opened the central election steering committee office of the NDA alliance - UPPL, BJP, and AGP parties at JD Road, Bodofa Nwgrw in Kokrajhar on Monday in the presence of UPPL president and chief executive member of Bodoland Territorial Region, Pramod Boro, state cabinet minister, Urkhao Gwra Brahma, NDA alliance candidate, Joyanta Basumatary, AGP leader Kama Mohan Roy, chairman of the central election steering committee & ex-MLA, Hemendra Nath Brahma, and several dignitaries from the NDA alliance partners.

The leaders of the NDA alliance partners were given a rousing welcome by the supporters of UPPL, BJP, and AGP in the election office. Addressing reporters following the inauguration of the election steering office, minister and BJP leader Ranjeet Kumar Dass expressed the nation's momentum towards re-electing Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a third consecutive term, aiming to forge a revitalised India and assert global leadership. Dass emphasised that the BJP, UPPL, and AGP were driven not by power but by a commitment to serving the populace. He highlighted the unified determination in Assam, under the NDA's banner, to secure victories for BJP and its allies in the upcoming elections.



Dass said that the joint candidate of UPPL, BJP, and AGP - Joyanta Basumatary was proficient to represent the alliance. He claimed that Basumatary will emerge victorious with a huge margin of 3-4 lakhs in the ensuing election. He also called upon all workers of the NDA to dedicate and work for the welfare of the people. Pramod Boro, the CEM of Bodoland Territorial Council and president of UPPL, said the government to triple en-

gines was on track and continues to remain with the support of the people of all communities as the UPPL, BJP, and AGP combined have established peace in the region and ensured all-round development with equal justice. He claimed that the UPPL-BJP-AGP-backed candidate Joyanta Basumatary will emerge victorious in the election battle at Kokrajhar HPC.

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Nes Jorabat marks 18th anniversary with grand relaunch event



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 18: M/s Nes Jorabat, a flagship retail outlet of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL), celebrated its 18th anniversary in grand style on Sunday. The event was graced by esteemed guests including Zubeen Garg, renowned singer & pride of Assam, and A L Hek, minister of Government of Meghalaya, among others.

The occasion marked the unveiling of Nes Jorabat's revamped look and extended facilities, including a dedicated section to serve small vehicles such as SUVs, and Sedans, with plans for future installation of CNG facilities.

Highlighting the significance of the milestone, the Meghalaya minister reminisced about the outlet's inception 18 years ago and applauded the employment opportunities it has provided to over 150 local attendants, especially Khasi girls.

Debashis Naik, head Retail East BPCL, emphasised the enhanced convenience for commuters along with recent additions like EV

charging facilities and the launch of the 'Double Dhamaka Scheme', offering instant gifts and lottery opportunities to customers.

B J Phukan, MD NRL, praised BPCL's efforts in maintaining Nes Jorabat's position as the highest-selling retail outlet, commending the world-class extension and improvements made.

Indranil Banerjee, territory manager Shillong, highlighted Nes Jorabat's status as BPCL's premier outlet, offering a unique experience to patrons.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony was conducted by Zubeen Garg, A L Hek, and Debashis Naik, in the presence of BPCL officials and local dignitaries, including the village headman and executive committee members.

Jain, a veteran with 40 years in the petroleum industry, expressed pride in elevating NRL and BPCL's reputation through Nes Jorabat's exemplary facilities, including automation, ample parking, and various amenities such as a coffee shop, car wash, and EV charging.

The event also saw the launch of

the 'Ustaad Loyalty' program, rewarding customers with points for their purchases.

The event was attended by BPCL's state head North East Pankaj Das, BPCL's Assam territory manager Mowsum Khaund, BPCL's state engineering officer Faiyaz Alam, BPCL's TC Shillong territory Jannjeet Das, BPCL's Shillong engineering officer Pankaj Doley, BPCL's sales officer Meghalaya and Tripura area Asmita Khan.

While from the dealer side, it was attended by the complete Jain family along with Ex GM of NRL Apoorva Bhattacharya with his wife who is renowned folk singer Mimi Bhattacharya, Assamese actress Neetali Das, and some famous Assamese social media influencers including the Assam lady biker Punam along with several guests, officers, dignitaries, friends, and family members of the Jain family.

Nes Jorabat's relaunch signifies a commitment to excellence and customer satisfaction, setting new standards in the retail fuel industry.

35 families return to Barithe Dharma

HT Correspondent

HOWRAGHAT, March 18: In a ceremony held in Diphu, 35 Christian Karbi families have returned to their traditional religion, Barithe Dharma. Organised by Karbi Kurpho Anei at Serlonging, this event marked a significant homecoming for the tribesmen. During the ceremony, which saw the participation of 150 men and women from these families, rituals were performed to convert them back to their original faith. Offerings were made to Karbi deities Hemphu, Mukrang, and Rasinja, symbolising their reconnection with their ancestral beliefs. Following the spiritual rites, they were honoured with Karbi turbans.

President Tansing Bey of Karbi Kurpho Anei highlighted that these families, hailing from Bokajan, Nilip, Rongkhang, Langsomepi, and other areas, have chosen to embrace their indigenous religion. Notable members of the Karbi community, including Pratap Terang and Joysing Terang of the Karbi Customary Law, were present at the program to witness this significant cultural reawakening.

Topon Kumar Gogoi foresees increased victory margin

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, March 18: During a meeting held in KPM Chariali, BJP candidate for Jorhat Lok Sabha constituency, Topon Kumar Gogoi, stated that he anticipates winning with a larger margin than in 2019, citing the disarray within the Opposition Congress. He emphasised the unprecedented erosion of the Congress support base in the constituency.

Also present at the meeting, minister of Water Resources Pijush Hazarika remarked that Rahul Gandhi had sent Gaurav Gogoi to Jorhat Lok Sabha with the expectation of losing the seat rather than winning it. Hazarika claimed that Akhili Gogoi's invitation to Jorhat instead of his first choice, Nagaon, was intended to humiliate Gaurav Gogoi, knowing well that he cannot win in the constituency. He further alleged that Gaurav Gogoi lacks familiarity with the places across the prestigious constituency and will be an unknown face to the electorate. Hazarika predicted that the margin of victory for Topon Kr Gogoi will exceed 2 lakhs this time.



RO directive to candidates filing nomination

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, March 18: Jorhat district commissioner Pulak Mahanta, who is also the returning officer (RO) of the 14th Jorhat HPC (Lok Sabha seat) as per the directive of the Election Commission of India, has issued a notification stating that a total of five persons, including the candidate, could enter the RO office at the time of filing nomination papers.

Aaranyak and Diring LP School host nature camp in Karbi Anglong

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 18: Aaranyak collaborated with Diring LP School of Karbi Anglong to conduct the second nature camp at Sarbura Singnar village, located in the Karbi Anglong district. The objective of the camp was to develop environmental consciousness and instill a sense of appreciation for nature among the youth, emphasising the need for conservation efforts and sustainable practices.

The event saw enthusiastic participation from 28 children hailing from Sarbura Singnar and Khaiitun Terang villages. Rangina Phangocho, project officer with Aaranyak, commenced the camp with an inspiring introductory speech. He underscored the significance of establishing a connection with nature, understanding biodiversity, and fostering a sense of environmental stewardship.

Joining Rangina Phangocho were notable figures such as Dilip Singnar, the headmaster of Diring LP School, Dr Jayanta Kr Roy, manager and senior wildlife biologist with Aaranyak, and Arif Hussain, manager with Aaranyak. The speakers emphasised the transformative impact of such camps on young minds, encouraging active engagement in conservation efforts and ecological preser-

Gaurav Gogoi receives rousing welcome

HT Correspondent

DEMOW, March 18: Gaurav Gogoi, the INC Party candidate for the Jorhat Lok Sabha seat, visited Demow constituency on Monday, where he was warmly welcomed by party workers and the people of Demow.

Previously, Gaurav Gogoi served as the MP of the Kalibor Lok Sabha seat. According to sources, on Monday morning, Gaurav Gogoi, the Jorhat Lok Sabha seat candidate, offered Puja at Thowra Dou near Demow. Subsequently, he was seen atop a car, accompanied by his party workers and Rajior Dal members on motorcycles, as they took out a rally chanting slogans of 'Gaurav Gogoi zindabad' and 'Congress zindabad'. Gaurav Gogoi, along with other Congress leaders, visited various places in the Demow constituency, interacting with the people on Monday. Among those present at the event were Ajay Kumar Gogoi, secretary of APCC, Manurajan Konwar, Congress leader, and Dhajya Konwar, Rajior Dal leader.



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Morigaon district commissioner announces polling logistics

HT Correspondent

MORIGAON, March 18: District election officer and district commissioner of Morigaon district, Devashish Sharma, held a press conference at the meeting room of the District Commissioner's Office on Monday. He told reporters that the second phase of polling will be held on April 26 in five Lok Sabha constituencies in the state, including Nagaon Lok Sabha constituency. The notification for this phase of polling will be issued in March. The deadline for submission of nominations is April 4, and nominations will be examined in April. The deadline for withdrawal of nominations for this phase is April. Counting of votes will be held on June 4, and the entire election process will be completed by June. The second phase of polling will be held in three assembly constituencies of Morigaon constituency under Nagaon constituency, namely the 52nd Jagiroad (SC), 53rd Laharighat, and 54th Morigaon assembly constituency respectively.

In Morigaon constituency, there are 3,64,040 male voters, 3,55,876 female voters, and 12 third gender voters. There are 911 polling stations in the Morigaon con-

stituency. Of these, 29 polling stations will be managed by women only, and six polling stations will be set up as model polling stations. The model centers are 146 Jagi MV Schools (East) and 147 Jagi MV Schools (West) in Jagiroad Assembly constituency, 62 Bhuragaon Colleges (East) and 63 Bhuragaon Colleges (North) in Laharighat constituency, and 123 Charaibahi Higher Secondary Schools in Morigaon constituency (right) and 124 Charaibahi Higher Secondary School (left). There are three polling stations run by youths only. They are 302 Aujari Primary School (South) in Jagiroad constituency, 84 Bhuragaon Hospital Road Primary School (West) in Laharighat constituency, and 133 Jaluguti Higher Secondary School (Central) in Morigaon constituency. The polling station will be operated by people with disabilities at 47 Morigaon Higher Secondary and Multipurpose School (West) in Morigaon constituency. 35 polling stations are considered vulnerable, and 29 polling stations are considered critical in the district. There are 10,549 voters aged 18 to 19 and 82,411 senior citizen voters in Morigaon constituency. There are 215 centenarian voters and 3,727 voters

over the age of 85 in the district. The district commissioner said wheelchairs, postal ballots, etc., will be provided to the sick and disabled. He added that postal ballots would also be arranged for voters involved in essential services, including the media, as required. He said the Model Code of Conduct came into force in Morigaon district as soon as the Election Commission of India announced the date of the polls. In fact, it is the conscience of the people that can ensure compliance with the Model Code of Conduct, he said, adding that he sought the cooperation of all to complete the peaceful, healthy, and fair elections. If any violation of the Model Code of Conduct is noticed, the complaint can be submitted on the c-Vigil app or by calling the toll-free number 1950 of the Control Room, he said. He said the administration, police, flying squad, expenditure monitoring committee, and various cells will be on alert to prevent such violations as soon as the election code of conduct comes into force. Additional district commissioner (election) Sulakshana Barpathragohain and election officer Jagriti Kalwar were present at the press conference.

Election awareness song in 7 languages launched in Morigaon

Bull 'Precious' unveiled as election mascot

HT Correspondent

MORIGAON, March 18: The District Sweep (System Voter Education and Voter Participation) Cell of Morigaon district administration and Election Department launched a top voter awareness song, election tagline, and election mascot at Pabitra Hat Hall, Morigaon on Monday. The election tagline 'Our Vote is Priceless Vote' and the title song were unveiled by senior journalist and citizen of Morigaon, Pratap Hazarika. The song was released in seven languages, including Assamese, Hindi, Karbi, Boro, Nepali, Tiwa, and Bengali. The song is titled - 'The pride of India, the courage of India, the temple of the people, this democracy', with the overall planning of the song by district election officer and district commissioner Devashish Sharma.

Considering the presence of various species of bulls in traditional bullfighting and Pabitra Sanctuary in Ahatguri and other places in Morigaon district, an omen named 'Amulya' has been taken as an election symbol for voter awareness. District commissioner Devashish Sharma stated that voting is not just a right but a festival. He emphasised that every citizen of the country should exercise their right to vote and participate in this festival. He sought the cooperation of the people in conducting the elections smoothly

this time, highlighting that abstaining from voting is not a liability but a real responsibility and duty as citizens of a democratic country to elect worthy representatives.

Senior journalist Pratap Hazarika, speaking at the function, expressed appreciation for presenting ideas and creating awareness through songs. He emphasised the significance of the election title song released today, stating that its melody will attract people. He mentioned the styles of various artists, from Paul Robson and Beethoven to Bhupen Hazarika, Jyoti, Vishnu, Papon, and Zubeen Garg, whose songs have been embraced by people. Hazarika highlighted the potential in the new generation and emphasised that elections are a national festival of India, urging every eligible citizen, irrespective of caste, religion, race, and gender, to participate in this national festival.

Superintendent of Police Hemant Kumar Das, unveiling the Shubhankar at the function, stated that every eligible citizen of society should consider voting as a responsibility. He appreciated the efforts of the District Election Department in creating awareness and urged everyone to vote. Additional district commissioners Pranjal Barua and Biman Das, heads of various departments, and members of the public were present at the meeting.

APDCL employee nabbed for alleged bribery

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, March 18: Nanda Hazarika, an employee of APDCL Nagaon division (II), was arrested on Monday from his residence in Christianpatty by a team from Vigilance and Anti-Corruption, Guwahati, while accepting a bribe from a complainant.

Sources claimed that the arrested employee allegedly demanded a bribe from an e-rickshaw driver for the connection of a commercial electric meter. Unwilling to pay the demanded bribe, the complainant approached the Office of the Directorate of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption, Guwahati.

Accordingly, a team from vigilance and anti-corruption laid a trap on Monday at his Christianpatty residence here and finally got the breakthrough, sources added.

Obituary

Minral Hazarika, a resident of Birubari, Guwahati, who retired from the Irrigation Department, Government of Assam, and was socially active and popular, passed away on Monday, at GMCH, Guwahati. He was 74. He is survived by his wife, one son, one daughter-in-law, one son-in-law, and a host of relatives. His last rites were performed at the Ulubari cremation ground on Monday, in the presence of his family members, relatives, and well-wishers. His demise is widely mourned.

Training on sports integrated pedagogy organised

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, March 18: A 4-day training on sports integrated pedagogy for teachers/CRCCs/BRPs (BRG) members was organised by the District Institute of Education and Training Sonitpur. About 35 participants from 7 educational blocks of Sonitpur and Biswanath district attended the training program. The training was inaugurated by the principal of DIET Sonitpur, Samirjyoti Bora. Senior lecturer Rima Borah also encouraged the participants with an enlightening speech.

The first session of the training started with an explanation of the importance of SIP by the coordina-

tor of the program, Achyut Deori. Different sessions on the integration of sports with different subjects like language, science, EVS, mathematics were conducted by different RPs engaged in the program, namely, Ranjan Saikia, Partha Pratim Dutta, Dilip Swargiya, Dimpri Khanikar, Sangeeta Devi, and Rashmi Rekha Rajkhowa.

All the sessions were conducted engaging the participants in different types of minor games, recreational games, yoga, aerobics, and also indigenous games that boosted the energy, confidence, and sportsmanship among all the participants.



tion. The day unfolded with a series of engaging activities designed to immerse the students in nature's wonders. An ice-breaking session helped build camaraderie among the participants, setting a positive tone for the day. Bhaskor Barukial, a dedicated project officer with Aaranyak and an enthusiastic naturalist and bird watcher, introduced the students to the fascinating world of bird watching, showcasing the rich avian diversity found in the region.

The highlight of the camp was the nature trails, where students were divided into five groups for an immersive experience in exploring nature. Guided by experts, the students learned about native plants, wildlife habitats, and conservation practices firsthand, deepening their understanding of environmental stewardship.

Post-lunch, the energy remained high as students engaged in group activities and poster presentations based on their nature trail experiences. Each group showcased their findings, insights, and reflections, demon-

strating a newfound appreciation for the natural world. Dr Jayanta Kumar Roy and Swapn Nath were present to inspire the students during their poster presentation.

Sourav Gupta, a researcher with Aaranyak, facilitated an interactive session through engaging discussions and multimedia presentations. Gupta enlightened the students about the rich biodiversity of the region, highlighting the importance of preserving these invaluable natural resources for future generations.

The camp wrapped up with an environmental game led by Swapn Nath, followed by an impassioned speech focusing on the preservation of nature and culture. Finally, certificates were distributed to all the participants.

Overall, the second nature camp organised by research-driven frontline conservation organisation Aaranyak and Diring LP School was a resounding success, leaving a lasting impact on the participants and inspiring them to become ambassadors of environmental conservation in their communities. The program achieved success with the assistance of the women collective group from Sarbura Singnar and the team from the Kaziranga Karbi Anglong Landscape - Natural Resource and Management Programme.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Peace and justice are two sides of the same coin. -Dwight D. Eisenhower

CAA execution concerns

The recent implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) just ahead of the national election has reignited political debates and stirred concerns across the nation. While the act ostensibly aims to streamline the citizenship process for non-Muslim migrants from neighbouring countries, its timing suggests a political undertone that cannot be ignored.

Critics argue that the CAA's provision for expedited citizenship based on religion contradicts India's secular principles and constitutional values. Additionally, the act's alignment with other government measures, such as the creation of a national register of citizens (NRC), raises apprehensions about its potential misuse to target specific religious communities, particularly Muslims.

The suspicion and apprehension surrounding the CAA underscore the need for a comprehensive and inclusive approach to citizenship and immigration policies. Any legislative measures must align with India's constitutional values of secularism and equality, ensuring that no community feels targeted or marginalized.

As the world grapples with complex issues, Pakistan offers a simple solution: export beggars!

In the intricate web of Pakistan's socio-economic landscape, lies a peculiar tale of two unlikely exports: terrorism and donkeys, with beggars now joining this curious cast of characters. As the nation grapples with poverty and organized crime, the export of beggars to West Asian countries has emerged as a peculiar phenomenon, prompting international scrutiny and diplomatic entanglements.

The saga begins in the heart of Pakistan, a developing nation plagued by poverty and economic instability. Here, the practice of begging has transformed into a lucrative profession, enticing individuals with promises of higher earnings than unskilled labourers. Yet, behind this facade of economic opportunity lies a darker reality - a breeding ground for beggar mafias, orchestrating a symphony of exploitation and coercion.

Driven by desperation, Pakistan's beggars seek greener pastures abroad, venturing to West Asian countries under the guise of religious pilgrimage. However, their true intentions are soon revealed as they take to the streets, engaging in begging activities that tarnish Pakistan's reputation on the global stage.

As Pakistani beggars flock to foreign shores, they bring with them a litany of woes, from overcrowded jails to diplomatic embarrassment. Iraqi and Saudi Arabian diplomats lament the influx of Pakistani beggars, highlighting the shameful spectacle unfolding in their midst. Meanwhile, back home, the World Bank's dire warnings echo through the corridors of power,

urging Pakistan to address its economic woes and rein in wasteful expenditures.

In the midst of this chaos, Pakistan's policymakers are confronted with a conundrum of epic proportions. How does one stem the tide of beggars while addressing the root causes of poverty and economic instability? The answers are elusive, obscured by political inertia and vested interests.

Blanket bans and punitive measures offer little solace, exacerbating the plight of the most vulnerable while failing to address the systemic issues at play.

Amidst the clamour for action, voices of reason emerge, advocating for a nuanced approach to the begging epidemic. Legalization and regulation offer a glimmer of hope, providing a framework for monitoring and oversight.

