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- Israeli troops withdraw from Shifa Hospital, Gaza's largest
- Pak court suspends 14-year jail term of Imran Khan and his wife

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- Oppn cites 2015 RTI reply, jabs govt over 'change in stance'
- Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal taken to Tihar jail

Nearly 53,000 people affected ● Amit Shah assures assistance to CM

Thunderstorm claims 4 lives in state

GUWAHATI, April 1: Four persons were killed and nearly 53,000 people affected as a thunderstorm wreaked havoc in the state, officials said on Monday.

A four-year-old child died and two persons went missing after a boat capsized in the Brahmaputra in South Salmara-Mankachar district on Sunday night, while one each died in Cachar, West Karbi Anglong and Udalguri in storm and lightning related accidents.

Union home minister Amit Shah spoke to chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma over the phone to enquire about the situation in the state and assured him of all assistance.

The storm accompanied by a downpour lashed several parts of the state on Sunday evening, uprooting trees and electric poles and damaging houses, Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) CEO Gyanendra Dev Tripathi said.

"A country boat sank at 5 pm yesterday at Nepurer Alga village while heading to Nepurer Alga ghat from Sishumara ghat. A child's body was recovered by locals and two people are missing," he told PTI.

The deceased has been identified as Samin Mondal (4), while Kobat Ali Mondal (56) and Is-



mail Ali (8) are missing, Tripathi said.

"An SDRF team started a search operation this morning and deep divers from Dhubri and Goalpara districts also joined them. An NDRF team is en-route to the site to assist in the rescue efforts,"

he said. The ASDMA is also sending drones with pilots for surveillance during the operation, the CEO said. He said there were 15 passengers on the boat, and the rest of them swam to safety with the help of locals.

Meanwhile, in Cachar, a woman was caught in the midst of the storm and lost her life. She has been identified as Sakhi Begum Laskar (30) of Sonai, the ASDMA said.

Incidents of lightning killed Pintu Chauhan (17) of Donka in West Karbi Anglong and Ruparam Basumatary (46) of Mazbat in Udalguri, it said.

Besides, six people were injured when lightning struck them. They were admitted to the Silchar Medical College and (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Kejriwal called AAP national treasurer confused: ED

NEW DELHI, April 1: Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal called his party's national treasurer "confused" when he was confronted with his statement on issues related to the affairs of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the Enforcement Directorate claimed before a court on Monday.

The special Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) court of Judge Kaveri Baweja sent the 55-year-old Kejriwal, also the national convener of the AAP, to judicial custody till April 15 in connection with the money laundering probe linked to alleged irregularities in the Delhi excise policy for 2021-22, which was later scrapped. He was brought to Tihar jail and will be lodged in jail number 2.

The ED also alleged that Kejriwal, during his questioning, said AAP communication in-charge Vijay Nair "did not report to him" but to his cabinet colleagues Atishi and Saurabh Bharadwaj and that his interaction with Nair was "lim-

ited". Nair was arrested in this case by the ED.

The federal agency charged Kejriwal, in its application filed while seeking his judicial custody, of being "evasive", giving "misleading replies" and "concealing information" during his questioning in the remand period after his arrest on March 21.

It has earlier called him the "kingpin and key conspirator" of the alleged scam.

The AAP and its leaders have repeatedly denied the charges of wrongdoing, with Kejriwal alleging that the case was built by the BJP-led Centre to create a "smoke-screen" that the AAP is a corrupt party.

"The arrestee (Kejriwal) has even given false and contrary evidence vis-a-vis other members of the AAP. When he was confronted with the statements given by his own party leaders he has called them confused," the ED told the court. "National Treasurer of AAP N D Gupta (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Cong leaders 'a call away' from joining BJP: CM Sarma

MAJULI, April 1: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said Congress leaders are just a phone call away from joining the ruling BJP, though he refrained from doing so due to the challenge of accommodating many of them within the party.

Additionally, he dismissed the notion that opposition parties uniting against the ruling regime would affect the BJP's electoral prospects in the state.

Speaking to reporters after concluding a 15-km bicycle rally in Majuli to kick off a fortnight-long 'Vijay Sankalp Yatra', Sarma emphasised his confidence in the BJP's strength even as the state's five Lok Sabha constituencies prepare for elections on April 19.