Yet, the road ahead is fraught with challenges, from bureaucratic red tape to the entrenched interests of beggar mafias. As Pakistan grapples with its beggar conundrum, the world watches with bated breath, pondering the implications of this curious export. Will Pakistan heed the calls for reform, or will it remain mired in a cycle of poverty and exploitation? Only time will tell, as the beggars of Pakistan continue their journey, navigating the treacherous waters of economic desperation and international scrutiny.

In the annals of Pakistan's history, the tale of its beggars stands as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, a reminder of the enduring struggle for dignity and opportunity. As the nation charts its course forward, may it find the courage to confront its demons and forge a path towards a brighter future - for beggars and citizens alike. (The author can be reached at 9706619975)



Biden may not have enough rope to push his vision of the Middle East

This year's US presidential elections are not the only potential hurdle confronting President Joe Biden's multi-pronged vision for a Middle East peace once the Gaza war ends. So is Israeli intransigence, the prospect of a long-term insurgency in post-war Gaza, and increasing Saudi Chinese technological cooperation.

The Biden administration is pushing for a multi-pronged comprehensive Middle East deal that would not only end the war in Gaza but also produce a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The deal would involve a reformed Palestine Authority governing Gaza and the West Bank, a credible pathway to an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, and Saudi recognition of the Jewish state.

The plan doesn't lack ambition but the odds of all the pieces coming together are almost insurmountable, certainly in the time left until the November US election, even if Saudi Arabia has bought into the concept, albeit with a high price tag. Assuming the price is right, Saudi Arabia is interested in cutting a deal while Biden is in office. The kingdom is not sure that a second Donald J. Trump presidency would meet Saudi demands, particularly its insistence on a legally binding defense agreement with the United States.

Despite his catering to the Saudis during his presidency, Trump turned the moment the kingdom needed US assistance into a business opportunity. In response to Yemeni Houthis attacks in 2019 on Saudi oil facilities that temporarily knocked out 50 per cent of the kingdom's oil production capacity, Trump described the incident as a Saudi, not an American problem, and offered to retaliate on behalf of the Saudis if they were willing to foot the bill. Saudi Arabia is not the only player putting a price tag on a Middle East deal.

The United States has indicated that Saudi Arabia would have to curtail its technological cooperation with China on return for a defence agreement. Nevertheless, signalling interest in a deal, Saudi media, much like Al Jazeera, the pioneer in airing Israeli voices in Arab media and covering the Jewish state with correspondents on the ground, have increasingly included Israelis in their reporting on the Gaza war, despite the kingdom's vocal condemnation of the Jewish state's war conduct.

Even so, the war has raised the price Saudi Arabia insists on extracting from Israel and the United States in return for diplomatic recognition. In contrast to vague Saudi references to a resolution of the Palestinian problem before the war, officials now insist on a "credible and irreversible" pathway to the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Public opinion in the kingdom and across the Muslim world enraged by the Gaza war is one reason for the hardening Saudi position.

However, an incident earlier this week suggests that changing Saudi attitudes towards Israel and Jews may not happen overnight. A delegation of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) curtailed a visit to the kingdom after the group's chairman, Rabbi Abraham Cooper, was asked to remove his skullcap during a tour of a heritage site, despite Saudi Arabia's projection of itself as a beacon of tolerant and "moderate" Islam.

The Saudi embassy in Washington said, "This unfortunate incident was the result of a misunderstanding of internal protocols." The embassy did not say what those protocols are. The United Arab Emirates recently highlighted the sensitivity of relations with Israel when its state-



owned Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) and multinational oil and gas giant BP suspended a US\$2 billion bid to buy a major stake in Israel's NewMed Energy company.

The UAE established relations with Israel in 2020 and has insisted it will maintain the relationship despite its criticism of Israel's war conduct. New Med, which owns a 45 per cent stake in Leviathan, Israel's biggest gas field, and 30 per cent of Aphrodite, located off Cyprus, said the suspension was due to "uncertainty created in the external environment." To be sure, Israel is no less in need of a sea change in attitudes towards Palestinians for a pathway to a Palestinian state to be credible and irreversible.

That too is not going to happen overnight and may not happen before Americans go to the polls. Discriminatory attitudes towards Palestinians have always been ingrained in Israeli society but have been on steroids since Hamas' October 7 attack.

In addition, opposition to a Palestinian state, particularly one that is not demilitarised, extends far beyond Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's Likud party and its ultra-nationalist and ultra-conservative coalition partners. While implicitly highlighting

the imperative of a political solution, this week's US intelligence's Annual Threat Assessment also implicitly suggested that Hamas will remain a player that will need to be taken into account in any peace process. In effect, the assessment suggested that Israel would not achieve two of its three war goals: the destruction of Hamas and ensuring that Gaza no longer serves as a launching pad for armed Palestinian resistance. Similarly, Israel's third goal, the freeing of Hamas-held hostages is likely to be a product of negotiations rather than military action.

Hamas holds hostage some 136 people and bodies of captives killed in the war. Negotiations on a ceasefire and prisoner exchange have stalled. "Israel probably will face lingering armed resistance from Hamas for years to come, and the military will struggle to neutralize Hamas' underground infrastructure, which allows insurgents to hide, regain strength, and surprise Israeli forces," the assessment predicted. If correct, continued Palestinian resistance is likely to stiffen Israeli opposition to the creation of a Palestinian state.

In recognition of the likelihood that Hamas will remain a player, the Palestine Authority has insisted that the group would have to be part of the mainstream Palestinian polity, even if it is not

represented in a post-war transition government. The Authority's insistence is one reason why Netanyahu opposes taking control of post-war Gaza. Instead, Netanyahu wants tribal and clan leaders to administer the Strip under Israeli tutelage.

In a first step, Israel was believed to be attempting to recruit Gazan clansmen to provide security for aid convoys entering Gaza. Bowing to US and international pressure, Israeli military spokesperson Rear-Admiral Daniel Hagari said this week that Israel, accused of using "starvation as a weapon for war," planned to "flood" the Strip with humanitarian supplies. The website of Hamas' Al-Majd intelligence and internal security forces indicated that the group was seeking to thwart Mr. Netanyahu's plan by targeting Palestinians suspected of cooperating with Israel.

Earlier this week, Al-Majd warned Palestinians who cooperated with Israel that they would be treated as collaborators and handled with an iron fist. Hamas has a history of executing suspected collaborators. Arab media reports said Hamas had killed in recent days the head of the powerful Doghush clan and two others in their family compound in Gaza City. Hamas accused the unidentified leader of stealing humanitarian aid and maintaining contact with Israel.

With links to organised crime and the arms trade, Doghush clansmen have clashed with Hamas in the past. Clan members have been associated with multiple Palestinian groups including Hamas, Palestine Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' Al Fatah, and various Islamist organisations. Dubbed the "Sopranos of Gaza City, the Doghush gained notoriety for their involvement in the 2005 abduction of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and the 2007 kidnapping of British journalist Alan Johnston. (IPA Service)

Techno-turbulence: role of AI, deepfakes in India's election dynamics

By: Girish Linganna

As India prepares for its upcoming general election, artificial intelligence has become a battleground for political parties. Experts caution that current regulations are falling behind rapidly advancing technologies like deepfakes. The move from conventional campaigning methods to utilizing AI for gaining votes was evident during the recent local elections in several key Indian states.

According to SCMP, an AI-generated video in Telangana supposedly showing the leader of the former ruling Bharat Rashtra Samiti party, KT Rama Rao, endorsing opposition party Congress sparked a major controversy after it was watched more than half a million times on Congress' official X account. Rao's party ended up losing the election, leading to Congress subsequently establishing a new state government.

Deepfakes have surfaced involving Bollywood icon Amitabh Bachchan, who hosts Kaun Banega Crorepati, the Hindi adaptation of the television game show Who Wants to Be a Millionaire. In a manipulated video, Bachchan is shown discussing a loan-waiver scheme for farmers in Madhya Pradesh with a contestant, leading to negative portrayal of then-Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan and praise for political opponent Kamal Nath. However, this interaction is entirely fake.

During the state elections, AI was utilized in various ways such as cloning the voice of Congress' chief ministerial candidate in Rajasthan, Ashok Gehlot, to send customized WhatsApp messages addressing voters by name. Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party employed AI to digitally 'bring back' former chief minister M. Karunanidhi, deceased in 2018, to speak at public gatherings.

In November last year, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed concern about the proliferation of AI following the appearance of a deepfake video showing him engaging in a traditional dance. He described the misuse of this technology as alarming and cautioned that it could result in a serious crisis, highlighting that a large portion of India's population may struggle to verify or authenticate manipulated media.

In December, the government released a directive to all social media platforms urging them to adhere to the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology's regulations regarding banned content, particularly those concerning material designed to deceive, mislead, or impersonate others.

A recent advisory from the ministry advised tech firms to seek permission before publicly launching generative AI models that are deemed "unreliable" or still in the testing phase, cautioning against actions that could jeopardize the integrity of the electoral process.

Right-wing groups recently criticized Google's Gemini chatbot for its response

to a question about Modi, noting accusations that his policies have been described as fascist by some experts. The chatbot also highlighted the government's crack-down on dissent and use of violence against religious minorities.

Regardless of the regulations in place, numerous experts argue that it is challenging to prevent the dissemination of AI-generated content, particularly deepfakes. Considering that more than half of India's population, which exceeds 1.4 billion people, now has internet access, as reported by the South China Morning Post (SCMP), experts believe it is increasingly challenging to control the spread of AI-generated content, including deepfakes.

One of the challenges arises from the absence of any legislation in India specifically governing deepfakes, a situation that may be insurmountable, as suggested by a technology attorney and policy analyst.

Anushka Jain, a technical lawyer and research associate at the technology research network Digital Futures Lab, informed SCMP that the identification of deepfakes is mandated by prominent firms such as Google and Facebook. Content creators may begin utilizing open-source generators that do not mandate labelling and are readily available in the market. This shift could make it impractical to regulate deepfakes in

The rapid development of rapidly advancing generative AI technology has caught many nations off-guard, prompting them to enact laws to address the risks posed by deepfakes in election contexts. Several states in the US have passed laws to address deepfakes, and a bill called the Protect Elections from Deceptive AI Act was presented to Congress in September to ban the use of misleading AI-generated content in elections.

The European Parliament endorsed the Artificial Intelligence Act on Wednesday, 13th of March, which was previously negotiated with member states in December. This legislation includes transparency measures, compliance mandates, and aims to mitigate risks by prohibiting the indiscriminate extraction of facial images from surveillance videos.

The UK's newly implemented Online Safety Act includes provisions to regulate aspects of AI, including criminalizing the sharing of non-consensual deepfakes.

Prateek Waghre, the executive director of the Internet Freedom Foundation, an Indian digital rights organization, informed SCMP that the group had issued an open letter urging political candidates and parties to avoid employing deepfake technology in the upcoming elections in India. He mentioned that political parties hold the most influence in deciding whether to use deepfakes during elections, leaving others trying to keep up. However, the feasibility of these parties being realistic in their decision-making is another important consideration.

Waghre stated that deepfakes are a progression of the disinformation, misinformation, and negative campaigning that

India has faced for many years. He described it as another type of negative campaign rhetoric.

The World Economic Forum's 2024 Global Risk Report, issued in January, highlighted misinformation and disinformation as a significant global risk over the next two years, especially for countries like India preparing for elections.

Waghre mentions that the main difficulty lies in identifying deepfakes and ensuring they are addressed correctly. He stated that without authorities taking action to outlaw deepfakes in some manner, enforcing any regulations would prove to be very challenging.

Fake videos targeting politicians and parties are widespread on Indian social media. A report from Italian tech company DeepTrace Technologies in 2019 ranked India as the sixth most vulnerable country to deepfakes.

Lately, there has been a significant rise in the popularity of AI-generated videos on Instagram featuring Prime Minister Modi singing popular songs in various regional languages. The deepfake content produced for political parties is predominantly outsourced to private consulting firms rather than being created internally.

Divyendra Singh Jadoun, who operates a "synthetic media" startup named The Indian Deepfaker, informed SCMP that creating a 60-second video used to require his team 15 days.

However, now, anyone can make a deepfake in under three minutes using just one image. He expressed concern that the creation of deepfakes is no longer restricted to individuals with coding expertise, as it is now easily accessible. This raises worry about the possibility of widespread use of deepfakes during the general elections.

Jadoun, speaking to This Week in Asia as cited by SCMP, mentioned that he was collaborating with various politicians in preparation for the upcoming elections. He noted that several of India's political parties were incorporating AI into their election strategies. His company was responsible for replicating Ashok Gehlot's voice to create personalized WhatsApp messages that the politician distributed before Rajasthan's assembly elections in November.

According to Jadoun, as generative AI advances, the tools for detecting deepfakes are falling behind. He mentioned that companies such as Intel rely on deepfake detection tools that can only identify outdated and low-quality deepfakes. However, the quality of deepfakes is constantly improving.

For instance, he mentioned an Instagram advertisement he encountered showing a fabricated interview with cricketer Virat Kohli. Despite reporting it, the platform stated that it did not breach its policies. He remarked that these platforms lack the capability to identify top-notch deepfakes, making it technically impossible to prevent their dissemination.

Hafiz Malik, an electrical and computer engineering professor at the University of Michigan-Dearborn in the US, concurred

that the swift evolution of deepfake technology would have a global impact on elections. He expressed specific worry about countries such as India, where WhatsApp is extensively utilized and held in high regard. While platforms like Facebook and Twitter have features such as deepfake detection and alert systems to comply with regulations, WhatsApp does not have similar safeguards, according to Malik.

Major technology companies have implemented restrictions on the utilization of deepfakes, like YouTube's updated regulations from last year. These guidelines now mandate creators to disclose if they have employed generative AI to produce authentic-seeming videos. Microsoft has committed to adding digital watermarks to content to indicate if AI was utilized in its development, aiding campaigns and election monitors in addressing cybersecurity risks.

Meta, the parent company of Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and other platforms, announced that political advertisements must disclose if AI was utilized in their production. However, this disclosure is not mandatory for other non-paid posts.

Regulation alone will not suffice, as emphasized by Malik, who highlighted the vital requirement for ongoing technological advancements and updates to effectively tackle the issue. He cited Imran Khan's utilization of deepfakes to campaign while in prison during the recent elections in Pakistan as a potential positive example of the technology's applications.

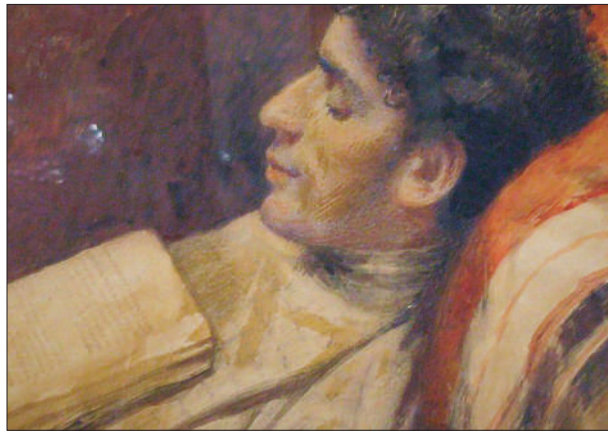
He mentioned that creating a tool solely to appease regulators will be ineffective if it is not regularly updated. He emphasized that the only effective approach to regulating deepfakes is through the continuous development of advanced technology. Ultimately, it is a matter of technology, which can be either utilized or exploited.

S.Y. Quraishi, a former chief election commissioner of India, informed This Week in Asia that the primary tool accessible to the nation's electoral authorities to prevent deepfakes was educating voters about the matter. He noted that spreading rumours during elections had been a persistent challenge.

He mentioned that he has seen how false information during elections can result in violence and the practice of booth capturing, where individuals associated with a candidate forcefully take control of a polling station to manipulate the outcome through coercion and intimidation.

The simplicity of disseminating fake news through deepfakes with just a click of a button significantly raises the danger of spreading misinformation. In November, the UK's cybersecurity agency cautioned about the increasing risk that AI presents to elections, and the US Federal Election Commission is exploring methods to oversee AI-generated deepfakes in political advertisements. Quraishi stated that deepfakes are a widespread issue without any existing global legislation to regulate them. (IPA Service)

How literature and art can help us rethink our problems with sleep



By: Paul Huebener

Troubles with sleep have become something of a public obsession. Up to half of the population in Canada reports trouble sleeping, and the global sleep industry is valued at US\$67 billion. Consumer products like sleep trackers and scented pillow sprays imply that sleep loss is a matter of personal responsibility, something for individuals to solve with quick tips and gadgets.

Media reports and self-help articles also tend to treat imperfect sleep as an individual problem, a failure that people need to fix by changing their habits and lifestyles. But if we think about sleep as a cultural issue, we can rethink our relationship with slumber and recognise how sleep exposes competing agendas. Works of literature and art, for example, can teach us to challenge dominant visions of sleep, allowing us to see sleep as a place where values are formed and cultural debates are shaped.

There are many ways that sleep functions culturally as a form of inequity and power. The inequitable nature of troubles with sleep is visible through the poor sleep of medical workers, the sleep loss tied to climate disasters and uneven rates of sleeping pill use. While some people enjoy their luxury bedding at night, others are being evicted from their homes, unsure where or how they'll get a night's rest.

Seeing sleep purely as a personal responsibility ignores how it is tied to social values and forms of oppression. No amount of weighted blankets, blue-light-blocking glasses or aromatherapy candles can solve inherently systemic problems.

Dear Scarlet

Literature and art have always played a key role in cultural debates. Creative works can teach us to see sleep in unexpected ways, revealing the meanings of sleep in diverse contexts. They can also help us develop a critical literacy of sleep by teaching us to question the dominant cultural visions of slumber that circulate around us.

Writer and cartoonist Teresa Wong's illustrated memoir *Dear Scarlet: The Story of My Postpartum Depression* shows how sleep loss for new parents can be tied to problematic cultural norms. As Wong battles overwhelming hopelessness after the birth of her first child, doctors and friends dismiss her concerns, telling her that she will get over the baby blues. Sleep deprivation makes the situation worse. Wong lies awake, filled with anxious self-doubt, and eventually thinks that her baby would be better off without her.

In one nighttime scene, the baby's crying leads Wong to think that she hates her baby. But she decides, "I didn't hate you. I hated myself." This spiral of dark thoughts shows how sleep deprivation can be linked to misery for new parents, especially in the absence of support.

The starkness of Wong's drawings reflects her blunted senses, as her inner world is drained of detail and colour. In the final panel of the sequence, Wong's body is composed of just thirteen or so lines of ink, a bare representation that reflects her desolation. The minimal artwork conveys a big message, showing how sleep loss is tied to cultural problems around gender, health care and social isolation.

Fiction and poetry

Works of fiction and poetry can also reflect the links between sleep loss and societal issues. David Chariandy's novel *Brother* follows the lives of Michael and Francis, the children of Trinidadian immigrants in Toronto. The brothers are trapped in a world of poverty and violence, and they often relive trauma in the moments when they are falling asleep.

Michael notes that Francis would "be on the edge of sleep when some terror would visit him. He'd wake screaming a deep body scream." Of himself, Michael says, "On the edge of sleep, the shootings return to me with an attack of panic and wild vertigo." The repeated image of the "edge" of sleep brings to mind a precipice or, perhaps, the blade of a knife that penetrates the mind.

Sleep is usually associated with peaceful rest, but by linking sleep with trauma, *Brother* changes what sleep means. The brothers' nighttime panic reflects how sleep loss can be tied to social inequality and poverty, issues that go far beyond matters of personal sleep habits.

Writer Dionne Brand's poetry considers the difficulty of sleeping when disasters are affecting others. In her book *Thirsty*, she writes:

*"if it is late at night and quiet...
you can hear someone's life falling apart
Most people can sleep through a siren. I can't...
Even at a great distance
you sense its mortal discoveries."*

Sleeping through an ambulance siren can be a necessary skill in the city, but for Brand, such a sleep shows callousness toward the suffering of others. And in her poem *Inventories*, these anxieties extend far beyond the street outside one's bedroom window. The speaker in this poem lies awake because people in distant places are being killed by bombs and guns: "a sleep, no, / sleep would be forgiving."