Notably, Majuli is now part of the Jorhat Lok Sabha constituency post-delimitation, where BJP's incumbent MP Topon Kumar Gogoi faces Congress' Gaurav Gogoi, who is the deputy leader of opposition in the outgoing Lok Sabha.



Gogoi represented Kaliabor in the outgoing House, which has been rechristened Kaziranga following the delimitation of constituencies in the state.

Besides Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur and Kaziranga are the other constituencies where polls are slated in the first phase.

Sarma's rally accompanied by numerous party members and supporters, received attention from diverse demographics, with attendees offering traditional Assamese scarves as a sign of respect.

"If I ask today, all of them will come. The Muslim leaders will come by 2032, and the Hindu leaders will join if I call them," the CM said, when (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Arunachal an Indian state, nothing will be gained by changing names: Jaishankar

SURAT, April 1: Arunachal Pradesh was, is, and will remain an Indian state in the future, Union external affairs minister S Jaishankar asserted on Monday, days after China released 30 new names of various places in the border state.

Addressing a press conference, Jaishankar said nothing will be gained by changing the names.

"If I change the name of your house, will it become mine? Arunachal Pradesh was an Indian state, is an Indian state and will remain so in the future. Nothing will be gained by changing names," said the external affairs minister, who is on a two-day visit to Gujarat. He was responding to a question on Beijing's latest move to re-emphasise its claim over the Indian state.

The Chinese ministry of civil affairs released the fourth list of

standardised geographical names in Zangnan, the Chinese name for Arunachal Pradesh which Beijing claims as part of south Tibet, state-run Global Times reported on Sunday.

The official website of the ministry posted 30 additional names for the region.

Queried on Indians being hired and forced to fight alongside the Russian Army on the Russia-Ukraine border, Jaishankar said the Indian government has "strongly" raised this issue before its Russian counterpart after two Indians died in the war zone.

He also said efforts are on to bring back 23 to 24 Indians who were wrongfully hired to serve in the Russian Army.

"So far, two Indians have lost their lives. It took some time to bring their bodies back from Russia because (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Assam govt announces localised public holiday

GUWAHATI, April 1: The Assam government on Monday announced localised public holidays in different constituencies during the three-phase Lok Sabha polls in the state.

The notification, issued by an order of the Governor, announced public holidays on April 19, 26, and May 7 in areas where polling is scheduled on those dates under the Negotiable Instruments Act of 1881.

In the first phase on April 19, polling will be held in five constituencies: Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Kaziranga, Lakhimpur, and Sonitpur. The second phase on April 26 will see polling in another five seats: Silchar, Karimganj, Diphu, Nagaon, and Darrang-Udalguri. The remaining four constituencies - Guwahati, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

No coercive action against Cong over tax demand notices in view of LS polls: I-T dept

NEW DELHI, April 1: In a relief for the Congress, the income tax department on Monday told the Supreme Court that it will not take any coercive action against the opposition party for tax demand notices of ₹ 3500 crore approximately in view of Lok Sabha elections.

A bench of justices BV Nagarathna and Augustine George Masih recorded the statement of solicitor general Tushar Mehta, representing the IT department that no precipitative action will be taken in the prevailing circumstances till the final adjudication of the matter. "At the commencement of the hearing on this application, the solicitor general appearing for the respondent department, submitted that there is no dispute that



on several dates in the month of March 2024, demands have been raised as against the appellant herein totalling approximately ₹ 3500 crore," the bench noted.

It further recorded, "It is further submitted (by SG Tushar Mehta) that issues which arise in these appeals are yet to be adjudicated upon but having regard to the situ-

ations now, the department does not wish to precipitate the matter as much as no coercive steps shall be taken by the respondent department with regard to the aforesaid demand of ₹ 3500 crore approximately."

The bench posted the Congress' plea against different tax demand notices for hearing on July 24, 2024. Senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, appearing for the Congress party, appreciated the gesture terming it "gracious" and said that all demand notices were issued in February and March for different years totalling ₹ 3500 crore approximately. "I am very rarely rendered speechless. By my learned friend's intervention, I have been rendered speechless. Kindly have it in July," he said. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

ASDC general secretary accuses former MP of destroying committee



DIPHU, April 1: General secretary of Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) and former chief executive member (CEM) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Jotsom Bey said Jayanta Rongpi, a former MP has destroyed the ASDC as a CPI (ML) worker.