In these poems, the cruelty of sleep is that it requires us to become skilled at indifference. Sleep is not just an everyday act. It is also a form of meaning, a contradictory symbol of anxiety and rest.

If we want to be compassionate people during our waking hours, we need to enjoy restful slumber at night. Whether or not we sleep more soundly than the people in these books, works of literature can help us understand why sleeping well is about more than buying the right mattress or debating the merits of Daylight Saving Time.

The humanities can teach us how to see sleep as a place where values take shape. And literature and art can help us decide what sleep means, or ought to mean, within the systems of power and care that shape our lives.

We need to recognise sleep as a matter of culture so that we can think critically about the forms of power tied up with it. Every sleep tells a story, and by learning to read these stories carefully, we can help each other rest a little easier. (Courtesy: *The Wire*)

AI and data: A tale of necessity and constraint

By: Sauradeep Bag

Data plays a foundational and indispensable role in artificial intelligence (AI) systems. It serves as the lifeblood that fuels machine learning algorithms, enabling them to learn patterns, make predictions, and generate insights. High-quality, diverse, and large-scale datasets are crucial for training AI models effectively. Through exposure to vast amounts of data, AI systems can identify correlations, extract features, and refine their decision-making processes. However, the collection of this data is often contentious, particularly when it is used to improve public service delivery.

The societal impact of AI presents numerous challenges. Building trust requires establishing frameworks, guidelines, and mechanisms to address these concerns. It is clear that understanding and preventing data misuse is critical. Nations like China have integrated AI into governance, and others are following suit.

Given AI's rapid development, strict guidelines are imperative. Concerns include dystopian scenarios of AI merging with China's social credit system and the potential for private companies with extensive data access to do the same. Action is necessary, and a clear, united, global pathway focusing on data privacy and integrity is crucial.

Global trend

While much attention is rightly focused on the use of AI in authoritarian regimes, a recent report indicates a broad adoption of AI technologies worldwide. Countries with authoritarian regimes and limited political freedoms are investing significantly in AI surveillance technologies.

Governments in regions such as the Gulf, East Asia, and South Asia are acquiring advanced analytic systems, facial recognition cameras, and sophisticated monitoring capabilities. However, even liberal democracies in Europe are swiftly adopting automated border controls, predictive policing, safe cities, and facial recognition systems.

The Global Expansion of AI Surveillance Index indicates that 51 percent of advanced democracies employ AI surveillance systems. This contrasts with 37 percent usage in autocratic states, 41 percent in electoral autocratic states, and 41 percent in electoral democracies.

India is actively involved in such initiatives, reportedly utilising AI technologies for facial recognition and smart city projects, drawing from both American and Chinese sources. Notably, Ahmedabad has become the first Indian city to employ AI for extensive surveillance and monitoring conducted by municipal corporations and the police throughout the city. A pivotal starting point for further analysis is to recognise China's significant role in this field.

China leads in AI development, currently making significant strides and drawing considerable attention in the field. Chinese companies have made rapid advancements in AI research and commercialisation. This progress can be attributed to the growth of the entrepreneurial class, which has driven the development of large technology platforms in China over the past two decades, as well as the highly competitive business environment. International collaboration, including corporate investments, partnerships, and scholarly research, has also played a significant role.

Additionally, companies driving AI applications in China have benefited from targeted state support for investment and research. Despite sometimes setting overly ambitious targets, the Chinese government's approach has effectively mobilised resources towards specific industries. This environment has fostered a nimble commercial ecosystem, leading to increased innovation among Chinese AI firms.

China leads in AI development, currently making significant strides and drawing considerable attention in the field. Chinese companies have made rapid advancements in AI research and commercialisation. However, a potentially alarming issue arises from China's extensive surveillance infrastructure and large population, enabling Chinese firms to access substantial amounts of data from government agencies, obtained through surveillance cameras and smart-city systems. This, combined with China's social credit system, could lead to hazardous and authoritarian consequences.

Initially focused on financial creditworthiness like Western credit scores, the system expanded to include compliance and legal violations. Its ultimate goal is a unified, real-time monitored record for individuals, businesses, and the government. The significance of data in driving AI advancement and innovation is undeniable, yet it raises ethical questions. In countries like China, citizens may lack control over data usage. However, the concept of enhancing public services through more efficient AI models is divisive. It's essential to approach this issue through a lens of fairness, necessitating critical evaluation of such systems

irrespective of their country of origin. **New project, old concerns** Privacy concerns have been on the rise in China, particularly with the implementation of two major laws last year: the Personal Information Protection Law and the Data Security Law. These laws have established China as having one of the world's most stringent data governance frameworks.

Even before the widespread use of AI technology, Chinese public security organisations were proficient in tracking criminal suspects and regime dissidents. The use of facial recognition systems has further enhanced their surveillance capabilities. There is strong evidence to suggest that some of these systems are targeting individuals of Uyghur background in Xinjiang province.

In response, the United States has imposed sanctions on several Chinese companies involved in developing facial recognition technology and providing it to public security organs. Consequently, several prominent Chinese AI firms are now included on the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security's Entity List.

However, it's not only China that is exploring the convergence of AI and surveillance. For example, the United Kingdom (UK) recently conducted some experiments in this area. AI surveillance software was used on the London Underground to monitor passengers for criminal or unsafe behaviour, combining machine learning with live CCTV footage.

Transport for London (TfL) conducted a trial of 11 algorithms at Willesden Green Tube station from October 2022 to September 2023. This represented TfL's inaugural integration of AI with live video feeds to provide real-time alerts to staff. Throughout the trial, more than 44,000 alerts were generated, with 19,000 successfully delivered to station staff.

During the trial at Willesden Green, which had 25,000 daily visitors before the COVID-19 pandemic, the AI system aimed to detect safety incidents to aid those in need. It also targeted criminal and antisocial behaviour, using AI models to identify wheelchairs, prams, vaping, unauthorised access, and individuals endangering themselves near train platforms.

Keeping AI in check Countries like China and the UK, along with many others worldwide, are integrating AI into various sectors, including governance, military applications, and pharmaceuticals. This trend is a natural progression as emerging technologies expand at an unprecedented rate, and their adoption seems imminent. However, it is crucial for key stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, and international regulatory bodies, to establish best practices and guidelines. These efforts are necessary to protect data privacy and integrity, as there are concerns about the rise of what some term "digital authoritarianism".

The risks are evident, underscoring the need for oversight and regulation, a concern recognised globally. Significant strides have already been taken to tackle these challenges. The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) stands out as the most comprehensive privacy regulation globally. It covers data protection and privacy for individuals in the EU and the European Economic Area, granting substantial rights to data subjects.

The GDPR imposes stringent obligations on data controllers and processors, mandating the implementation of data protection principles and adherence to strict standards in personal data handling.

Continued access to data is crucial for developing AI. Machine learning systems require ongoing training and retraining to ensure accurate results. However, changes in governance or regulations can lead to data no longer being available, impacting AI performance and eroding trust in the system. Standardised practices and regulations are needed to address these challenges and ensure the reliability of AI systems in the face of data access issues.

Principled innovation AI uses machine learning algorithms to analyse data, make autonomous decisions, and



adapt to new information without human input. It's pervasive across sectors like healthcare, fashion, finance, and agriculture, posing privacy challenges. Privacy must be a top priority, as highlighted in the UK trial mentioned earlier.

Experts reviewing the documents have raised concerns about the accuracy of object detection algorithms and the lack of clarity regarding public awareness of the trial. They also warn against the possible expansion of surveillance systems to incorporate more sophisticated detection methods or facial recognition software.

Researchers from the Ada Lovelace Institute stress that while the trial did not include facial recognition, using AI in public spaces to analyse behaviours and infer protected characteristics raises similar scientific, ethical, legal, and societal questions as facial recognition technologies.

It's essential to consider mistakes and malfunctions in AI systems. For example, during the UK trial, AI errors included flagging children following their parents through ticket barriers as potential fare dodgers and misidentifying a folding bike as a non-folding one. Additionally, police officers participated in the trial by displaying a machete and a gun in view of CCTV cameras while the station was closed, aiming to improve the system's weapon detection capabilities.

The proliferation of data-driven technologies, particularly in AI, has elicited heightened apprehension among individuals regarding the methods employed for data collection and utilisation. In an era where data serves as a foundational asset, pivotal for fuelling AI models, concerns have arisen regarding the potential trade-offs between data utility and individual privacy.

While the accumulation of extensive datasets offers notable benefits for AI advancements, it concurrently raises pertinent questions regarding the erosion of personal privacy boundaries. Thus, there exists a pressing imperative for governments to navigate a delicate equilibrium, leveraging data to optimise public service delivery while upholding the sanctity of individual privacy rights.

Employing techniques such as anonymisation and data isolation emerges as essential strategies to mitigate privacy risks in the era of burgeoning AI integration. Addressing these challenges mandates a comprehensive and conscientious approach to ensure the ethical and considerate mainstream integration of AI technologies. (Courtesy: ORF)

AI uses machine learning algorithms to analyse data, make autonomous decisions, and

search for and experiment with newer types of substances, including those from psychoactive fauna. Such people, say the researchers, are called 'psychonauts'.

Snake venom chemistry So how does snake venom work? It usually intoxicates through nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs), say the authors. Neurotoxic snake venom, found in elapid snakes such as cobras and kraits, "is primarily composed of a highly strong presynaptic neurotoxin that prevents impulses from nerve terminals from being transferred to muscle receptors", according to the United States National Institutes of Health.

"After entering the body, snake venom releases active chemicals such as 5-hydroxytryptamine, bradykinin, slow-reacting substances, prostaglandins and lysophosphatides. One of the most pleasant effects for psychonauts is drowsiness, one of the earliest symptoms of an elapid snake bite, especially a cobra. It is also a commonly recorded symptom in Australian and Indian snakebite literature," note the scientists.

Psychonauts also experience "muscular paralysis and centrally mediated opiate independent analgesia". The analgesia means that the person loses the ability to feel pain while still conscious.

Half the global snake bite deaths happen in India. Why are we not prepared? Snakebite: Researchers purify commercial Indian antivenoms, find them more potent

However, the scientists warn that "the habit of getting high from snake venom is probably the most deadly among psychoactive fauna".

Such animals, say the researchers, are called 'psychoactive fauna': Some of the commonly used psychoactive fauna are hallucinogenic fish such as clownfish and Rabbitfish, amphibians such as toads, ants such as Red Harvester Ants, reptiles such as the Indian Wall Lizard, and liver and bone marrow of giraffe.

Why do people indulge in such activity? The authors say as one consumes psychoactive substances regularly, they can develop tolerance towards them and no longer 'get a kick'.

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However, the scientists warn that "the habit of getting high from snake venom is probably the most deadly among psychoactive fauna".

Such animals, say the researchers, are called 'psychoactive fauna': Some of the commonly used psychoactive fauna are hallucinogenic fish such as clownfish and Rabbitfish, amphibians such as toads, ants such as Red Harvester Ants, reptiles such as the Indian Wall Lizard, and liver and bone marrow of giraffe.

Why do people indulge in such activity? The authors say as one consumes psychoactive substances regularly, they can develop tolerance towards them and no longer 'get a kick'.

This desire to experience newer forms of intoxication forces such individuals to

Nearly 76 million voters cast their ballots for Putin, his highest vote tally ever

Putin gets 5th term in election that was never in doubt, after harshest crackdown since Soviet era

MOSCOW, March 18: Election commission results on Monday showed that President Vladimir Putin has secured a fifth term with an overwhelming number of votes, in an election that held little suspense after the harshest crackdown on the opposition and free speech since Soviet times.

After facing only token challenges and harshly suppressing opposition voices, Putin was set to extend his nearly quarter-century rule for six more years. Even with little margin for protest, Russians crowded outside polling stations at noon on Sunday, the last day of the election, apparently heeding an opposition call to express their displeasure with the president.

Putin has led Russia as president or prime minister since December 1999, a tenure marked by international military aggression and an increasing intolerance for dissent.

Early on Monday, Putin hailed overwhelming preliminary results as an indication of "trust" and "hope" in him — while critics saw them as another reflection of the preordained nature of the election.

"Of course, we have lots of tasks ahead. But I want to make it clear for everyone: When we were consolidated, no one has ever managed to frighten us, to suppress our will and our self-conscience. They failed in the past and they will fail in the future," Putin said at a meeting with his campaign staff after polls closed.

Any public criticism of Putin or his war in Ukraine has been stifled. Independent media have been crippled. His fiercest political foe, Alexei Navalny, died in an Arctic prison last month, and other critics are either in jail or in exile.

Beyond the fact that voters had virtually no choice, independent monitoring of the



election was extremely limited.

Russia's Central Election Commission said on Monday that with nearly 100% of all precincts counted, Putin got 87.29% of the vote. Central Election Commission chief Ella Pamfilova said that nearly 76 million voters cast their ballots for Putin, his highest vote tally ever.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and the presidents of Bolivia, Cuba, Honduras, Nicaragua and Venezuela quickly congratulated Putin on his victory, as did the leaders of ex-Soviet nations Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Meanwhile, the West dismissed the vote as a sham.

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter: "This is not what free and fair elections look like."

In the tightly controlled environment, Navalny's associates urged those unhappy with Putin or the war to go to the polls at noon on Sunday — and lines outside a number of polling stations both inside Russia and at its embassies around the world appeared to swell at that time.

Among those heading call was Yulia Navalnaya, Navalny's widow, who spent more than five hours in the line at the Rus-

sian Embassy in Berlin. She told reporters that she wrote her late husband's name on her ballot.

Asked whether she had a message for Putin, Navalnaya replied: "Please stop asking for messages from me or from somebody for Mr. Putin. There could be no negotiations and nothing with Mr. Putin, because he's a killer, he's a gangster."

But Putin brushed off the effectiveness of the apparent protest.

"There were calls to come vote at noon. And this was supposed to be a manifestation of opposition. Well, if there were calls to come vote, then ... I praise this," he said at a news conference after polls closed.

Putin referenced Navalny by name for the first time ever at the news conference, declaring that he was ready to release him in a swap for unidentified inmates in Western custody just days before the opposition leader's death.

He rejected Western criticism of the vote and tried to turn the tables at the West, charging that the four criminal cases against Republican candidate Donald Trump were a use of the judiciary for political aims and describing denigrating democracy in the U.S. as a "catastrophe." "The whole world is laughing at it," he said.

Some Russians waiting to vote in Moscow and St. Petersburg told The Associated Press that they were taking part in the protest, but it wasn't possible to confirm whether all of those in line were doing so.

A voter in Moscow, who identified himself only as Vadim, said he hoped for change, but added that "unfortunately, it's unlikely." Like others, he didn't give his full name because of security concerns. Meanwhile, supporters of Navalny streamed to

his grave in Moscow, some bringing ballots with his name written on them.

Meduza, Russia's biggest independent news outlet, published photos of ballots it received from their readers, with "killer" inscribed on one and "The Hague awaits you" on another. The latter refers to an arrest warrant for Putin on war crimes charges from the International Criminal Court.

Some people told the AP that they were happy to vote for Putin — unsurprising in a country where state TV airs a drumbeat of praise for the Russian leader and voicing any other opinion is risky.

Dmitry Sergienko, who cast his ballot in Moscow, said, "I am happy with everything and want everything to continue as it is now."

Voting took place over three days at polling stations across the vast country, in illegally annexed regions of Ukraine and online. Several people were arrested, including in Moscow and St. Petersburg, after they tried to start fires or set off explosives at polling stations while others were detained for throwing green antiseptic or ink into ballot boxes.

Stanislav Andreychuk, co-chair of the Golos independent election watchdog, said Russians were searched when entering polling stations, there were attempts to check filled-out ballots before they were cast, and one report said police demanded a ballot box be opened to remove a ballot.

That left little room for people to express themselves. Still, huge lines formed around noon outside diplomatic missions in London, Berlin, Paris and other cities with large Russian communities, many of whom left home after Putin's invasion of Ukraine. (AP)

Pakistan conducts airstrikes inside Afghanistan; 8 people killed

ISLAMABAD/KABUL, March 18: Pakistan on Monday carried out airstrikes inside Afghanistan that killed eight civilians, including three children, Afghan Taliban said, amidst a war of words between the two neighbours for a spate of recent militant attacks in restive Pakistani cities.

A senior Afghan interim government official on Monday confirmed that strikes in the Afghanistan provinces of Paktika and Khost along the Pakistan border have taken place. There was no immediate reaction from the Pakistani side. Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesperson of the Afghan rulers, alleged in a statement that Pakistani aircraft had carried out the airstrikes, the Dawn newspaper reported from Kabul.

At "around 3 am, Pakistani aircraft bombed civilian homes" in Khost and Paktika provinces near the border with Pakistan, said Afghan interim government spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid, claiming that all eight people killed were women and children.

Mujahid said that Pakistani planes had bombed the Laman area in Paktika's Barmal district.

Alleging that "houses of common people were targeted", he said three women and three children were killed in Paktika and a house collapsed while two women were killed in Khost, where a house was destroyed as well.

"The Islamic Emirate strongly condemns the attacks and describes these as non-serious actions and violation of Afghanistan territory," Mujahid said.

The spokesperson asked Pakistan to stop blaming Afghanistan for its problems and failure to control violent incidents. "Such acts can lead to dire consequences which will not be in control of Pakistan," he warned.



The strikes come a day after President Asif Ali Zardari vowed retaliation following the killing of seven soldiers, including two officers, in a terrorist attack on a security forces' post in North Waziristan.

Offering the funeral prayers of the two officers, Zardari on Sunday said that the blood of the martyrs would not go in vain and the country would avenge the deaths. The president said Pakistan would not hesitate to strike back if attacked by anyone at borders or inside its territory.

The Hafiz Gul Bahadar group had claimed responsibility for the deadly attack. Security officials say that fighters of the Gul Bahadar group operate from the Afghan side of the border, mostly from Khost. The Paktika province is located near Pakistan's South Waziristan District while Khost is situated near North Waziristan. Pakistan's Special Representative to Afghanistan Ambassador Asif Durrani on Saturday said that an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 militants from the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have taken shelter in neighbouring Afghanistan.

"If we include their families, then the number goes up to 70,000," Durrani said. Reacting to Durrani's charges, Afghanistan has dismissed his statement, saying that Afghan soil is not allowed to be used against other countries, including Pakistan. (PTI)

Israel launches another raid on Gaza's main hospital, charging that Hamas has regrouped there

RAFAH, March 18: Israeli forces launched another raid on the Gaza Strip's largest hospital early on Monday, saying Hamas militants had regrouped there and had fired on them from inside the compound, where Palestinian officials say tens of thousands of people were sheltering.

The army last raided Shifa Hospital in November after claiming that Hamas maintained an elaborate command centre within and beneath the facility. The military revealed a tunnel leading to a bunker, as well as weapons it said were found inside the hospital, but the evidence fell short of the earlier claims, and critics accused the army of recklessly endangering the lives of civilians.

People sheltering in the hospital said Israeli forces backed by tanks and artillery had surrounded the medical complex early Monday and that snipers were shooting at people inside. They said the army raided a number of buildings and detained dozens of people.

"We're trapped inside," said Abdel-Hady Sayed, who has been sheltering in the medical facility for over three months. "They fire at anything moving ... doctors and ambulances can't move."

Gaza's Health Ministry said the Israeli army was directing gun and missile fire at a building used for

specialised surgeries. It said a fire broke out at the hospital's gate.

The ministry said around 30,000 people are sheltering at the hospital, including patients, medical staff and people who have fled their homes seeking safety.

Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, the chief Israeli military spokesperson, said the army launched a "high-precision operation" in parts of the medical complex. He said senior Hamas militants had regrouped there and were directing attacks from the compound.