Bey has been fielded as the ASDC MP candidate

from 6-Diphu (ST) parliamentary constituency in the ensuing second phase of parliamentary elections in the state, voting for which is scheduled to take place on April 26.

The ASDC, Karbi Students Association (KSA) and Karbi Nimso Chingthur Asong (KNCA) jointly commemorated the 29th anniversary of MoU signing with the central government on April 1, 1995.

Addressing party workers and supporters during the celebrations held at Bura Tisso village, Inglongkiri Model Village, Bey said, "Deserters like Jayanta Rongpi, who as a member of CPI (ML) joined in the autonomous state movement launched by ASDC and destroyed the party. He and other selfish leaders made money to enrich themselves. It is not the fault of ASDC, but those deserters, who have ruined the ASDC." The ASDC general secretary said, "When I was the CEM I did not allow outsiders to settle in Karbi Anglong. Our government opposed the setting up of Tiger Reserve in Kaziranga National Park." Bey said he is in the ASDC for the movement on autonomous state for 50 years now. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

China releases 30 more names for places in Arunachal Pradesh

BELIJING, April 1: China has released a fourth list of 30 new names of various places in Arunachal Pradesh amid Beijing's stepped-up assertions in recent weeks to re-emphasise its claim over the Indian state.

India has been rejecting China renaming places in Arunachal Pradesh, asserting that the state is an integral part of the country and assigning "invented" names does not alter this reality.

The Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs released the fourth list of standardised geographical names in Zangnan, the Chinese name for Arunachal Pradesh which Beijing claims as part of south Tibet, state-run Global Times reported on Sunday.

The official website of the ministry posted 30 additional names for the region.

Set to take effect from May 1, the implementation measures stipulate in Article 13 that "place names in foreign languages that may harm China's territorial claims and sovereignty rights shall not be directly quoted or translated without authorisation," the report said.

The Chinese Civil Affairs Ministry released the first list of the standardised names of six places in Zangnan was released in 2017, while

the second list of 15 places was issued in 2021 followed by another list with names for 11 places in 2023.

The recent statements by China to reassert its claims over the state started with Beijing lodging a diplomatic protest with India over Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Arunachal Pradesh, where he dedicated to the nation the Sela Tunnel built at an altitude of 13,000 feet in Arunachal Pradesh.

The tunnel will provide all-weather connectivity to strategically located Tawang and is expected to ensure better movement of troops along the frontier region.

Chinese Foreign and Defence ministries have issued a flurry of statements to highlight China's claims over the area.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on March 23 dismissed China's repeated claims on Arunachal Pradesh as "ludicrous" and that the frontier state was a "natural part of India".

"This is not a new issue. I mean, China has laid claim, it has expanded its claim. The claims are ludicrous to begin with and remain ludicrous today," he said in response to a question on the Arunachal issue after delivering a lecture at the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

India set to experience extreme heat during April-June, with central, western peninsular parts bearing the brunt

Increasing heat unlikely to impact wheat crop, says IMD

NEW DELHI, April 1: The increase in temperatures will not have any impact on the harvest-ready wheat crop, the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) said on Monday.

India is set to experience extreme heat during the April-June period, with the central and the western peninsular parts expected to face the worst impact, IMD director general Mrutyunjay Mohapatra said during a press conference.

The Met office said maximum temperatures are very likely to be above normal by 2-3 degrees Celsius over many parts of north India and the east and the west coasts, and near normal over the rest of the country, during the wheat harvesting period.

However, there is no heat wave warning for wheat producing states, except Madhya Pradesh, the IMD chief said.

"Temperatures are around 37-40 degrees Celsius in Madhya Pradesh at present and are likely to go up to 42 degrees next week. Since 90 per cent of



the wheat harvesting in the state is over, there will be no effect," he said, citing data from the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare.

Even if temperatures go above 35 degrees Celsius, there will be no impact in Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, he added.

India produced 110.55 million tons of wheat during 2022-23. Of this, Uttar Pradesh accounted for 30.40 per cent, Madhya Pradesh 20.56 per cent, Punjab 15.18 per cent, Haryana 9.89 per cent and Rajasthan 9.62 per cent.

An early onslaught of heat waves impacted the wheat crop in India in 2022, with production declining to 107.7 million tons from 109.59 million tons in 2021. This prompted the country, the world's second-largest wheat producer, to ban exports.

The wheat crop is sown in October, and harvesting in most parts begins around April.

The IMD reported that 80-85 per cent of the wheat crop was sown either early or timely between October 25 and November 30, with climate-resilient varieties planted over 70 per cent of the sown area.

This year, wheat production is expected to be around 112-114 million tons. Government data shows that the country's wheat production increased from 99.87 million tonnes in 2017-18 to 110.55 million tonnes in 2022-23, and the area under wheat cultivation rose from 29.67 million hectares to 31.78 million hectares during the period. (PTI)

PM Modi calls for greater economic self-reliance, making rupee more acceptable, accessible globally

MUMBAI, April 1: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday said India needs to increase its economic self-reliance in the next 10 years to mitigate the impact of global crises, and make rupee more accessible and acceptable throughout the world.

The Prime Minister also said the workload on bureaucrats will increase substantially soon after formation of the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre.

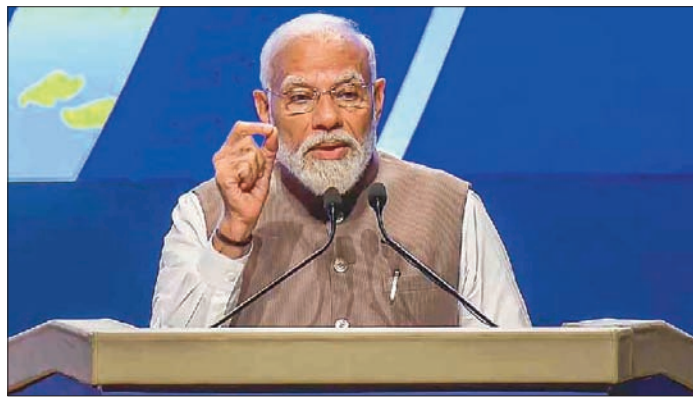
Modi was addressing the opening ceremony of the 90th anniversary celebrations of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) here. The RBI commenced its operations on April 1, 1935.

He highlighted the role of the RBI in speedy and sustainable growth of the country.

Noting the achievement of the RBI in infusing rule-based discipline and fiscally prudent policies in the banking sector, the Prime Minister asked for advance estimates of the needs of various sectors to take proactive steps while assuring the banks of government's support. Modi praised the role of the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) for taking steps to control inflation.

Steps like active price monitoring and fiscal consolidation kept inflation at a moderate level even during difficult times of the Covid pandemic, Modi said, lauding the RBI's role in the progress of the economy.

"Nobody can stop a country



from progressing if its priorities are clear," he said, adding that India is becoming the engine of global growth with 15 per cent share in world GDP growth.

Modi said the Indian economy is creating new records at a time when many countries in the world are still trying to recover from the economic shock of the pandemic.

Highlighting the importance of creating a balance between inflation control and growth for any developing country, he expressed confidence that the RBI can become a model and play a leadership role in the world, supporting the entire Global South.

"Friends, together we have to do another big thing in the next 10 years. We have to increase India's economic self-reliance. We have to try that our economy should be least affected by global crises," he said. He emphasised the efforts to make rupee more accessible and

acceptable throughout the world.

Stressing the importance of innovation in the 21st century, the Prime Minister asked to be prepared for proposals that will come with regard to cutting-edge technologies with teams and identification of personnel for the task.

He asked bankers and regulators to be ready for the needs of new and traditional sectors such as space and tourism.

He mentioned the expert view that in the coming years, Ayodhya is going to become the biggest religious tourism centre in the world.

Modi also underlined the importance of a strong banking industry for providing required funding to the projects of the nation.

He noted the changes brought about by technologies such as AI and blockchain and stressed the importance of cyber security in the growing digital banking system.

The PM also emphasised on the

importance of coordination of monetary and fiscal policies in the GDP and the economy of the country. He recalled the 80-year celebration of the RBI in 2014 and remembered the challenges and problems like NPA and stability faced by the banking system of the country at that time.

He said starting from there, "today we have reached a point where the Indian banking system is being seen as a strong and sustainable banking system of the world as the near moribund banking system of that time is now in profit and showing record credit".

He said the gross NPA of the banks, which was around 11.25 per cent in 2018, has reached below 3 per cent by September 2023.