The army released a grainy aerial video of what it said were militants firing on its forces from inside the hospital, as well as video of a rocket-propelled grenade striking an armoured vehicle. It said its forces had detained around 80 people in the raid.

Hagari said the patients and medical staff could remain in the medical complex and that a safe passage was available for civilians who want to leave.

Israel accuses Hamas of using hospitals and other civilian facilities to shield its fighters, and the Israeli military has raided several hospitals since the start of the war, which was triggered by Hamas' October 7 attack into southern Israel.

Most of Gaza's medical facilities

have been forced to shut down for lack of fuel and medical supplies, even as scores of people are killed and wounded each day in Israeli strikes. Israel's offensive has driven most of Gaza's 2.3 million people from their homes and the UN says a quarter of the population is starving.

The Gaza Health Ministry said at least 31,645 Palestinians have been killed in the war. The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count, but says women and children make up two-thirds of the dead.

Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people in the surprise attack out of Gaza that triggered the war and took another 250 people hostage. Hamas is still believed to be holding about 100 captives, as well as the remains of 30 others, after most of the rest were freed during a cease-fire last year in exchange for the release of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

The United States, Qatar and Egypt have spent weeks trying to broker another cease-fire and hostage release, but the gulf between the two sides remains wide, with Hamas demanding guarantees for an end to the war and Israel vowing to continue the offensive until it dismantles the militant group. (AP)

Blinken tells democracy summit that technology must sustain democratic values

SEOUL, March 18: U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken underscored the need to make sure that technologies sustain democratic values, telling a democracy summit on Monday that authoritarian regimes deploy them to undermine democracy and human rights.

Blinken spoke at the ministerial conference of the third Summit for Democracy, a U.S.-led initiative held in Seoul, South Korea, this year.

"Revitalizing democracy will also require us to shape the technological future, that's inclusive, that's rights respecting, directed at driving progress in people's lives," Blinken said.

"As authoritarian and repressive regimes deploy technologies to undermine democracy and human rights, we need to ensure that technology sustains and supports democratic values and norms," he said.

U.S. President Joe Biden first proposed the idea of a democracy summit during his 2020 campaign and has called for the U.S. and like-minded allies to show the world that democracies serve societies better than autocracies.

Also Monday, Blinken met South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul and President Yoon Suk Yeol for talks on North Korea and the U.S.-South Korea alliance, according to the South Korean government. (AP)

SKorean defence chief says NK has supplied 7,000 containers of munitions to Russia

SEOUL, March 18: North Korea has shipped around 7,000 containers filled with munitions and other military equipment to Russia since last year to help support its war in Ukraine, South Korea's defense minister said on Monday.

Shin Won-sik shared the assessment at a news conference hours after the South Korean and Japanese militaries said the North fired multiple short-range ballistic missiles into its eastern waters, adding to a streak of weapons displays amid growing tensions with rivals.

Since the start of 2022, North Korea has used Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a distraction to ramp up its weapons tests and has also aligned with Moscow over the conflict, as leader Kim Jong Un tries to break out of diplomatic isolation and join a united front against the United States.

U.S. and South Korean officials have accused North Korea of supplying Russia with artillery shells, missiles and other equipment in recent months to help fuel its war on Ukraine, saying that such arms transfers accelerated after a rare summit between Kim and Russian President Vladimir Putin in September.

North Korea in exchange possibly received badly needed food and economic aid and military assistance aimed at upgrading Kim's forces, according to South Korean officials and private experts. Both Moscow and Pyongyang have denied the existence of an arms deal between the countries.

During a news conference in Seoul, Shin said the South Korean military believes the North, after initially relying on ships, has been

increasingly using its rail networks to send arms supplies to Russia through their land border.

In exchange for sending possibly several million artillery shells and other supplies, North Korea has received more than 9,000 Russian containers likely filled with aid, Shin said. He raised suspicions that Russia could be providing North Korea with fuel, possibly in defiance of U.N. Security Council sanctions that tightly cap the country's imports of oil and petroleum products.

While fuel shortages likely forced North Korea to scale back winter training activities for its soldiers in recent years, South Korea's military assesses that the North expanded such drills this January and February, Shin said.

North Korea's latest missile launches came days after the

end of the latest South Korean-U.S. combined military drills that the North portrays as an invasion rehearsal.

Shin said the North may dial up its testing activity before the April 10 parliamentary elections in South Korea, which is shaping up as a confidence vote for conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol, who has taken a harder line than his liberal predecessor over North Korean nuclear ambitions and threats.

Animosity between the war-divided Koreans has recently worsened, with both countries taking steps to breach a 2018 bilateral military agreement on reducing border tensions. Kim vowed in January to abandon the North's long-standing goal of reconciliation and to rewrite its constitution to declare the South its most hostile adversary. (AP)



Chinese Foreign Minister meets NZ counterpart to start diplomatic tour

WELLINGTON, March 18: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with his New Zealand counterpart Monday, as China's most senior diplomat began a tour of the country and Australia.

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Winston Peters greeted Wang in Wellington, New Zealand's capital.

"There have been some significant developments since we last met, not least a global pandemic that impacted both our countries," Peters said in his opening comments of their formal meeting at New Zealand's parliament house.

"Today is a valuable opportunity to reflect on the challenges and opportunities that are now before us."

Wang is the highest-ranking Chinese politician to visit the country since his own previous visit in 2017. New Zealand has had strong economic ties with China in recent years, and was the first developed country to sign a bilateral free trade deal with Beijing in 2008.

While in Wellington, Wang will also have brief meetings with Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and Trade Minister Todd McClay.

"China looks forward to working with the two countries to deliver on the common understandings between the leaders, enhance strategic communication, deepen mutual trust, advance exchanges and cooperation, promote the steady and sustained growth of the China-New Zealand and China-Australia comprehensive strategic partnerships and contribute to world peace, stability and prosperity," foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said.

Wang will arrive in Canberra, Australia on Wednesday to meet with counterpart Penny Wong, with dialogue between the pair expected to center on the case of detained Australian Yang Hengjun. (AP)

Maryam visits Kot Lakhpat Jail, reflects on her and father's difficult time in prison

LAHORE, March 18: Nawaz Sharif is a "king-maker" today while his oppressors are "nowhere", an emotional Maryam Nawaz, the first woman chief minister of Pakistan's Punjab province, has said, as she visited the Kot Lakhpat Jail here and recalled hardships she and her father endured in prison.

Maryam, 50, on Sunday visited the Kot Lakhpat Jail, where she and Nawaz Sharif served prison terms in corruption cases, and broke Ramzan fast with the women prisoners. She sat with the women prisoners and presented samosas, pakoras, fruits and biryani to them.

She also got to see the prison cell where her father three-time former prime minister Nawaz Sharif languished in a Panama Papers corruption case before leaving the country for London in 2019 on medical grounds.

"Emotional moment to see the cell of MNS (Mian Nawaz Sharif), where a three-time prime minister was kept. I was in the same jail but I was never allowed to visit him. Got to see it today. He is a kingmaker today while his oppressors are nowhere," she said on X.

After spending four years in self-exile Sharif,

74, returned in October last year reportedly after striking a deal with a powerful military establishment. He was set to become premier for a record the fourth time in last month's general elections but his party failed to get enough seats in the National Assembly to form a government on its own. Independent candidates backed by jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party won the maximum number of seats.

However, his younger brother Shehbaz Sharif, who is considered a favourite of the military establishment, managed to form a coalition federal government with the help of five other parties, including the Pakistan Peoples Party led by ex-foreign minister Bilawal Zardari-Blutto.

Recalling her time in this jail, she said: "I was imprisoned in the death cell and faced a difficult time. My father was also imprisoned in the same jail but I was denied permission for meeting him. I used to meet my father once a week only."

She said once she received a handwritten letter from her father which stated that he after being arrested was being taken to the National Accountability Bureau jail.

"Someone in the jail told me that your father is

feeling unwell and is being taken to hospital. It was a time of great difficulty. I couldn't talk with my cancer patient mother. I used to talk with my children for 20 minutes only. I was greatly worried about my 15-year-old daughter at that time as she also underwent a difficult time," Maryam, considered the political heir of Nawaz Sharif, wrote.

During the visit, she announced three months of remission in the punishment of prisoners and released 155 prisoners across the province.

She said a video call facility will be provided in all the jails of Punjab very soon. She said that few persons would go to jail due to their faults and others owing to their circumstances.

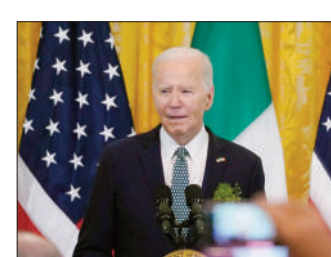
"Even the innocent have to face punishments due to shortcomings in the justice system. We will definitely bring improvements in the jail system along with the provision of possible ease for the prisoners. We are aware of the difficulties of prisoners and we would bring improvements in their food and other essential needs," she said.

She directed the jail authorities to adopt a respectable and dignified practice for arranging a meeting of the prisoners with their family members. (PTI)

Biden to sign executive order aimed at advancing study of women's health

WASHINGTON, March 18: President Joe Biden is expected to sign an executive order on Monday aimed at advancing the study of women's health in part by strengthening data collection and providing easier and better funding opportunities for biomedical research.

Women make up half the population, but their health is underfunded and understudied. It wasn't until the 1990s that the federal government mandated women be included in federally funded medical research; for most of medical history, though, scientific study was based almost entirely on men.



Today, research often fails to properly track differences between women and men, and does not represent women equally particularly for illnesses more common to them. Biden's executive order is aiming to change that, aides said.

"We still know too little about how to effectively prevent, diagnose and treat a wide array of health conditions in women," said Dr. Carolyn Mazure, the head of the White House initiative on women's health.

Biden said he's long been a believer in the "power of research" to help save lives and get high-quality health care to the people who need it. But the executive order also checks off a political box, too, during an election year when women will be crucial to his reelection efforts.

First lady Jill Biden is leading both the effort to organize and mobilize female voters and the White House Initiative on Women's Health Research.

And the announcement comes as the ripple effects spread from the Supreme Court's decision that overturned federal abortion rights, touching on medical issues for women who never intended to end their pregnancies. In Alabama, for example, the future of IVF was thrown into question statewide after a judge's ruling.

Women were a critical part of the coalition that elected Biden in 2020, giving him 55% of their vote, according to AP VoteCast. (AP)

BJP, allies will sweep Northeast in LS polls: Sonowal

GUWAHATI, March 18: Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal on Monday said the BJP-led NDA will sweep the Lok Sabha elections in the Northeast and win more than 23 seats out of 25 in the region.

He said people of the region will again repose faith on the ruling alliance due to the development activities undertaken in the region over the last 10 years.

"The mood is in favour of BJP and its allies because under the leadership of Narendra Modi ji, there has been tremendous development in the last 10 years," Sonowal told reporters at the state party headquarters here, his first visit since being named the BJP's candidate from Dibrugarh Lok Sabha constituency.

Claiming that the NDA will win more than 12 seats in Assam and over 23 in the Northeast, he added, "Northeast people firmly believe that the region will prosper further if Modi ji comes to power for the third term."

Refusing to comment on his political rivals, the BJP leader said, "We consider all opponents with dignity, whoever that it may be."

In the outgoing Lok Sabha, BJP and its allies have 19 MPs from the region, Congress has four, AIUDF one and an independent. (PTI)

Arunachal to go to simultaneous Lok Sabha, state assembly polls during 1st phase on April 19

75 companies of central paramilitary forces deployed for Arunachal polls

ITANAGAR, March 18: The Election Commission has deployed 75 companies of central paramilitary forces to conduct free and fair simultaneous Lok Sabha and assembly polls in Arunachal Pradesh, a senior election official said on Monday.

In addition, the available police force in the state would also be pressed into service for election duties, Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Pawan Kumar Sain told reporters here.

He said the CPMF companies (a company comprises around 100 personnel) have been deployed in all the districts of the state, and they have started the area dominance exercise in various critical and vulnerable polling stations.

The northeastern state will go to simultaneous polls in the first phase on April 19.

"Out of the total 2,226 polling stations in the state, 480 polling booths are under shadow areas, while 588 booths have been identified as critical and 443 as vulnerable," the CEO said.

Shadow zones or areas have



poor or no mobile and internet connectivity.

Sain said webcasting and enabling communication on real-time environment (ENCORE) would be available in 750 polling stations, while offline webcasting facility would feature in 342 polling stations.

He said the state election machinery has so far seized ₹ 3,88,34,496 in cash from various districts and recovered 378 un-

licensed arms.

"Out of 33,996 licensed arms in the state, people have deposited 2,400 arms in various police stations as of date," the CEO said.

"We will ensure free and fair polling without any violence, and will not tolerate any violation of the model code of conduct (MCC). We have already suspended an additional deputy commissioner and a senior government official for favouring

candidates," Sain said.

He said the election authorities have also decided to make use of helicopters for transportation of poll personnel and materials to several remote circles if weather conditions are favourable in April.

"There are altogether 228 polling stations in the state that could be reached only by foot march," the CEO said.

There are a total of 8,86,848 voters in the state, including 4,49,050 females.

He said out of the total 2,226 polling booths, 156 would be managed entirely by women.

The notification for the simultaneous polls in Arunachal Pradesh would be issued on March 20, while the last date for filing nomination papers is March 27. The last date for withdrawal of nominations is March 30.

The counting of votes for the assembly polls would take place on June 2, and for the Lok Sabha polls, on June 4.

The state has two Lok Sabha seats and a 60-member assembly. (PTI)

CSIR-NEIST celebrates 64th Foundation Day



HT Correspondent

JORHAT, March 18: CSIR-North East Institute of Science and Technology, Jorhat, the premier institute of CSIR in the Northeast celebrated its 64th Foundation Day on Monday in a befitting manner.

A special function was held at the Dr J N Baruah Auditorium where Bhupendra Nath Goswami, SERB distinguished fellow of the Cotton University and former director of the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), Pune delivered the foundation day lecture as chief guest while D Ramaiah, former director of CSIR-NEIST attended was the guest of honour for the occasion.

In the foundation day lecture on "Climate

Change and Crisis of Sustainable Development" Goswami held the audience spellbound with his critical analysis on the various aspects of climate change and its implications on sustainable development. He explained how the major drivers of climate change are human population growth and industrial developments backed by global average temperature change.

He discussed the findings of scientists such as Michael E Mann, S Arrhenius, Syukuro Manabe and June G Charney on global mean temperature, which provided a comprehensive understanding on the major climate change drivers such as earth heat balance, ocean temperature, atmospheric

CO2 level and other anthropogenic greenhouse gases. He informed that the warnings of climate change range from as early as the 20th century and India is the third largest emitter of CO2 in the world. He said that the country is still in a position to control the growth of CO2 emission and emphasised the need to sensitise on green innovations and mobilise public awareness on our development model so that every development policy is moderated and sustainable.

Addressing the audience, Ramaiah encouraged the young generation to focus on future impact of our activities while initiating or conceptualising any project. He mentioned that the institute has contributed immensely not only on technology development for industry but also for societal uplift. He encouraged the present employees to continue its efforts to produce high quality scientific work with high social relevance.

Virendra M Tiwari, director of CSIR-NEIST welcomed the gathering and expressed gratitude to the founding fathers of the institute and the past and present employees for their contribution in building the institute to its present state.

As a part of the celebration, certificates of appreciation were awarded to the employees and project staff for their exemplary performance during the year 2023-24 under different categories. Further, 'CSIR-NEIST Annual Report 2022-23' was released by the chief guest during the event. Another highlight of the programme was the inauguration of 'CSIR-NEIST Leave Management System (LMS)' and 'Online Guesthouse Booking System' by the guest of honour.

Preparation for Lok Sabha polls in Aizawl district in full swing

AIZWAL, March 18: Preparations for election to Mizoram's lone Lok Sabha seat are in full swing, an official said on Monday.

Aizawl district commissioner Nazuk Kumar, who also serves as the returning officer, told reporters that training for various official teams assigned to manage the upcoming polls in 12 assembly constituencies within Aizawl district has been largely completed.

The initial phase of training for polling parties is scheduled for March 26 and March 27, she said.

Randomisation of electronic voting machines (EVMs) and voter verifiable paper audit trails (VVPATs) have been finalised and they are currently secured in strong rooms designated for each assembly constituency, she added.

A total of 514 ballot units, 523 control units, and 541 VVPATs have been allocated for Aizawl district for the

forthcoming Lok Sabha polls, Kumar said.

Voting is scheduled for April 19, with counting is on June 4. The deadline for filing nominations is March 27, while candidates have until March 30 to withdraw their candidatures. According to Kumar, a total of 290,058 electorate, including 153,000 women voters, are expected to exercise their franchise in the upcoming polls. Among them, there are 10,131 first-time voters, 1,439 senior citizens (aged 85 years and above), and 778 Persons with Disabilities (PwD) voters.

Aizawl district boasts 321 polling stations, with 48 (four in each assembly constituency) set to be manned by women and one by differently abled individuals.

Home voting facilities will be provided for senior citizens (85 years and above) and PwD voters possessing disability certificates. (PTI)

Longest tunnel is 6,610 metres long, 12 km long approach road to connect portal 1 of tunnel-7 in Tsiempama village

Construction of longest tunnel under the Dimapur – Kohima rail project begins

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 18: The construction activities began in portal 1 of tunnel number – 7 of the Dimapur - Kohima new rail line project, located in Tsiempama village of Medziphema circle of Dimapur district in Nagaland.

This tunnel will be the longest tunnel in the Dimapur - Kohima new rail line project. The length of this tunnel is of 6,610 meters. A 12 km long approach road was constructed through the hills to reach the portal 1 of the tunnel number – 7 in Tsiempama village. The tunnel is located between Pherima and Piphema stations of this project.

The 82.50 Km long (2.75 Km in Assam and 79.75 Km in Nagaland) Dimapur - Kohima new railway line project, which takes off from the Dhanisiri station of Assam to



Zubza adjacent to Kohima is being constructed at an anticipated cost of Rs. 6,663 crores. The project has eight new stations namely Dhanisiri, Dhanisripur, Shokhuvi,

Molvom, Pherima, Piphema, Mengzuma and Zubza. The project includes 27 major bridges, 148 minor bridges, five road over bridges, 15 road under bridges and

NESO files petition against CAA

SHILLONG, March 18: The Northeast Students' Organization (NESO) on Monday filed a petition before the Supreme Court of India for staying the implementation of the Rules of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019.

"We have filed a petition in the Supreme Court, challenging the Rules of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 with a submission to the Supreme Court to issue a stay on its implementation," NESO chairman Samuel Jyrwa said in a statement from Delhi.

Earlier, the NESO had filed a petition in the Supreme Court on December 19, 2019, against the CAA, 2019.

"Even though, CAA 2019 has exempted the ILP covered states which includes Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur and also the Sixth Scheduled covered areas which include 98 per cent of Meghalaya, 70 per cent of Tripura and eight districts of Assam, but the 27 districts of Assam are not exempted, which poses a serious threat to the entire Northeastern states, which will be adversely affected in the near future," he said.

"So to protect the microscopic indigenous communities of Northeast, which are already affected by unabated influx of illegal migrants from Bangladesh, it is necessary that CAA, 2019 should not be made applicable as it will only worsen the already precarious situation of the Northeastern region," Jyrwa said. (NNN)

Nagaland police fights drugs menace with enhanced measures

DIMAPUR, March 18: The Nagaland police personnel are fighting the drugs menace in the state with enhanced measures.

Talking to media persons in Chumoukedima near Dimapur, director general of police (DGP), Nagaland, Rupin Sharma said, "In continuation of the state government's war against drugs, the Nagaland Police continues its statewide efforts in all the districts of the state to combat the menace of widespread availability and usage of synthetic drugs and psychotropic substances".