Also, the "twin-balance sheet" problem is now a thing of the past, and banks have registered a credit growth of 15 per cent.

The RBI has played a significant role in all these accomplishments, he added.

The Prime Minister also released a commemorative coin to mark 90 years of the RBI.

Maharashtra Governor Ramesh Bains, Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, Deputy Chief Ministers Devendra Fadnis and Ajit Pawar, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, Ministers of State for Finance Bhagwat Kishanrao Karad and Pankaj Chaudhary were present on the occasion, along with RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das. (PTI)

No new change in income tax regime from April 1: FinMin

NEW DELHI, April 1: The finance ministry on Monday said there is no change in the new income tax regime for individuals for the current fiscal year and individual taxpayers can opt out of the regime at the time of filing their ITR. Clarifying on social media posts claiming certain changes in the new tax regime effective April 1, the ministry said, "There is no new change which is coming in from 01.04.2024."

A modified new income tax regime was rolled out from the financial year beginning April 1, 2023, for individuals under which the tax rates are "significantly lower".

However, the benefit of various exemptions and deductions (other than standard deduction of ₹ 50,000 from salary and ₹ 15,000 from family pension) is not available, as in the old regime.

"New tax regime is the default tax regime. However, tax payers can choose the tax regime (old or new) that they think is beneficial to them... Option for opting out from the new tax regime is available till filing of return for the AY 2024-25," the ministry said.

Under the new I-T regime, income of up to ₹ 3 lakh is exempt from tax. A 5 per cent tax is levied on income between ₹ 3-6 lakh, 10 per cent for income between ₹ 6-9 lakh. Income between ₹ 9-12 lakh and ₹ 12-15 lakh is subject to 15 per cent and 20 per cent tax, respectively. A 30 per cent I-T would be applicable on income above ₹ 15 lakh.

The new tax regime was set as "a default regime" from 2023-24 and the Assessment Year corresponding to this is AY 2024-25. This can be changed by the taxpayer at the time of filing Income Tax Returns (ITR) by an individual.

Eligible persons without any business income will have the option to choose the regime for each financial year.

So, they can choose new tax regime in one financial year and old tax regime in another year and vice-versa, the ministry said in a statement.

The old tax regime which is still in force and offers a host of deductions and exemptions, exempts income up to ₹ 2.5 lakh from taxes. Income from ₹ 2.5-5 lakh attracts 5 per cent tax, and 20 per cent for income between ₹ 5 lakh and ₹ 10 lakh. A 30 per cent tax is levied on income above ₹ 10 lakh. (PTI)

PM says growth should be RBI's top most priority next decade, with trust and stability

MUMBAI, April 1: The Reserve Bank has to accord "top-most priority" to growth and at the same time focus on trust and stability, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Monday.

Addressing the inauguration of the event commemorating 90 years of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) here, Modi said the next decade is as important for attaining the goal of developed India as it is for the RBI, which will complete 100 years of existence in 2035.

Modi said as per the "mantra" of the central bank, "The RBI should make fast growth its top-most priority, along with focusing on trust and stability."

Since 2016, keeping inflation under check has become the primary goal of the RBI. Often, there are voices who have pitched for additional attention to growth through measures like rate cuts.



The comments come days ahead of the first monetary policy review of the new fiscal year.

Modi said the "reflection" of double-digit inflation rate was not visible in the financial policies earlier, and claimed credit for giving the RBI the rights to take decisions to curb inflation.

The six-member monetary policy committee (MPC) has also done some very good work on its mandate over the years, Modi said.

The government's efforts, including delivering on fiscal consolidation and active price monitoring, also helped in the cooling of inflation, he added.

Stock markets start new fiscal on a high; Sensex, Nifty scale new lifetime highs

MUMBAI, April 1: Stock markets started the new fiscal on a high with benchmark Sensex and Nifty scaling fresh record high levels in intra-day trade before settling in the green on Monday, backed by firm trends in Asian markets and foreign fund inflows.

Extending its winning momentum to the third day in a row, the 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 363.20 points or 0.49 per cent to settle at 74,014.55. During the day, it zoomed 603.27 points or 0.81 per cent to hit its record intra-day high of 74,254.62.

The NSE Nifty climbed 135.10 points or 0.61 per cent to 22,462. During the day, it jumped 203.05 points or 0.90 per cent to hit the all-time peak of 22,529.95.