Intensive checking of vehicles (MVCP), raids and checking of hotels, restaurants, etc. have also been launched to prevent any such illegal activity, the DGP said.

The DGP then stated that combating the drug menace is not only the responsibility of the police, but also requires the cooperation of all citizens. He appealed to the general public to provide information on sale or distribution of any form of narcotics, drugs or Indian made foreign liquor to the nearest police station or Narcotic Police Station, Nagaland through the 'MADEIN' mobile application. The identity of the informant shall



be kept confidential.

The DGP also warned the sellers of SIM cards to be aware that many traffickers were using fake identity cards to procure SIM cards.

The DGP also disclosed the arrest, seizure and recoveries made and cases registered during the past three months.

Nagaland police IGP (CID) Vikram Khalate and CP Dimapur K. Sophie also gave a brief report on the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 and registered drugs related cases and individuals arrested in Dimapur. (NNN)

Organisations protest against bomb attack on house of FOCS president

IMPAL, March 18: Various civil society organizations working together with the Federation of Civil Society Organisations (FOCS) on Monday protested against the bomb attack at the house of the president of the FOCS on Sunday night.

Miscreants lobbed a hand grenade at the house of FOCS president Thoidingjam Manihar at Kongba Uchekon under the Iriblung Police Station of Imphal East district on Sunday night at around 9 pm.

The grenade, however, did not explode. Personnel of the police bomb detection and disposal squad called by the Iriblung police station safely defused the bomb and later disposed of at the foothill of Awaching in Imphal East the same night.

Denouncing the bomb attack, residents of Kongba Uchekon on Monday staged a sit-in-protest at the locality.

While denouncing the attack, the protesters demanded clarification if a group is responsible for the attack.

Meanwhile, FOCS and other organisations strongly condemned the lobbing of the hand grenade at the house of FOCS's president Th Manihar.

The attack was an act of cow-

ardly people, the leaders of the organisations told the reporters at a press conference held at the office of the Manipur Women Federation (MWF) at Kakwa in Imphal East district on Monday.

Vice president of FOCS, BM Yaima Shah said that it is not a thing to be done by intelligent people or groups in this time of crisis. He said that Manihar has been playing a significant role played during the time of crisis since the ethnic strife broke out in the state on May 3 last year.

Manihar has been leading FOCS and the organisations collaborating with it since the very beginning of the crisis and he is dedicated to the welfare of the people, he said.

He said that the FOCS and the organisations took the bomb attack at Manihar's house as a symbolic attack on all them.

The vice president said that instead of threatening them with bomb, it would be better to hold talks and bring about an understanding on any issue which might have prompted the bomb attack.

He further urged the perpetrator(s) to come forward and clarify the motive behind the bomb attack.

Leaders of as many as 12 organisations were also present on the occasion. (NNN)

Women's body expresses concern over govt order to submit licensed guns

IMPAL, March 18: Imagi Meira, a women-based pressure group, on Monday expressed strong concern over the government orders asking the people to submit licensed guns in connection with the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

Members of the group, in a press meet held at Manipur Press Club Imphal, said that the move will make the villagers residing in the peripheral areas of the valley defenseless as the ethnic crisis coupled with violence is yet to end in the state. They asserted that the villagers are defending their villages with licensed arms.

After the Election Commission of India (ECI) announced the poll dates for the 18th Lok Sabha elections, the deputy commissioners of all the districts in Manipur issued orders directing the public to submit licensed arms. Coordinator of the group (Imagi Meira), L Shachirani while decriing the orders said that miscreants armed with sophisticated weapons are continuing their attacks on the settlements in the fringe of the valley districts. (NNN)

KDA calls for half-day strike in Kargil as agitation likely to intensify in Ladakh



LEH, March 18: The Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) has called for a half-day general strike on March 20 in solidarity with renowned education reformist Sonam Wangchuk whose hunger strike in support of statehood and constitutional safeguards for the Union Territory of Ladakh entered 13th day on Monday.

The agitation in Ladakh in support of the demands is likely to intensify further in the coming days with the KDA and Leh-based Apex body planning to chalk out a joint strategy after their meeting with the Union Home Ministry early this month hit a deadlock.

Wangchuk, a key campaigner for constitutional safeguards for Ladakh, on Monday said that 250 people slept hungry in minus 12 degrees Celsius to "remind the Indian government of their promises to safeguard Ladakh's environment and tribal indigenous culture."

"This Government likes to call India the 'Mother of Democracy'. But if India denies democratic rights to people of Ladakh & continues to keep it under bureaucrats controlled from New Delhi then it could only be called a Stepmother of Democracy as far as Ladakh is concerned," Wangchuk wrote on

X. Wangchuk has been on "climate fast" here since March 6, a day after talks between the representatives of KDA-Apex body and the Central government failed.

In Kargil, the KDA announced a half-day general strike on March 20 and a protest rally in support of Wangchuk and the ongoing agitation.

"The decision to observe the half-day strike was taken at a meeting. We will also brief the people about the talks with the government," KDA co-chairman Qamar Ali Akhoo told reporters.

Asgar Ali Karbalai, who is also the co-chairman of the KDA, said the ongoing agitation in Ladakh is not restricted to one community or one district as it is being projected by some vested interests who want to pitch the people of Ladakh against each other.

"We have called a strike and protest rally to put all types of rumours to rest. Everyone in Ladakh is part of the agitation and united in support of the demands," he said.

Karbalai said the leadership of both KDA and Apex body are shortly meeting in Leh or Kargil to chalkout the future strategy after the Centre's rejection of the main demands -- statehood and constitutional safeguards under the sixth schedule. (PTI)

Cong raises questions over PM CARES Fund, over 'lack of transparency'

'Media reports suggest that it received donations to the tune of ₹12,700 crore at least, with large donations from a few corporations'

NEW DELHI, March 19: The Congress on Monday raised questions about the PM CARES Fund, saying that four years after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is still not clear why it was set up, who its donors are and why its administrative structure is so "lacking in transparency."

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh alleged that given the history of the Modi government, as shown by the "electoral bond scam", one can only speculate that the lack of transparency was deliberately engineered to give the prime minister an unsupervised pool of funds to spend as he wishes.

In a post on X, Ramesh said, "Now that the corruption, extortion and intimidation of the Modi Sarkar through the electoral bond scam is getting revealed in all its shocking detail, let us not forget another route the Government opened for companies to curry favour: the self-glorifyingly named PM CARES."

"The total amount of funds PM-CARES received and the names of the donors have never been officially reported. Media reports suggest that it received donations to the tune of ₹ 12,700 crore at least, with large donations from a few corporations," he claimed.



Some prominent donors who publicly pledged to donate to the fund include the Reliance Group (₹ 500 crore), Adani Group (₹ 100 crore), PayTM (₹ 500 crore), JSW Group (₹ 100 crore) and others, the Congress leader said.

"PM CARES is exempt from CAG and RTI oversight -- allegedly, because it did not receive budgetary support from the government. However, it is well known that at least 38 PSUs, owned and operated by the government, have donated vast sums to the tune of ₹ 2,105 crore to the PM CARES fund. An additional 150 crores came from PSU employee contributions," Ramesh

said. Moreover, the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund (PM CARES Fund) received several special exemptions from the government such as donations received 100 per cent tax deduction under Section 80G of the Income Tax Act relating to charities.

"Foreign donations were allowed under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act. Donations were made eligible to be treated as Corporate Social Responsibility expenditure under the Companies Act. This privilege is not extended even to the Chief Minister's Relief Fund in States,"

he said. "Suspiciously, quite a few China-based or Chinese-owned firms have donated to the PM-CARES Fund. TikTok claimed to have donated ₹ 30 crore, Xiaomi donated ₹ 10 crore, Huawei up to ₹ 7 crore and OnePlus reportedly donated ₹ 1 crore," he claimed.

At a time when China is encroaching on Indian territory in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, donations were sought and accepted from these firms, he said. "Four years after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is still not clear why the PM CARES fund was set up, how much it received and from whom, how the funds were disbursed, and why its administrative structure is so lacking in transparency," Ramesh said.

"Given the history of the Modi Sarkar, as shown by the electoral bond scam, one can only speculate that the lack of transparency was deliberately engineered to give the Prime Minister an unsupervised pool of funds to spend as he wishes. For corporations, it was a new, tax-exempt, CSR-saving way of currying favour with the Prime Minister -- possibly to seek government contracts and licenses in the future, or to avoid the intimidation of ED-IT raids," Ramesh alleged. (PTI)

Eshwarappa skips PM's rally



SHIVAMOGGA (KARNATAKA), March 18: Senior BJP leader K S Eshwarappa, who has raised a banner of revolt over denial of ticket to his son to contest the coming Lok Sabha elections from Haveri, on Monday skipped Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rally here, in an embarrassment to the party.

The 75-year-old former deputy chief minister, who has turned down the invitation to attend the event, was seen visiting maths of various communities.

Eshwarappa has announced he will contest as an independent candidate from Shimoga (Shivamogga) in the coming Lok Sabha polls, blaming veteran BJP leader B S Yediyurappa and his son B Y Vijayendra, who is state BJP President, for his son K E Kantesh being denied ticket.

Kejriwal skips ED summons in DJB case; AAP terms notice 'illegal'

NEW DELHI, March 18: Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal on Monday skipped the Enforcement Directorate summons in a money laundering case linked to alleged irregularities in the Delhi Jal Board, with the Aam Aadmi Party terming the notice "illegal".

The AAP accused the BJP government at the Centre of "using" the Enforcement Directorate (ED) to target Kejriwal and stop him from campaigning in the Lok Sabha polls. "The summons is illegal. The BJP wants to fight the Lok Sabha elections using ED," it alleged.

Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva hit back, saying Kejriwal, who is also AAP national convener, has lost his "honour" by repeatedly skipping the ED summons and alleged that there was a scam in the Delhi Jal Board (DJB).

The Delhi chief minister was summoned by the ED to appear before it on Monday in a money laundering probe linked to alleged irregularities in the Delhi Jal Board. He is also facing inquiries in the Delhi excise policy-linked money laundering case and has previously



disregarded eight summonses in that matter, terming those "illegitimate". The federal probe agency has issued a ninth summons to Kejriwal to appear for questioning on March 21 in the excise policy-linked money laundering case.

The AAP's Delhi unit convener Gopal Rai, when asked about the summonses to Kejriwal, said, "It is beyond understanding when will the ED stop serving the political agenda of BJP. The ED served notices and the chief minister replied to them saying they were illegal. The ED went to court against him. When the

"careless" leader. "Even today Kejriwal ran away from probe. Different courts... have rejected the bail applications of AAP leaders like Manish Sisodia and Satyendra Jain. Kejriwal is indifferent to the fact that the bail of his party leaders was rejected and he is running away from the probe," she told PTI-Video.

The ED has filed two complaints before a magisterial court in Delhi, seeking Kejriwal's prosecution for skipping multiple summonses issued to him in the money laundering case linked to the alleged Delhi excise policy scam. Last Saturday, the court granted him bail in the two complaints. Delhi Cabinet minister and AAP leader Atishi alleged that the ED was being "used as a political tool".

"Why is the ED continuously sending summonses to Arvind Kejriwal when the court is hearing a case related to the legality of the summonses? The court is considering this matter. Why is the ED not respecting the law and waiting for the court's order?" she told PTI-Video. (PTI)

matter is in court, what is the urgency of sending another notice," he asked. If the BJP wants to arrest Kejriwal, they do not need summons, Rai said, adding, "They can arrest him anytime."

"If you believe in the Constitution and law, wait for the court's decision. We are also waiting. The court will hear the matter on April 1," the AAP leader said.

Delhi BJP leader and the party's candidate for the New Delhi Lok Sabha seat Bansuri Swaraj said that Kejriwal, by skipping ED summonses, was proving he was a

Karnataka reeling under acute water crisis, Modi govt refusing to help people: Congress

NEW DELHI, March 18: The Congress on Monday said Karnataka is reeling under an acute water crisis due to a severe drought situation in most parts and accused the Modi government of refusing to help the people of the state. Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh's attack on the government came on a day Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to address a public meeting in Shivamogga.

"The prime minister is in Shivamogga, Karnataka today. We hope he addresses some of the key issues in the state in his address," he said.

Ramesh said Karnataka is reeling under an acute water crisis due to a severe drought situation in most parts of the state, with 223 of the state's 236 Talukas facing drought conditions.

"The state government has requested the Modi Sarkar to release funds of ₹ 18,172 crore for drought relief. Why has the Modi Sarkar refused to help Karnataka's people so far?" he said in a post on X.

To help alleviate the drought-related stress on the rural economy, the Karnataka government has sought to increase the number of working days under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) from 100 to 150, the Congress leader said.

"There is a provision in the scheme to do so during periods of drought. However, the Modi Sarkar has not only failed to approve the extension of the scheme, it has also failed to release ₹ 1600 crore towards the payment of wages to those working under MGNREGS," Ramesh said.

When is the Modi government going to pay Karnataka's MGNREGS workers their wages, he asked. "Since taking office in 2023, the Karnataka government's efforts to provide an additional 5 kgs of rice to poor families through its Anna Bhagya Scheme have been disrupted by the Modi government," he said.

Bilkis Bano case: One more convict moves SC seeking review of Jan 8 verdict cancelling remission

NEW DELHI, March 18: One more convict in the Bilkis Bano case has moved the Supreme Court seeking a review of its January 8 verdict cancelling remission of his sentence, contending that it cannot be challenged based on the nature of the crime and "society's cry for justice".

The review plea filed by Ramesh Rupabhai Chandana said the top court erred while passing the impugned order and overruling judgment dated May 13, 2022, passed by another bench of the apex court. The Gujarat government and two of the 11 convicts have already filed a petition seeking a review of the January 8 verdict in which remission orders of all of them were cancelled and they asked to surrender.

Listing reasons for seeking a review of the verdict, the plea said the top court erred in its finding "on the ground that the remission order passed by the competent authority cannot be challenged on factual grounds, inter alia, the nature of the crime, impact on society and society's cry for justice after the conviction and sentence has attained finality in the eyes of law."

It said that overruling of the judgment dated May 13, 2022, passed by a coordinate of this court, which allowed the Gujarat government to grant remission as per the 1992 policy, the impugned order of January 8 was in contravention of the doctrine of Comity of Courts.

The doctrine of Comity of Courts refers to courts respecting the laws and decisions of other courts.

The plea said that in the instant case, only the trial was transferred (to Maharashtra) under "extraordinary circumstances" by way of judicial intervention and it is a fact apparent on the face of record that in the transfer petition concerned, the issue of remission was not the matter in issue.

"Hence, it is not just and fair to presume that vide the said transfer order, appropriate government as per section 432(7) CrPC also stood changed to being that of the transferee state," it said.

The plea further said the remission policies of Gujarat and Maharashtra respectively, when compared -- both at the time of transfer and subsequent conviction respectively -- can be said to be beneficial and prejudicial respectively.

"That is to say, since Gujarat policy laying down 14 years as criteria for becoming eligible for grant of remission is beneficial for the petitioner and on the other hand, 28 years for the same as per Maharashtra policy is prejudicial for him," it said.

Earlier, Radheshyam Bhagwandas Shah and Rajubhai Babulal Soni, both lodged in Godhra sub-jail after the January 8 apex court verdict, filed the review plea. (PTI)

Kavitha conspired with AAP leaders Kejriwal, Sisodia to get favours in Delhi excise policy: ED

NEW DELHI, March 18: BRS leader K Kavitha and some others "conspired" with top AAP leaders, including Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia, to get favours in the now-scrapped Delhi excise policy by paying Rs 100 crore to the political party that rules Delhi, the Enforcement Directorate alleged on Monday.

Forty-six-year-old Kavitha, the MLC daughter of former Telangana chief minister K Chandrababai Naidu, was arrested by the federal agency last week from her Hyderabad home and she is in the ED custody till March 23.

Probe found, the ED claimed in a statement, that Kavitha along with others "conspired with the top leaders of AAP including Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia for getting favours in the Delhi excise policy-formulation and implementation."

"In exchange of these favours, she was involved in paying Rs 100 crore to the leaders of AAP," the agency said.

By the acts of "corruption and conspiracy" in the formulation and implementation of Delhi excise policy 2021-22, a continuous stream of illegal funds in the form of kickback from the wholesalers was generated for the AAP, it said.

It alleged "Kavitha and her associates were to recover the proceeds of crime paid in advance to AAP and to further generate profits/proceeds of crime from this entire conspiracy."

The agency, while seeking the remand of Kavitha last week, told the special Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) court that she was "one of the kingpins, a key conspirator and beneficiary

of the Delhi excise policy scam". Kavitha asserted earlier that she had done nothing wrong and alleged that the Centre was "using" the ED as the BJP could not gain a "backdoor entry" into Telangana. The Aam Aadmi Party has accused the BJP was using ED and CBI as its "goons" to finish off political opponents.

The agency said it has conducted searches at 245 locations across the country since the registration of a case in 2022 and has arrested 15 persons, including former Delhi deputy CM and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Manish Sisodia, AAP leader Sanjay Singh and some liquor businessmen.

It has filed a total of six charge sheets in this case till now and had attached assets worth over ₹ 128 crore. (PTI)

for visiting the admitted family members, among others.

Direct household cost per patient was 16.29 USD, almost 4 per cent of a person's average monthly income in the island nation.

Indirect costs for the families affected by dengue resulted in absenteeism from work, thereby leading to loss of family income. People with informal employment and daily wage jobs are more likely to be affected by this, the experts said.

A considerable proportion of families in the South Asian region have only one member working. An average of 22 days of absenteeism from work has been reported due to dengue in the countries here, according to a 2019 study published in the journal International Journal of Infectious Diseases.

"When we add both direct and indirect costs to the household, it accounts for 77.29 per cent, which is almost three-fourths of the monthly household income in Sri Lanka," Weerasinghe said.

In Thailand, another South Asian country with high dengue prevalence, the economic impact of the disease is 600 million Baht (over ₹ 138 crore) per year for just treatment, noted Darin Areechokchai, from the Bureau of Vector-Borne Diseases, Department of Disease Control, Ministry of Public Health. (PTI)

How rising dengue burden is costing India and Sri Lanka billions

NEW DELHI/COLOMBO, March 18: The increasing incidence of dengue in India and Sri Lanka is not just a significant health concern but also exacts a hefty economic toll on these South Asian countries, say experts who estimate the annual losses to be in billions.

Researchers highlight the dire economic consequences of this affliction caused by a virus spread through the bite of an infected Aedes mosquito species, reinforcing the benefits that the region would realise if the neglected tropical disease was substantially controlled.

As the sweltering heat swept across Colombo in June, Seetha, a 60-year-old daily wage worker found herself in the grips of dengue hemorrhagic fever, a severe and sometimes fatal form of the disease.

"I had a fever, body aches, and a relentless headache for four days before being admitted to the hospital. I was catheterised and not even allowed to go to the toilet," she told PTI.

Seetha's work involved providing care to a 5-year-old child until the mother returned from work. The onset of dengue, however, disrupted her livelihood.

"I was bedridden for seven days in the hospital, unable to move, and the impact on

my work was severe. It took me almost a month to recover," she recalls.

As the sole breadwinner following her husband's death, Seetha faced a financial quandary during her illness.

"My children were not working and there was no money. My brother and another relative had to step in and provide us with financial support for survival," the woman explained.

Seetha's narrative underscores the broader economic challenges faced by South Asian countries that grapple with the relentless onslaught of dengue every year.

In 2023, India officially recorded nearly 95,000 cases and 91 deaths by September 17. In 2022, the figure was 2.33 lakh with 303 deaths.

Sri Lanka had reported more than 80,000 dengue cases by the first week of December last year and 47 deaths, according to the National Dengue Control Unit (NDCU).

Dr Nayani P Weerasinghe, a consultant microbiologist and senior lecturer at the University of Ruhuna in Galle, Sri Lanka, noted the economic burden of dengue in the two countries is substantial, with significant strains on healthcare systems and families, especially those reliant on daily wages.