Realty and metal shares performed well while FMCG and auto traded subdued.

From the Sensex basket, JSW Steel, Tata Steel, UltraTech Cement, NTPC, Larsen & Toubro and HDFC Bank were the major gainers.

Titan, Nestle, Bharti Airtel and IndusInd Bank were among the laggards.

"The Indian market boarded on a strong trajectory at the onset of the new financial year, with indications pointing towards a continuation of this favourable momentum, in the near term. This confidence is supported by a global rally in expectation of a Fed rate cut in June and a healthy domestic earnings growth forecast in Q4FY24," Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services said.

Metal stocks excelled, owing to the swift pace of Chinese PMI data, indicating traction in the



economic recovery, Nair added.

In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge jumped 2.98 per cent and the midcap index climbed 1.64 per cent. Among the indices, realty zoomed 4.18 per cent, telecommunication jumped 3.44 per cent, metal by 3.39 per cent, commodities by 2.91 per cent, utilities by 2.62 per cent and industrials by 2.16 per cent. Consumer Durables and auto were the laggards.

Among Asian markets, Seoul and Shanghai settled in the green while Tokyo ended lower. Wall Street ended on a mixed note on Thursday.

Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) bought equities worth ₹ 188.31 crore on Thursday, according to exchange data.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 0.10 per cent to USD 86.91 a barrel. Equity markets were closed on Friday for Good Friday.

In the 2023-24 financial year, the BSE benchmark jumped 14,659.83 points or 24.85 per cent, while the Nifty soared 4,967.15 points or 28.61 per cent. (PTI)

Potato prices in Bengal likely to ease to ₹ 20-21/kg this week

KOLKATA, April 1: Potato prices, which soared by 30-40 per cent to ₹ 24-25 for the 'Jyoti' variety in the last fortnight due to reasons like lower crop yield and shortage of labourers during Holi holidays, are expected to ease to ₹ 20-21 a kg in a week, according to an official. 'Jyoti' and its variants are mass-selling varieties, while the premium 'Chandramukhi' variety rose to ₹ 30.

Local shopkeepers and markets attributed the price rise of potatoes to the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. It is commonly understood that during elections, traders have to contribute donations to political parties, which

are then passed on to customers. Industry officials, however, ruled out this rationale.

"I think from next week onward, the price of potatoes should gradually go down to ₹ 20-21 a kg. There had been an acute shortage of labourers due to the Holi holidays, and there had been some loss of crops due to sudden rain, which led to the rise," West Bengal Vendors' Association president Kamal Dey told PTI. He said that 80 per cent of the labourers needed for loading and unloading are migrants who return home during the Holi festival but will begin to return this week. Patit Paban

De, senior member of the West Bengal Cold Storage Association, said there will be an estimated 10 per cent lower production of tubers, given the trend and reports of loading of crops in cold storages. "Till now, loading is only between 70-75 per cent on average. At the maximum, loading will not cross 80 per cent at best given the trend. Last year loading was 88-89 per cent," he said. He said that the wholesale price in the Hooghly district market is ₹ 16 a kg, and under no circumstances should the price be over ₹ 22/kg in retail markets of Kolkata. (PTI)

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Thunderstorm claims 4 lives

Hospital, it added. In a bulletin, the ASDMA said the storm affected nearly 53,000 people across 919 villages in 22 districts. A total of 14,633 houses were either partially or fully damaged. It also said that over 10 hectares of cropland have been damaged, while at least three cows died. Huts, schools, shops, Anganwadi centres and other institutions have been damaged across the state, while scores of vehicles were damaged when trees fell on them.

An official said that hundreds of visitors were stranded inside Garbhanga Reserve Forest near Guwahati till the early hours as the entire road was blocked by uprooted trees. "The SDRF and district administration carried out rescue operations till around 3 am and cleared the road. Hundreds of people were visiting the forest as it was a Sunday," he said. People faced a harrowing time in reaching their destinations with many roads blocked till this morning by uprooted trees and electric poles. Besides Sarma, Shah spoke to the chief ministers of West Bengal and Manipur in the wake of severe losses suffered by the three states due to the storm and assured them of all possible help from the Centre. Shah also appealed to the BJP workers in the three states to provide every possible help to the affected people during this hour of distress.