"Both agricultural and industrial sectors



suffer due to the disabling nature of dengue and absenteeism from work, particularly in labour-intensive industries, adversely affecting productivity," Weerasinghe told PTI.

Echoing Weerasinghe, epidemiologist and economist Ramanan Laxminarayan noted that although dengue rarely kills, it causes significant health burdens and costs.

"When hospitalisation is required, it drives many families into poverty. I recently had a coworker in India suffering from dengue. Fortunately, he survived but the hospital bills were over ₹ 14 lakh," Laxminarayan, founder and director of One Health Trust, told PTI.

Most people with dengue have mild or no symptoms and get better in up to two weeks.

Symptoms include high fever, severe headache, muscle and joint pains, swollen glands, and rash.

However, severe symptoms such as shooting abdominal pain, bleeding gums or nose, and blood in vomit or stool, often come after the fever has gone, and can be fatal. What makes matters worse is that there are no effective drugs to treat the disease.

The economic impact of dengue is multifaceted.

A cost analysis study in southern Sri Lanka estimated direct medical costs per hospitalised dengue patient at USD 233.76 (around ₹ 20,000) in 2017-18. For complications requiring intensive care arise, the cost soars to USD 733.46 (over ₹ 61,000).

The burden extends beyond direct medical expenses to indirect costs, with households bearing 77.29 per cent of the monthly income on average, the expert said.

Weerasinghe also highlighted variations across South Asian countries, citing a systemic analysis in India which indicates a cost of USD 5.71 billion from 2013 to 2016, substantially higher than in Sri Lanka.

The direct costs were for seeking medical care for the illness -- channeling fees, costs of laboratory investigations, medications, travel expenses for seeking medical care and

7 killed in Kolkata building collapse, Mamata assures stern action against illegal construction

KOLKATA, March 18: At least seven people, including two women, were killed and several others injured after an under-construction five-storey building collapsed in the Garden Reach area of Kolkata, police said on Monday.

The toll could go up since at least four people were spotted trapped under the debris, 16 hours after the collapse, and only one of them showed signs of life, a fire services official, engaged in rescue operations, said.

Kolkata Mayor Firhad Hakim said the rescue operations were carried out on war footing at the site where the building was being constructed illegally.

While Md Wasim, the promoter of the building, was arrested, the mayor said stringent action would be taken as per law.

West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee visited the building collapse site at Azan Molla Lane in the city's western periphery and assured locals of stern action against illegal construction.

In a horrific accident, the under-construction five-storey building collapsed around midnight, Hakim said.

"We are using gas cutters and other equipment to clear the debris and reach those who are stuck underneath. It's taking a long time since we are proceeding cautiously towards the victims," the fire services official told PTI, adding that the personnel from NDRF, the state and Kolkata Police disaster management teams were also working



in tandem.

Owing to the massive pile-up of debris, rescue workers are finding it tough to reach those who have been trapped, he said.

"We have compiled a list of victims of the building collapse. Seven people died and two of them were women. Of the 15 injured people, 11 are undergoing treatment at hospitals and four were discharged after preliminary treatment," a senior officer said.

"Sad to learn about the house collapse disaster of an under-construction building in the Garden Reach area of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation. Our Mayor, Fire Minister, Secretaries and Commissioner of Police, civic, police, fire and disaster management officers and teams (including NDRF, KMC and KP teams) have been on site throughout the night for mitigating the disaster," the chief minister

wrote on X.

She said the government will provide compensation to the next of kin of each deceased and the injured persons. "We stand by the distressed families and rescue operations shall continue," Banerjee said on the microblogging site.

Hakim, also West Bengal's urban development minister, said, "I spoke to the chief minister and we will provide ₹ 5 lakh to the next of kin of each deceased and ₹ one lakh to each injured person."

TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee said the building collapse incident is "extremely sad" and asserted that it should not be politicised.

"The opposition leaders, who are raising various questions in this regard, for them, I would say that politics can wait. We can do politics later, but at the moment we should focus on rescuing the peo-

ple who are stuck. We hope that such incidents are not repeated. All institutions should work in tandem," he said.

The chief minister hoped that those trapped under the debris would be rescued soon.

"This is an illegal construction. I express my condolences to the family. I will urge the administration to take strict action against those involved in the illegal construction," she said after visiting the injured in a hospital.

This is Banerjee's first public appearance after she fell at her home and suffered injuries on Thursday evening. She also underwent stitches.

Banerjee with her bandaged forehead visited the building collapse site this morning.

She said the authorities should have been more vigilant when the illegal construction was going on.

Admitting that illegal constructions in the area were rampant, Hakim said, "It has been a trend here and also in some other areas since the Left Front era."

He also admitted that there could have been a "lapse on the part of the officials" for failing to monitor whether constructions in the locality were being made in accordance with law.

Hakim said, "It is not the job of the local councillor but of the civic body officials to inspect whether constructions are taking place according to sanctioned plans from Kolkata Municipal Corporation or not."

The chief minister, meanwhile, expressed her distress over the incident and urged the administration to take necessary action against those involved in the illegal construction.

"The government stands by the affected families," she said.

State Fire and Emergency Services Minister Sujit Bose said the rescue operations are underway on a war footing and those trapped under the debris would be brought out soon. Kolkata police commissioner Vineet Goyal visited the spot and took stock of the rescue operations.

According to locals, who were the first responders, concrete chunks fell from the building before it collapsed.

There was a loud sound and a thick cloud of dust engulfed the area as soon as the building collapsed. The debris fell on nearby shanties in the densely populated area, they said.

"Although no one lived in the under-construction building, it collapsed on the adjacent shanties. We fear that many individuals might still be trapped under the rubble," said a resident.

In a post on X last night, Leader of Opposition in the West Bengal Assembly Suwendu Adhikari said, "I urge @chief_west, Secretary @HomeBengal, @CPKolkata to immediately involve West Bengal State Disaster Management Team for immediate Rescue & Relief."

"I am receiving frantic calls regarding probable casualties. Please dispatch any team which can help in rescuing the victims, be it fire Servicemen, police or any other team," he said. (PTI)

ED raids 10 locations in Delhi-NCR in fake cancer drugs case

NEW DELHI, March 18: The Enforcement Directorate on Monday raided multiple locations in Delhi-NCR as part of a money laundering investigation linked to a case of manufacture and sale of spurious cancer medicines, official sources said.

The federal agency searched 10 locations and recovered about ₹ 65 lakh in cash from two locations.

The money laundering case was registered taking cognisance of a Delhi Police crime branch case registered last week to probe an organised criminal racket allegedly involved in the manufacturing and selling of cancer and chemotherapy drugs to certain hospitals in Delhi-NCR, the sources said.

The premises of the main suspects and their associates such as Vipul Jain, Suraj Shat, Neeraj Chauhan, Parvez Malik, Komal Tiwari, Abhinay and Tushar Chauhan were covered by the ED.

Out of the total cash, ₹ 23 lakh was recovered from a bean bag kept in the house of Suraj Sharma, the sources said.

Police have arrested a dozen people, including an IIT-BHU graduate, in this case till now.

According to the police, Vipul Jain was the "mastermind" of the racket.

Neeraj Chauhan, who previously worked as a manager in the Oncology Department of reputed hospitals, joined Jain in 2022 and leveraged his experience in getting "fake" chemotherapy injections at affordable rates.

The accused were charged by the police under various sections of the Indian Penal Code, such as 274 (adulteration of drugs), 275 (sale of adulterated drugs), 276 (sale of the drug as a different drug or preparation), 420 (cheating), 468 (forgery for purpose of cheating), 471 (using as genuine a forged document), and 120-B (criminal conspiracy). (PTI)

3 held for assaulting shopkeeper over playing loud music in Bengaluru, BJP reacts

BENGALURU, March 18: Three people were arrested on Monday for allegedly assaulting a shopkeeper over playing loud music during 'Azaan' (Islamic call to prayer) here, the police said even as BJP MP Tejaswi Surya called for mass chanting of 'Hanuman chalisa' at the spot where the incident reportedly occurred. The Karnataka unit of the BJP slammed the Congress government in the state over the incident.

The assault allegedly took place over playing Hanuman chalisa, a Hindu devotional hymn in praise of lord Hanuman, at a shop in central Bengaluru area.

However, the police said they did not find any substantial evidence to support the accusation and the complaint did not mention it.

According to the FIR, an altercation broke out between Mukesh and the gang members over loud music being played, on Sunday evening at Siddannagalli under the limits of Halasuru Gate police station.

In the purported CCTV footage, which has gone viral a group of youth is confronting the shopkeeper over playing the 'bhajan' during Azaan time. It led to a heated argument between

them with one of them grabbing the shopkeeper's collar. When the victim tried to retaliate, they dragged the shopkeeper out of the shop and beat him up.

According to police, the shopkeeper played a song on high volume during the time of Azaan, which apparently irked the youth belonging to the minority community. They went to question the shopowner, leading to an argument. One of the youths started punching Mukesh and a fight ensued between them.

Based on the complaint, a case has been registered and three men were arrested.

The FIR has been registered under 506 (punishment for criminal intimidation), 504 (intentional insult with intent to provoke breach of the peace), 149 (every member of unlawful assembly guilty of offence committed in prosecution of common object), 307 (attempt to murder) and other relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code.

Speaking to reporters today, Mukesh said, "Yesterday around 6.15 pm, I was playing a devotional song... three to four people came and threatened me that they will beat me up if I play loudly with speaker... I asked them what was the problem. They said it's our azaan time now and

that such (Bhajans) should not played at this time."

"If you play like this, we will beat you. Later, one of them grabbed my collar and when I tried to resist, they thrashed me and threatened to stab me with a knife," he added.

In his reaction, Karnataka BJP President BY Vijayendra attacked the Siddaramaiah-led Congress government over the law and order situation in the state and urged the police to arrest the culprits.

Following incidents such as the chanting of "Pakistan Zindabad" slogans in Vidhan Soudha and a bomb explosion at Rameshwaram Cafe now a Hindu shopkeeper in Bengaluru was viciously assaulted for playing the Hanuman Chalisa. The appeasement policies of the @IN-CKarnataka administration is pushing Karnataka into a radical state with absolute breakdown of law and order, he alleged in a post on X.

Holding the chief minister and his government accountable for the attack on Hindus and Hindu establishments, he said, Siddaramaiah's "appeasement politics" has encouraged barbarians to go on a rampage in the state. (PTI)

IIM-C inks pact to set up centre of excellence for design thinking

KOLKATA, March 18: IIM Calcutta has entered into a tripartite agreement with the School of Thinking and Mission Samridhhi to incorporate design thinking into its academic curriculum, research, and projects, the premier institute said in a statement on Monday. This collaboration aims to establish India's inaugural 'Centre of Excellence for Design Thinking' in a leading business school, positioning the centre as a focal point for all design thinking endeavours undertaken by IIM-C and its affiliated organisations, it added.

Mission Samridhhi will contribute to community-centric social initiatives and projects by leveraging its community development framework and IIM-C's research expertise, the statement said.

Established in 2016, the School of Design

Thinking is committed to promoting awareness of design thinking as a 'human centered' and 'future focused' societal approach.

Mission Samridhhi, a platform dedicated to the holistic development of rural India, brings its expertise to the collaboration, the statement said.

The signing ceremony was attended by Professor Saibal Chattopadhyay, director-in-charge of IIM-C, Professor Bhaskar Chakrabarti, dean (academic), and senior officials from Mission Samridhhi and the School of Design Thinking.

The MoU will remain in effect for three years, facilitating a long-term partnership between IIM-C, the School of Design Thinking, and Mission Samridhhi to drive a mindset transformation toward Design Thinking across various domains. (PTI)

SIA files charge-sheet in J&K narco-terror financing module case

SRINAGAR, March 18: The Jammu and Kashmir State Investigation Agency (SIA) on Monday filed a charge-sheet against two people, including a Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorist, accused of operating a narco-terror financing module in the Union Territory, officials said.

The charge-sheet was filed in the special-designated UA(PA) court under the NIA Act against Zaheed Ahmad Khoja and Zameer Ahmad Lone under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, they said here.

Lone, who hails from the Kashmir Valley, is an active terrorist of the LeT operating from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, the officials said.

They said Khoja was arrested in September last year when he was transporting a consignment of heroin weighing 3.565 kg. The value of the seized narcotics was estimated to be more than Rs 25 crore, the officials added.

Khoja and Lone along with members of terrorist organisations had hatched a criminal conspiracy to raise funds by illegally smuggling and trafficking narcotics from across the border, the SIA said.

The proceeds from the sale of the drug were used to financially support terrorist acts and fund the terror ecosystem, the agency said.

In pursuance of the larger criminal conspiracy, Khoja and Lone, and their associates through conver-

sations over encrypted messaging applications systematically planned spreading communal disharmony through terrorist acts targeted at minority communities in Kashmir, the SIA said.

"The terror funds were used for personal enrichment and for furtherance of terrorist acts, including setting ablaze government buildings, residential houses of minority communities and police personnel, and office of a political party, as directed by various terrorist organisations, active in Jammu and Kashmir," the agency said.

It said further investigation against other associates of those charge-sheeted in the case will continue. (PTI)

No need to bring slaughterhouses, meat processing units under EIA: Centre

NEW DELHI, March 18: There is no requirement to bring slaughterhouses and meat processing units under the ambit of the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006, as guidelines and safeguards are already in place to regulate them from an environmental perspective, the Centre has told the National Green Tribunal.

Animal rights activist Gauri Maulekhi approached the green tribunal last year demanding that slaughterhouses and meat processing units be brought within the ambit of EIA, 2006.

She raised concerns regarding over consumption of water at slaughterhouses, contamination of water bodies due to improper solid waste disposal and the risk of zoonotic diseases due to exposure to unhealthy carcasses among others.

The Union Environment Ministry submitted an affidavit to the NGT recently. The affidavit is based on a report by an eight-member working group set up by the ministry in August last year.

"Requisite guidelines/safeguards are already in place to regulate the slaughterhouses/processing units from an environ-



mental perspective, and there is no requirement for bringing slaughterhouses and meat processing units under the ambit of EIA, 2006," the ministry said.

It said the regulation framework and monitoring of agencies including district magistrates, pollution control boards, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) and Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development (APEDA) is adequate to address the environmental issues related to slaughterhouses and meat processing units.

"There will be no significant value addition by bringing such units under the ambit of EIA, 2006 as only the issue is the implementation of the regulations already in place," the ministry said.

It said the contentions of the petitioner (Maulekhi) are mainly due

to the unorganised slaughterhouses and meat processing units and that the working group has suggested prioritising their modernization.

The ministry's working group report said illegal slaughterhouses with a capacity of up to nine animals are causing "significant damage to the environment" and need to be regulated and monitored in a more efficient manner.

It said the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) may communicate to all state-level monitoring committees to crack down on the illegal slaughterhouse units with the help of local administration and recommend upgrading them into the organised sector.

"Necessary funding may be considered by the state or central government for expansion and modernization activities to control illegal slaughtering. Ramping up infrastructure, especially the waste management infrastructure, should be of utmost priority," the working group recommended.

The FSSAI needs to intensify inspections and ensure that slaughterhouses get the license only when the food safety standards and pollution norms are complied with, it said. (PTI)

Wastewater contributing to microplastics in Mandovi river: Goa-based CSIR-NIO's study

'Finding confirms land-based origins in wastewater significantly contribute to microplastic pollution and their potential risks to the ecosystem and eventually to human health via seafood'

PANAJI, March 18: Wastewater from homes, commercial establishments, markets and vessels used for entertainment purposes like casinos contribute to the abundance of microplastics in Mandovi river and onward in the Arabian Sea, a study by the Goa-based CSIR-National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) has found.

As part of the study titled 'Unravelling the land-based discharge of microplastics from sewers to oceans - A comprehensive study and risk assessment in wastewaters of Goa', researchers investigated the level of microplastics in wastewater and their potential risks to the ecosystem in Goa.

In the study, which has been published in the Science of the Total Environment Journal, the researchers have said the discharge of microplastics into the coastal waters assumes the role of a precursor for their presence in the coastal environment of Goa.

"The urban wastewater exhib-



ited significant amounts of microplastics in the size range of 100-300 microns mainly comprising fibres. Also the source identification study carried out found polymeric signatures of personal care products (PCPs) and washing machine effluents (WMEs) in wastewater," the study said.

This underscores the role of wastewater as a distinct point source for impelling estuarine con-

tamination encircling the environments of Panjim City, the study mentioned.

The research was led by Principal Scientist Dr. Mahua Saha (CSIR-NIO), while others who were party of the study included Chayanika Rathore, Aniket Desai, Priyansha Gupta, Akshata Naik, Haritha Yeshpal Subha from CSIR-NIO, Goa and Jacob de Boer from Virj University, Netherlands.

The finding confirms land-based origins in wastewater significantly contribute to microplastic pollution and their potential risks to the ecosystem and eventually to human health via seafood, the study said. The study confirms their hypothesis covering a knowledge gap about the pathways of microplastics from source to sink, the researchers said.

Researchers said the study was the first to provide a snapshot information that illustrates the substantial influence of microplastics in wastewater and their transmission to receiving coastal waters.

The study can make a meaningful contribution to Sustainable Development Goal 6.3, which aims "to comprehend global wastewater generation, reduce pollution, eliminate dumping, minimize release of hazardous substances, cut proportion of untreated wastewater, and significantly enhance global recycling and safe reuse efforts", they said. (PTI)

'Shakti' I spoke about not religious, but power of unrighteousness, corruption and falsehood: Rahul

NEW DELHI, March 18: Under attack for his "fight against shakti" remark made at a rally in Mumbai, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Monday clarified that he was not talking about any religious power but the 'shakti' of unrighteousness, corruption and falsehood.

He accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of twisting his words and said he was speaking about the power of which Modi was wearing the mask.

"Modi ji does not like my words, he always tries to change their meaning by twisting them in some way or the other because he knows that I have spoken a solemn truth.

"The 'shakti' (power) that I mentioned, Modi ji is the mask of that power and we are fighting against it. It is such a power that today it has captured India's voice, India's institutions, the CBI, I-T, ED, Election Commission, the media, Indian industry and the entire constitutional structure of India in its clutches," he said in post in Hindi on X.

Using the same 'shakti' (power), he alleged, Prime Minister Narendra Modi waives loans worth thousands of crores of Indian banks, while an Indian farmer commits suicide when he is unable to repay a loan of a few thousand rupees.

"The same 'shakti' (power) is given India's ports, India's airports, while India's youth is given the gift of 'Agniveer' that breaks their courage. While saluting the same power day and night, the country's media suppresses the truth.

"Narendra Modi ji, who is a slave of the same power, imposes GST on the poor of the country without controlling inflation and auctions the country's wealth to increase the strength of that power.

"I recognise that power and so does Narendra Modi ji. It is not any kind of religious power, it is the power of unrighteousness, corruption and falsehood. That's why whenever I raise my voice against it, Modi ji and his machine of lies gets upset and enraged," Gandhi said.

At a rally in Mumbai, Gandhi commented that, "We are not fighting against a political party... We are not fighting against Narendra Modi, nor are we fighting against one person. But, one face has been projected in the forefront."

"In Hindu dharma, there is a word 'shakti'. We are fighting against a 'shakti' (power). The question arises as to what is that 'shakti'..." he said at the public rally in Mumbai where several leaders of the opposition were present. Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday launched a scathing attack on Gandhi over his

"shakti" remark, saying the opposition INDIA bloc was trying to destroy it. Asserting that for him every mother and daughter was a form of "shakti", Modi said the upcoming polls will be a fight between those who want to destroy "shakti" and those who worship them.

At a public rally in Karnataka, Modi said, "Yesterday in Mumbai Shivaji Ground (park), INDI Alliance made an announcement that they want to destroy 'shakti'. If they want to destroy 'shakti', then worshipping 'Shakti' is our resolve."

"Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (17th Century AD Maratha ruler) took the blessings of Goddess Tulja Bhavani and marched for the freedom of India. He was a shakti worshipper. And at the same Shivaji Park, it was announced to eliminate shakti," Modi said.

Modi said that for him, every mother and every daughter is a form of 'shakti' and that he worships them.

He said the nation dedicated 'Chandrayaan's' success to 'Shiv Shakti' and the opposition parties are talking of destroying 'shakti'.

"On Sunday in Mumbai, there was an INDI Alliance rally after the announcement of the schedule for elections. They announced their manifesto in the rally. In Mumbai's Shivaji Park, they said their fight was against 'Shakti'. For me, every mother, every daughter is a form of 'shakti'. Mothers and sisters, I worship you as 'shakti'. I am Bharat Maa's 'pujari'," he said at another rally in Telangana.

"INDI Alliance in its manifesto announced to finish/destroy 'shakti'. I accept their challenge. I will sacrifice my life for the security of mothers and sisters," he further said. Several BJP leaders also launched an all-out attack against Gandhi over his remark.

The Congress also hit back at Modi over his remark that the INDIA bloc's manifesto talks about finishing 'shakti', saying the elections will decide whether the country would be run by 'Asuri Shakti' (demonic power) or 'Daivik Shakti' (divine power). Congress leader Pawan Khera likened the BJP to 'Asuri Shakti' and alleged that the nation has seen atrocities against women in the last 10 years and cited the rape cases in Unnao, Kathua and Hathras as well as the harassment of women workers.

"The prime minister is upset and the entire BJP is talking baseless things after Rahul Gandhi attacked 'Asuri Shakti'. This election is between 'Asuri Shakti' and 'Daivik Shakti'," the Congress national spokesperson said. (PTI)

Vicky Kaushal, Triptii Dimri, Ammy Virk's film titled 'Bad Newz'; to release in July



NEW DELHI, March 18: It has been in the news for long that Karan Johar is backing a romantic-comedy that stars Vicky Kaushal, Triptii Dimri and Ammy Virk in the lead roles, and has been helmed by Anand Tiwari.

Earlier, there were reports that the film was titled 'Rola' or 'Mere Mehboob Mere Sanam'. However, dismissing all rumours, Karan Johar has now confirmed that the film is titled 'Bad Newz', and is a comedy inspired by true events. He also stated that the film would release in cinemas on July 19, 2024.

Sharing a teaser of the film featuring the three actors, Karan captioned it as, "Get ready for the most entertaining hungama - a hilarious once in a billion situation awaits... a comedy inspired by true events! #BadNewz IN CINEMAS 19th July 2024!" Check it out here:

Meanwhile, earlier in the day, Vicky Kaushal had teased an announcement with Triptii Dimri and Ammy, through a video shared on Instagram. "In a world full of news - we have two ready for you! But which one would you like first - good news or bad news? Let us know in the comments below," the actor had written.

The video started with Vicky telling that he wants to share some news, and says, "Ab humare paas ek good news hain aur ek bad news... aap log kaunsa pehele sunna chahenge?". Soon, Triptii and Ammy appear in the video. While she says that she wants to hear the good news, Ammy says that he would rather pick the bad news first. (PTI)

'Shaitaan' crosses ₹ 100 crore-mark at box office

NEW DELHI, March 18: Supernatural thriller Shaitaan has added ₹ 24.41 crore to its net box office collections (NBOC) in the second weekend of its release, taking up its total earnings to ₹ 106.01 crore, the makers said on Monday.

Starring Ajay Devgn, Jyotika, and R Madhavan, the film had collected ₹ 81.60 crore in its first weekend. It released in theatres on March 8.

Presented by Jio Studios, Devgn Films and Panorama Studios, Shaitaan is produced by Devgn, Jyoti Deshpande, Kumar Mangat Pathak and Abhishek Pathak.

Shaitaan maintains absolute dominance in its second weekend collecting ₹ 10.17 crore on Sunday and a weekend total of ₹ 24.41 crore.

"Week 1 - ₹ 81.60 crore, 2nd Friday - ₹ 5.12 crore, 2nd Saturday - ₹ 9.12 crore, 2nd Sunday - ₹ 10.17 crore, Total 2nd weekend - ₹ 24.41 crore. Total - ₹ 106.01 crore NBOC (India) & ₹ 152.11 crore Worldwide Gross," the makers said in a press note.

Shaitaan, directed by Vikas Bahl, is the Hindi remake of the 2023 Gujarati horror film 'Vash', written and directed by Krishnadev Yagnik. (PTI)



MM Keeravaani to compose music for Anupam Kher's 'Tanvi The Great'



NEW DELHI, March 18: Actor-filmmaker Anupam Kher on Monday announced that 'RRR' composer MM Keeravaani will score the music for his upcoming directorial venture 'Tanvi The Great'.

The movie marks Kher's second project as director after 2002's 'Om Jai Jagadish'. Kher expressed gratitude to Keeravaani, who won an Oscar and a Golden Globe for the 'Naatu Naatu' song from 'RRR', for boarding his film. 'ALL DREAMS COME TRUE: Proud to announce that one of the finest music composers of our times

#Oscar and #GoldenGlobe winner @mmkeeravaani sir is the music director of my directorial film #TanviTheGreat!' the director wrote in an X post. Kher said he had been a fan of Keeravaani's work since he heard the song 'Tum Mile Dil Khile' from the 1994 film 'Criminal'.

"Spending almost a year to create the music and songs for #TanviTheGreat has been a total BLISS and BLESSING! Thank you Sir for your brilliance and generosity! Jai Ho!" he captioned his video with Keeravaani composing a tune in a music studio. (PTI)

Ananya Panday, Rahul Mishra close Lakme Fashion Week X FDCI 2024

MUMBAI, March 18: Actor Ananya Panday and designer Rahul Mishra brought down the curtain on the 2024 Lakme Fashion Week in partnership with the Fashion Design Council of India, months after they collaborated for the Paris Haute Couture Week.

Mishra showcased his label AFEW at the grand finale of the fashion extravaganza, held on Sunday night at the Jio World Convention Centre here.

AFEW, which was launched at Palais de Tokyo in Paris, draws inspiration from the children's story 'The Fox and the Star' and carries the installations of natural forms that consist of vegetal and animal motifs.

Mishra described the experience of showcasing at the Lakme Fashion Week as "homecoming".

"This is my show in Bombay after six years so it's like homecoming. It's great that I got this opportunity. I am thankful to Lakme and everybody," the couturier said at the post-show press conference.

The ramp was bedecked with massive white sculptures with the models making their way around the structures as they matched steps to Nazia Hassan's superhit song "Boom Boom".

Mishra's collection, embossed with designs of leaves, dragonflies and other natural elements, was largely monochrome with a smattering of colours.

Panday, who is the face of Lakme, said she had a great time at the grand finale.

"This is the most fun I had walking on the ramp. I felt very

easy, cool and edgy walking. Even the music choice 'Boom Boom' playing in the background was fun. I have had the longest association with the House of Lakme. It's been six years now, I have been their favourite child," she said.

The "Kho Gaye Hum Kahan" star said she was happy to walk for the designer again after their Paris outing in January.

"My favourite thing about Rahul's work is that it's inspired by nature. I love the whole theory and how he puts it in action. To make his garments fit a body... it feels like the garments were just made for us," she added.

Panday, 25, was dressed in a black mini dress with floral applique work and sequins and a pair of matching knee-high black

boots. She completed her look with blingy earrings and wore her hair in a ponytail.

Mishra, known for marrying slow fashion with traditional Indian crafts, said he wanted his showstopper to wear something that was "close to her personality".

"It is the amalgamation of the idea of sculpture and creating something simple and natural. The three-dimensional forms (of sculptures and people) give a sense of a monolithic kind of texture," the Delhi-based designer told PTI.

The grand finale was attended by Panday's parents, actor Chunky Pandey and costume designer Bhavana Pandey, as well as actor couple Richa Chadha-Ali Fazal and Orry.

The five-day fashion gala concluded on Sunday. (PTI)

Mukesh Khanna upset about reports of Ranveer Singh's casting as Shaktimaan



NEW DELHI, March 18: Mukesh Khanna-starrer Shaktimaan was a frontrunner of superhero shows in India. The teleserial from the 1990s, which was aired on Doordarshan, is getting a reboot with Bollywood star Ranveer Singh reportedly chosen to play the superhero.

Meanwhile, Mukesh Khanna is apparently unhappy with the selection of the Gully Boy star to portray Shaktimaan. 65-year-old Khanna, who was also the producer of the superhero show reportedly said that stardom alone justifies the selection of a star with a "certain image" to play Shaktimaan. The man in the red and gold suit represents "Indian values" and should have the image of a teacher, he reportedly pointed out.

"Social media is flooded with rumours that Ranveer will play Shaktimaan. Everyone was angry about it. I kept quiet. As channels started announcing that Ranveer had been signed for the part, I had to say something. I have said that an actor with a certain image, no matter how big a star he may be, cannot become Shaktimaan. I have put my foot down. Let's see what happens now," news agency PTI reported Khanna as jotting on Instagram on Sunday.

Mukesh Khanna was critical of Ranveer's nude photoshoot. The veteran star called it "childish" and unfitting for a man chosen to essay a role like Shaktimaan. "Shaktimaan is not just a superhero, he has also become a super teacher. Now, the actor who takes on the role should have the quality that when he speaks, people will listen. There are big actors, but their image comes in the middle," Times Of India (TOI) quoted him as saying.

Sony Pictures India and Sajid Nadiadwala are reportedly attached to produce the Shaktimaan film directed by Malayalam actor-director Basil Joseph who is best known for the superhero flick Minnal Murali. (PTI)



'LOOKING FORWARD TO RO GOING OUT AND EXPRESSING HIMSELF'

He is going to have his hand on my shoulders: Hardik on Rohit's role in MI

MUMBAI, March 18: Mumbai Indians skipper Hardik Pandya on Monday said his predecessor Rohit Sharma will continue to be a guiding force for him during the IPL despite the unexpected change of leadership that the franchise announced ahead of the upcoming season, triggering a "backlash" from the fans.

Pandya, who led Gujarat Titans in the past two seasons, is back at Mumbai Indians as captain for the 2024 edition. Having led Mumbai Indians to five titles, Rohit was surprisingly replaced by Pandya going into the upcoming season.

"It will not be any different, he will always be there to help me. You mentioned that he is the captain of the Indian team, which helps me because this team, what it has achieved, it has achieved under him

"...from now onwards, it is (about) what he has achieved, I just have to carry forward that," Pandya said at a media interaction here.

"I don't think it will be any awkward or any different. It will be nice feeling because we have been playing for 10 years. I have played my whole career under him and he is going to have his hand on my shoulder throughout the season," he added.

Pandya admitted his move of leaving the Gujarat Titans' captaincy and replacing Rohit at the helm in Mumbai Indians did upset a section of fans.

"The backlash... To be very hon-



est we respect fans but at the same time, we focus on the sport and what is required. I focus on the controllables and I do not focus on what I cannot control," Pandya said.

"At the same time, we are very grateful to fans. A lot of fame and love comes from them and they have every right and I respect their opinion," he added.

However, Pandya said he has not met Rohit for the last two months or so and would only be chatting with the former skipper once the squad gets into action during the

practice game here on Monday.

"Yes and no. He has been travelling and playing," Pandya replied when asked if he has had a chat with Rohit.

"We are professionals, by the time the team comes together...we have been playing cricket...it has only been a couple of months that we have not seen each other. Whenever the IPL starts, which is from today since we have the practice game, once he comes, we will definitely have a chat," he said.

The star all-rounder will be making his comeback to top-level cricket

with the IPL, having undergone a lengthy rehabilitation for the ankle injury he suffered in the ODI World Cup at home in October.

"I have no issues with my body. I plan to play all the games. In IPL, I have not missed many games anyway. Technically, I was out for three months. It was a freak injury and it had nothing to do with my earlier injuries. I tried to stop the ball and ended up getting injured," said Pandya.

The 30-year-old got instant success as leader of Gujarat Titans and after his return to the high-profile

Mumbai franchise, he will be expected to add another silverware to their trophy cabinet.

"Expectations will always be there in Mumbai Indians. We must focus on the process. I cannot win tomorrow, we will have to wait for two months and see how we prepare, how we get together. We will play a brand which everyone will enjoy," he said.

Head coach Mark Boucher, who was sitting alongside Pandya in the media interaction, was also asked about Rohit and his role going forward.

"Rohit has been in fantastic form. Looking forward to Rohit going out and expressing himself. We watched him bat against England. He has been batting fantastic," said Boucher.

The Mumbai Indians coach hoped that the amount of cricket that the squad members have played in recent months would hold them in good stead in the IPL.

"Thankfully, there has been a lot of cricket that has been going on. So, the guys have played a lot of cricket. We are in a very good position from the players' perspective. The guys have been in good form as well," he said.

"Obviously, there are injuries which you have to manage. It's about trying to find roles for the new faces in the team. We are in a good position as a team. We are trying to give direction to the whole squad as to how we want to play," added the former South African cricketer. (PTI)

Akhil, Anish win gold; India bag six medals at Polish Grand Prix



NEW DELHI, March 18: Paris Olympics quota winners Akhil Sheoran and Anish Bhanwala won a gold medal each as Indian shooters ended their Polish Grand Prix campaign with six medals.

Sheoran won gold in the men's 50m rifle 3-positions Match 2 with a record score of 468.4.

Patrik Jany of the Czech Republic was 2.2 points behind at second spot at the Grand Prix Wrocławia & Dolnego Slaska.

Both the scores were higher than the existing world record of 466.1, held by Jany's countryman Jiri Privratsky.

Bhanwala won gold in the men's 25m rapid-fire pistol at the Jozef Zapadski Grand Prix held simultaneously.

Some members of India's 50m rifle and 25m rapid-fire pistol squad are currently on an exposure tour to Europe to compete in various established international events in the build-up to the Paris

Olympics.

Navy shooter Niraj Kumar was also impressive, finishing with two bronze in both the men's rifle 3P matches, becoming the only Indian to finish with two medals.

Niraj also shot impressive scores of 595 and 594 in the two qualification matches.

In the first match, he finished third behind Jany and Rio Olympic silver medalist Serhiy Kulish of Ukraine.

Swarnip Kusale also shot a solid 595 in Match 2 to top the qualification standings, being more accurate than Niraj, but finished fourth overall. The two Grand Prix also saw another Paris quota winner Shriyanka Sadangi win bronze in the women's 3P and Ashi Chouksey pick up a silver in the second women's 3P.

The Indian shooting contingent will now move to Germany for the ISAS Dortmund which begins on Tuesday. (PTI)

Kohli joins RCB training camp

BENGALURU, March 18: Superstar Virat Kohli on Monday made his first appearance in the training session of his franchise Royal Challengers Bangalore ahead of the IPL beginning March 22.

Kohli, who was out of the country for the birth of his second child, arrived in India on Sunday.

The former India and RCB captain was seen taking rounds of the Chinnaswamy Stadium as part of his warm-up. Skipper Faf du Plessis also attended the session.

RCB, who have never won the IPL, begin their campaign against reigning champions Chennai Super Kings in Chennai on Friday.

Kohli's performance in the lucrative T20 league will be closely tracked as the event precedes the T20 World Cup in the USA and Caribbean.

The 35-year-old played his first T20 since the 2022 World Cup back in January against Afghanistan.

Skipper Rohit Sharma also made a comeback in that series and is expected to lead India in the T20 World Cup beginning June 1.

Kohli also missed the five-match home Test series against England due to his family commitments.

The batting great had a memorable IPL last year, aggregating 639 runs including two hundreds and six half-centuries. (PTI)

Promotional event for Indian Racing Festival 2024 held in Srinagar

SRINAGAR, March 18: The Indian Racing Festival 2024, comprising three competitions of five rounds each, will commence later this year with Racing Promotions Private Limited (RPPL) organising a promotional road show here in collaboration with the J&K Tourism department.

The Indian Racing Festival this year will comprise three competitions -- Indian Racing League (IRL), FIA-backed Indian F4 Championship, and JK Tyre FMSCI National Racing Championship (JKNRC) -- with five rounds for each class spread across the country. As part of promoting motorsport across India, RPPL plans to organise roadshows at other places in the country as well.

RPPL and JK Tyre showcased the Wolf GB08 and Formula 4 cars during the event here.

The cars were driven by Sohail Shah -- one of the two champions of IRL 2023 -- Rishon Rajeev -- Formula 4 vice champion -- and Shriya Lohia, the Formula 4 India driver. RPPL chairman Akhilesh Reddy said, "This exhibition will encourage the youth of J&K to invest their time watching and learning about motorsport and will also give them hope for a future in the industry." (PTI)

IOA dissolves ad-hoc committee for wrestling, WFI to take charge

NEW DELHI, March 18: The Indian Olympic Association on Monday dissolved the ad-hoc committee for wrestling, saying "there is no further need" for it to continue after revocation of the suspension on the national federation, which now gets complete administrative control of the sport.

The IOA said that the decision was also guided by the successful conduct of the selection trials for next month's Olympic qualifying tournament for which the panel collaborated with the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI).

The ad-hoc committee was formed in December last year after the sports ministry suspended the WFI, which got a shot in the arm when the suspension imposed on it by the global governing body -- United World Wrestling -- was lifted in February.

"The decision to dissolve the Adhoc Committee comes in light of the lifting of the ban on the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) by the United World Wrestling (UWW) and the successful completion of Selection Trials by the Adhoc Committee appointed by the IOA as per the directives of the Hon'ble High Court of Delhi," said the IOA order issued on March 10.

WFI chief Sanjay Singh thanked the Indian Olympic Association for giving his elected panel control of the national federation.

"We thank IOA for giving us full-fledged control of the WFI. We will give all facilities to the wrestlers. We will soon organise a national camp and if the wrestlers want to train abroad we will facilitate that as well. The focus is now on the Olympics. We are hoping that 5-6 wrestlers will qualify," Singh told PTI.

The three-member committee, under the chairmanship of Bhupender Singh Bajwa was constituted on December 23 after the newly-elected WFI, led by Sanjay Singh, had allegedly flouted its own rules.

Earlier this month, the ad-hoc panel organised the trials to select the teams for the Asian Championships and the Asian Olympic Qualifiers in Kyrgyzstan to be held next month.

The protesting duo of Vinesh Phogat and Bajrang Punia competed in the trials and the former made the cut for Olympic qualifiers in the



50kg category.

Following the successful completion of the trials, the reins of the sport have now been formally handed over to WFI despite the continuing suspension imposed by the sports ministry.

The IOA instructed WFI to appoint a "Safeguarding Committee" to address concerns of sexual harassment and other issues such as adherence to rules.

"...as instructed by the UWW, it is imperative that the WFI appoint a Safeguarding Committee / Officer at the earliest to address the concerns of abuse and harassment and to ensure adherence to all rules, regulations, and guidelines set forth by the UWW and other relevant authorities," the IOA letter added.

"Furthermore, the WFI is also directed to conduct the elections of the Athletes Commission in a time-bound manner, in accordance with the established procedures and guidelines.

"This step is essential to promote athlete representation and participation in the decision-

making processes of the WFI."

The order also instructed the WFI to "repay the loan" provided by the IOA to the ad-hoc panel for managing wrestling affairs when the national body was under suspension.

"The day I won elections, you know that it was a crown of thorns for me. Despite limitations, we tried everything, whether it was organising the Nationals (in Pune), or providing officials and referees to the ad-hoc panel for the recent trials after (Delhi High Court) court stopped us from organising trials (in New Delhi), I am sure that it is the end of the struggle for us," added Sanjay Singh.

A source close to the developments said he was "surprised" by the IOA's move to dissolve the ad-hoc panel.

"The Sports Ministry had suspended the WFI in December last year and it hasn't yet issued orders for revoking the suspension. Besides, the case is sub-judice, so it's surprising why ad-hoc panel was dissolved by the IOA," he said. (PTI)

Laura Kenny retires from cycling as Britain's most successful female Olympic athlete with 5 golds

She gave birth to her second child last year and told the BBC that being at home was proving more alluring to her

LONDON, March 18: Laura Kenny, Britain's most successful female Olympic athlete, announced her retirement from cycling on Monday because she wants to spend more time at home with her family.

The 31-year-old Kenny has won five Olympic gold medals and had been expected to compete at the Paris Games in July.

She gave birth to her second child last year and told the BBC on Monday that being at home was proving more and more alluring to her.

"It's been in my head a little while, the sacrifices of leaving the children and your family at home is really quite big and it really is a big decision to make," Kenny said.



"More and more, I was struggling to do that. More people asking me

what races was I doing, what training camps was I going on -- I did-

n't want to go ultimately and that's what it came down to."

Her husband, Jason Kenny, is also a cyclist and Britain's most decorated Olympian.

"I knew the minute I was getting those feelings. Once I said to Jase, I don't think I want to ride a bike anymore, I started to feel relief," she said.

Laura Kenny won gold in the team pursuit and the omnium at both the 2012 and 2016 Olympic Games and the madison at the 2020 Olympics. She also won a silver medal in the team pursuit in 2020 and is a seven-time world champion and 14-time European champion.

Kenny said the "absolute highlight" of her career was the London

Games in 2012, during which her relationship with Jason Kenny became public.

"I never thought I would go to a home games, let alone go on to win two gold medals," she said.

"When I look back, I'm like, 'Wow, those two weeks did really change my life.'"

Britain's team performance director, Stephen Park, described Laura Kenny as "one of the greatest sporting talents our country has ever produced."

"She has been a beacon of inspiration for so many, young and old," Park said, "and I'm sure that the entire British cycling community will join me in wishing her the very best in the next chapter of her life." (AP)

Coach Fulton opts to go with almost full list of probables for crucial Australia tour

NEW DELHI, March 18: Drag-flicker Harmanpreet Singh will lead a 27-member strong Indian team in a five-match away hockey Test series against Australia, with chief coach Craig Fulton opting to go with almost the entire core group of probables undergoing training in Bhubaneswar.

India will leave for Australia on April 1 and play their opening game on April 6, followed by matches on April 7, 10, 12 and 13. All the games will be played in Perth.

The tour against one of the best hockey-playing nations is significant and the Indian team will aim to fine-tune its preparations ahead of this year's Paris Olympics.

The tour will give Fulton the opportunity to have a look at his probable 16-member squad for the quadrennial showpiece event.

But having said that, ahead of Paris Olympics the Indians will have another important assignment in the Belgium leg of the Pro League in May, which will give Fulton more options.

"This will be a very important tour for us as it will not only ascertain the level we are at and the areas we want to get better ahead of the Paris Olympics but this is also an important tournament for the players," Fulton said in a Hockey India release.

"We chose to go with the almost entire core group so that each player gets enough opportunity to showcase their full potential and also it is a goode added.

Hockey India had on March 11 named 28 core probable list for the men's national camp and with 27 of them in the Australia-bound squad, it goes well with Fulton's philosophy of giving everyone the opportunity to showcase their potential.

Only midfielder Rabichandra Singh Moirangthem has been dropped from the list of probables.

Midfielder Hardik Singh will continue to be Harmanpreet's deputy during the series.

The team will also have three goalkeepers in PR Sreejesh, Krishan Bahadur Pathak and Suraj Karkera.

"Playing against a team like Australia who are one of the potential podium finishers in Paris will be challenging and at the same time an enriching experience for the level of competition they bring to the matches. It will be a good exposure trip and we are looking forward to it," Fulton said. (PTI)

Rishabh might find it very difficult to get back his fluency at IPL's onset: Gavaskar

NEW DELHI, March 18: Rishabh Pant will find it "very difficult" to be at his fluent best at the beginning of the IPL but Sunil Gavaskar expects that his knees will react better once he starts batting more and more in match situations. Having survived a horrific car crash in December, 2022, Pant will make a comeback to competitive cricket after more than 14 months as Delhi Capitals captain after an extensive rehabilitation programme.

"It'll be very difficult. But the good thing is he (Pant) has played some cricket. So he has got some practice. To get fluency in batting is a little tough," Gavaskar told 'Star Sports'.

He then explained his point of view. "When you talk of a knee injury, the pivoting that takes place, Wicket-keeping is difficult as well, but even in batting, the knee is quite important. So, maybe, in the beginning, we won't see the real Rishabh Pant that we are used to," the maestro said. (PTI)

'We may lose one or two in terms of fitness but we have to move on as it is sport' Trying to hasten my recovery during WC led to prolonged rehab, admits Hardik Pandya

MUMBAI, March 18: Hardik Pandya's bid to hasten his comeback towards the business end of last year's ODI World Cup game actually aggravated his ankle injury and in the process delayed his possible return by five months.

Pandya had twisted his ankle trying to stop the ball on his follow-through during India's fourth World Cup game against Bangladesh in Pune on October 19.

Initially, he had eyed a comeback during home T20s versus Afghanistan but after a prolonged rehabilitation, his comeback vehicle turns out to be upcoming IPL -- a cash-rich league that catapulted the colourful Baroda all-rounder into instant stardom around a decade back.

"My injury was a freak one. It had nothing to do with my past injuries or my fitness. I tried to stop the ball and twisted my ankle. When I got injured, my injury from day one clearly showed that I would be out of the World Cup," Pandya said during a media interaction organised by Mumbai Indians here on Monday.

Pandya was itching to make a comeback by semi-finals but his desperation proved to be counter-productive in the long run.

"We pushed but it would have been an uphill task that I would be fit for the World Cup semifinals or the final. When we pushed, it kind of triggered the injury and my recovery took longer (than expected)."

Pandya admitted that his urge to represent India half-fit during World Cup semi-final was unjustifiable.

"I had a recurrence. My injury kind of expanded more and the question was that 'do I want to represent India at 50 percent?'. The answer was no, because India deserves better than that and I myself would not be able to justify the fact that I am coming (back) not



completely ready," he said. "From there, the whole focus was that that I will come back as soon as possible, but with injuries and something like the freak injury which I had, you have to give time."

"It is not something which goes away with physiotherapy, it is just natural body recovery which we need to do and obviously the whole MI thing came. I was sitting at home, working hard and this news came and it was even more special," Pandya added about his switch to MI from Gujarat Titans.

Pandya said he was back to full fitness around the time India played a three-match T20I series against Afghanistan at home, but did not have enough opportunities to play.

The all-rounder was recently a part of the

Reliance One team at the DY Patil T20 tournament, which marked his return to professional cricket after a lay-off.

"When I got fit, the Afghanistan series (had) just started. I have been fit since then (but) there were no games to play," he said.

"When I got injured, I had no clue how bad it was. When I went for the scans, it just showed just a little niggle which would be fine. But as a couple of hours progressed, it showed the real picture -- my ankle was swollen."

"I straight away went to the NCA next day to fasten my process and make sure that I come back. Again, we tried every day making sure that I am available for the World Cup (end) and we had to take a call after the

12th day," he added. Asked if Pandya will bowl in the IPL, the MI skipper replied in "affirmative".

Meanwhile, MI head coach Mark Boucher said the team is waiting to hear from the Indian cricket board on the fitness status of star batter Suryakumar Yadav.

"We are awaiting updates on Suryakumar from the BCCI. We have always been under a cloud of fitness issues but we have a world-class medical team. We may lose one or two in terms of fitness but we have to move on as it is sport," Boucher said.

It has already been reported by PTT last week that world's No.1 ranked T20 batter, who is recuperating from a sports hernia surgery, is likely to miss the first few games but his rehabilitation as far as World T20 is concerned is on track.

Boucher, however, said that there would be no policy of resting the players keeping this year's T20 World Cup in mind.

"As the coach of Mumbai Indians, I am going to be a little bit biased and hoping to see my best players play all games. I have a soft spot for my players and I do understand that they might have niggles and that's when I will fall back on my medical team and work with them accordingly," he said.

Talking about Rohit Sharma, Boucher said the Indian skipper was "fantastic" against England in the recently-concluded Test series and hoped to have his rich form continuing in the IPL.

"Rohit has been in a fantastic touch. The way he was hitting the ball against England was fantastic. I am looking forward to seeing him go out and express himself. If he has a fantastic season, we will be there in the dying stages of the tournament," Boucher said. (PTI)

Hockey Mizoram stun Hockey Punjab to seal quarterfinal berth from Pool F

PUNE, March 18: Hockey Mizoram stunned Hockey Punjab 4-2 to secure a quarterfinal spot in the 14th Hockey India Senior Women National Championship 2024 here on Monday.

The win enabled Hockey Mizoram to top Pool F with three wins from as many games ahead of Hockey Punjab, Hockey Himachal and Hockey Rajasthan.

Lalrinpuii (6th, 9th minutes) struck a brace, while skipper H Lalruafeli (26th) and Marina Lalramngaki (54th) converted two penalty corners for the winning side.

Hockey Punjab's goals came from the sticks of Taranpreet Kaur (35th) and Rajwinder Kaur (51st), both from penalty corners.

Hockey Mizoram joined Hockey Madhya Pradesh, Hockey Maharashtra, Hockey Jharkhand, Hockey Haryana, Hockey Association of Odisha and Hockey Bengal in the knock-out round, with one more spot up for grabs from Pool G. In the quarterfinals, Hockey Madhya Pradesh will take on Hockey Bengal, Hockey Jharkhand will play Hockey Mizoram and Hockey Haryana will clash against Hockey Association of Odisha. (PTI)

Lacked self-belief in pressure situations last year, this season it stayed intact: Smriti Mandhana

NEW DELHI, March 18: Smriti Mandhana's self-belief wavered in pressure situations last year but this season she was able to conquer the demons in her mind when pushed against the wall, helping RCB land their first major title in franchise cricket.

Speaking to media after RCB beat Delhi Capitals in a low-scoring WPL final, Mandhana said she has matured as a captain and player since last season.

"One thing that I have learned is to believe in yourself. That was something which lacked in me last year when it did go wrong."

"I doubted a few things in myself but that was the real conversation with my mind, I need to keep trusting myself and I think that was the biggest learning for me," said Mandhana on Sunday night.

The second season saw Mandhana getting her hands on the trophy while Harmanpreet Kaur had led Mumbai Indians to the title in the inaugural edition. That only shows the depth of Indian cricket, said Mandhana.

"Last year when MI and DC were playing in the final, somewhere deep down I hoped that Harman lifts it because the first edition



of WPL and for an Indian captain to win, if not me it has to be Harman. So I was really happy for Harman and whole MI team," Mandhana said.

"Second season I became the second Indian captain to win. That really shows the kind of depth Indian cricket has and it's just the start, we still have a long way to go."

Former RCB skipper Virat Kohli, who is back in India for the IPL, was quick to congratulate Mandhana and the team following the eight-wicket triumph.

"I didn't hear anything what he (Kohli) was saying because it was too loud. He was just like thumbs up and I responded with thumbs up. He looked really, really happy, there was a bright smile," she said

referring to the video call with Kohli.

"I remember him coming last year, and talk which really helped me personally and also the whole team. He has been with the franchise almost for the last 15 years, so I could see the happiness on his face," Mandhana said.

DC were going great guns after opting to bat, reaching 64 for no loss in seven overs before RCB spinners -- Shreyanka Patil (4/12) and Sophie Molineux (3/20) pulled things back in middle overs to bowl their opponents out for 113.

Mandhana said staying calm in that pressure situation paid rich dividends.

"In the match today, 6 overs 60 runs, a few things didn't go our way, a field settings which didn't go our way but the only thing which stayed constant was the belief I have. I was not really panicked about it, I was calm today. I could have clear conversation with the bowlers."

"Sense of calmness since the eliminator. Today also we told each other not to worry and stick to our plans and not to complicate much. We didn't want to be 20/3 or 4 while chasing 110 odd runs," she

said. Mandhana particularly reserved high praise for young Shreyanka Patil, who took four wickets in the final.

"Shreyanka has just been brilliant. The first 3-4 matches didn't go her way. She came off a really tough zonal tournament. During a match there I remember having a chat with her when I said don't worry 17th March you are going to do something special, little did I know that will happen and she will get the purple cap."

"I think she is the most complete player to come to international cricket in the last two years. She feels she belongs to international cricket," she said.

Meanwhile, DC head coach Jonathan Batty felt they didn't do justice with the bat, but still fought valiantly to take the match to the last over.

"We fought magnificently, bowled and fielded magnificently. The game to lose with only 3 balls to go was absolutely amazing."

"We didn't do ourselves great justice with the bat that left us with a few runs short. We should have scored more after that fantastic start," he said. (PTI)

Lakshya, Sindhu spearhead India's challenge in Swiss Open



BASEL (SWITZERLAND), March 18: Star Indian shuttler Lakshya Sen is expected to continue his purple patch, while two-time Olympic medallist PV Sindhu will strive to regain top form at the Swiss Open Super 300 tournament, beginning here on Tuesday.

After first-round losses at the Malaysia Super 1000 and India Super 750 earlier in the year, Sen has gained momentum. The 22-year-old enters the USD 210,000 tournament on the back of semifinal appearances at the French Open and All England Championships.

The seventh-seeded Indian will open his campaign against Malaysian Leong Jun Hao and is likely to cross paths with 2021 world champion Lee Zii Jia.

Former world No. 1 Kidambi Srikanth will face Asian Games bronze medallist Wang Tzu-wei of Chinese Taipei in the first round while young Priyanshu Rajawat will take on Hong Kong's fourth seed Lee Cheuk Yiu.

After making headway in the French Open earlier this month, Sindhu, who is on a comeback trail after recovering from a left knee injury, made an early exit from the All England Championship. She was guilty of committing several unforced errors

and the former world champion would look to improve on that aspect.

The fourth-seeded Indian will once again meet Germany's Yvonne Li, who retired against Sindhu in the All England Championship opener last week.

She will face a tough customer in Busanan Ongbamrungsri in the quarterfinals and if she manages to tame the Thai shuttler, Sindhu is likely to face in-form reigning All England champion and nemesis Carolina Marin of Spain.

The other Indian in the fray in the women's singles, Akkrashi Kashyap has a tough draw. She will open her campaign against Canada's Michelle Li and if she emerges victorious, she will face the winner of the clash between Japan's Nozomi Okuhara and seventh seed Ratchanon Intanon of Thailand.

The sixth-seeded pair of Ashwini Ponnappa and Tanisha Crasto, who have been in good touch, will cross swords with the Indonesian combination of Meilysa Trias Puspitasari and Rachel Allesya Rose.

Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand, who have been seeded eighth, will have to fight it out against the American duo of Annie Xu and Kerry Xu. (PTI)

It's hard to believe Pakistan's Nadeem is struggling to get a new javelin: Chopra

NEW DELHI, March 18: Star Indian athlete Neeraj Chopra expressed astonishment that his rival from across the border Arshad Nadeem is struggling to get a new javelin, given his standing in the world of athletics.

Pakistan's ace javelin exponent Nadeem had won the 2022 Commonwealth Games gold in Birmingham with a massive 90.18m throw. He had bagged the bronze medal at the 2018 Jakarta Asian Games where Chopra had clinched the top spot.

While Chopra, the Olympic and world champion, and Nadeem are fierce competitors on the field, they are known for their camaraderie off the pitch.

"It is hard to believe that he has been struggling to get a new javelin. Given his credentials,

this should not be a big issue at all," Chopra told SAI Media on Monday.

Nadeem recently said he is struggling to acquire an international-standard javelin for several years and expressed his frustration about that.

"It has now got to a stage where the javelin is damaged and I have asked the national federation and my coach to do something about it before the Paris Olympics," Nadeem had said recently.

"When I started off in 2015, competing in international events I got this javelin... for an international athlete aiming to win a medal in the Olympic Games, you need proper equipment and training facilities," Nadeem added. (PTI)

Brisbane Olympics organisers scrap plans for their 2032 centerpiece and reject new stadium idea

BRISBANE, March 18: Brisbane Olympics organizers have scrapped plans to demolish and rebuild an iconic cricket ground as the centerpiece of the 2032 Games while also rejecting a review panel's recommendation for a new stadium in city parklands.

Queensland state's Premier Steven Miles instead announced Monday he'd prefer to upgrade an existing rugby stadium close to downtown Brisbane to host the opening and closing ceremonies.

Miles called for an independent review of Olympic planning in January as backlash intensified against the tripling of the cost to redevelop the so-called Gabba stadium.

Brisbane's former mayor Graham Quirk led a 60-day review which handed its findings to the Miles' state government on Monday, two days after council elections across the state.

The review delivered 30 recommendations, the central feature being construction of a new 55,000-seat stadium at Victoria Park at a cost of 3.4 billion Australian dollars (\$2.23 billion) instead of redeveloping the Gabba.

"I know that I said I'd do what the Quirk review recommended, but I cannot support the option they have landed on" regarding a new stadium, Miles told a news conference at Suncorp Stadium, the long-time home of the National Rugby League powerhouse Brisbane Broncos. "I ordered this review because I'd heard from Queenslanders that AS2.7 billion at the Gabba was too much, so I know that for Queenslanders AS3.4 billion at Victoria Park will be too much, so I'm ruling that out."



He said the option to upgrade Suncorp Stadium, which is walking distance of multiple train stations and the city, would make it ideal to host the opening and closing ceremonies for the Olympics.

His government also plans to upgrade another existing stadium in the city's south to host track and field. The stadium, now known as the Queensland Sport and Athletics Center, was the main venue for the 1982 Commonwealth Games.

The Australian Broadcasting Corp reported the total cost to refurbish those two stadiums would be AS1 billion (\$66 million). Organizers still need to finalize where an indoor stadium will be built to host swimming during the Olympics and

later be converted into an indoor arena and concert venue.

Quirk earlier told the ABC that the cost to build a new stadium on the former council-owned golf course "is likely to be marginally more" than the AS3 billion (\$2 billion) for the full Gabba rebuild but "with better operational efficiencies and outcomes that would deliver a true international standard venue."

"If a full Gabba rebuild was to occur, you still don't end up with a top-level tier one stadium because of the fact that it's very limited by space, and for that reason, that's where we landed on Victoria Park," he said Monday on ABC radio. "This is about building what is needed, and a legacy for the people of

Queensland." Debate over the plan to demolish and rebuild the existing stadium in the suburb of Woolloongabba, originally built in 1895 and most recently redeveloped in 2005, has raged since the plan was confirmed in November.

Australian Olympic Committee president Ian Chesterman last month indicated he didn't like the idea of rebuilding an aging stadium as one of its centerpiece venues for the 2032 Games.

International Olympic Committee vice-president John Coates, who was instrumental in helping secure the Summer Games for Australia's third-largest city, also offered alternatives to the Gabba.

"We've put it to the review committee we should abandon the Gabba and we should look for another site for the athletics," Coates told local media last month.

Coates proposed the opening ceremony be held at 52,000-seat Suncorp Stadium, formerly known as Lang Park, and track and field at the 48,000-capacity QSAC facility under IOC's so-called "New Norm" concept that aim to avoid cost blowouts for host cities.

The Miles government apparently has taken that advice, despite the Quirk review noting the transport and logistics issues meant "QSAC Stadium does not represent value for money."

Under the original bid plans, the Queensland state government unveiled a 2.7 billion Australian dollar (\$1.7 billion) Gabba rebuild that would have forced cricket and the Brisbane Lions Australian Rules Football team to relocate from 2025 to 2030.

Critics pointed to escalating costs after the plan's price tag blew out to almost

three times the original estimate in the Olympic bid.

Brisbane won the 2032 hosting rights in July 2021, when the bid was led by state Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk. The long-standing premier quit in December amid falling opinion polls and was replaced by her former deputy Miles, who instigated the Olympics review. (AP)

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