Sarma said, "His assurance of full support and assistance for relief and rehabilitation on behalf of the Indian government is deeply appreciated." The chief minister's office said on X that Sarma was constantly monitoring the impact caused by heavy rains and storm, while the State Emergency Operation Centre was coordinating round the clock with all the district administrations. The storm also caused damage to the terminal building of the Guwahati airport, forcing the authority to halt operations for some time and divert six flights to other destinations. (PTI)

Kejriwal called AAP

(practising CA and former president of Institute of Chartered Accountants of India) in his statement has revealed that it is the national convenor Sh Arvind Kejriwal who appoints the state election in-charge/prabhari," it said. "State prabhari is supposed to manage all election campaign related matters. In case of Goa elections Sh Durgesh Pathak (AAP MLA) was chosen. However, Sh Arvind Kejriwal states that it is the PAC (Political Affairs Committee) which decided the state election in-charge," it said.

The ED claimed that Kejriwal first told it that N D Gupta, also a Rajya Sabha member of the AAP, is an "active member of the party and is a member of the PAC and has knowledge of the party functioning but when confronted with the statement of Sh N D Gupta wherein he (Gupta) reveals that the national convenor takes such decisions, Sh Arvind Kejriwal calls the National Treasurer confused".

The agency has alleged earlier that Nair, on behalf of AAP leaders, has received kickbacks to the tune of ₹ 100 crore from the 'south group' liquor lobby that allegedly involves BRS leader K Kavitha and others.

It had also claimed that Nair "arranged a video call through facetime (a video calling facility on iPhone) on his phone for Sameer (Mahandru) and Sh Arvind Kejriwal, where Sh Arvind said to Sh Sameer that, Vijay is his boy and that Sh Sameer should trust him and carry on with him".

Sameer Mahandru, a liquor businessman, was arrested in this case by the ED. The ED said it asked Kejriwal why Vijay Nair was staying in the bungalow of a cabinet minister (Kailash Gahlot) and worked at the CM's camp office but he claimed "unawareness" about the persons who worked at his camp office. The agency said Kejriwal was shown "evidence" about more than 10 meetings that Nair had with other co-accused named in this case like liquor manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers and even "middlemen" like Dinesh Arora and Abhishek Boinpally and was asked under what authority was he attending these meetings?

It said Kejriwal "evaded" the question by saying he was unaware about these persons. The ED said the CM again claimed ignorance when he was shown various "evidence" of ₹ 45 crore worth hawala transfers to Goa, which the agency has claimed was meant for the party's poll campaign in the state. It asked the court not to release Kejriwal as he was "highly influential and there was every likelihood that he would influence the witnesses and tamper with the evidence".

The excise case pertains to alleged corruption and money laundering in formulating and executing the Delhi government's now-scrapped excise policy for 2021-22. Delhi Lieutenant Governor V K Saxena recommended a CBI probe into the alleged irregularities in the formulation and implementation of the liquor policy. Subsequently, the ED registered a case under the PMLA. (PTI)

Cong leaders 'a call

asked if more Congress leaders are in queue to join the ruling party as several leaders and workers from the opposition party have joined BJP over the last few weeks. Asked about two women Congress MLAs Nandita Das and Sibamoni Bora, who are campaigning for the party candidates, Sarma suggested their willingness to switch sides but noted the limitations on calling everyone.

On state Congress chief Bhupen Kumar Borah reportedly filing a defamation case against him, Sarma said he has been saying only good things about the opposition leader. "Case is filed when defamation happens. But here, I have said he can be the chief minister. I am giving him an elevated position. How can that be defamatory?" Sarma questioned back. He also reiterated his assertion that Borah will join the BJP by early next year.

On the issue of opposition parties fielding candidates against each other despite initial collaboration, Sarma remained unfazed, attributing the electorate's focus solely on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership.

"The only factor in this election is Modi ji. Everyone wants to make him the PM again. The result will be same even if all the opposition parties come together," he said, exuding confidence of the BJP-led alliance sweeping the elections in the state as well as the entire country.

Highlighting development efforts in Majuli, Sarma outlined plans for infrastructure projects, including bridges and a hospital combining allopathic, naturopathic, and ayurvedic treatments. (PTI)

Arunachal an Indian state,

it was not that easy. We raised this issue strongly before Russia, be it our Ambassador in Moscow or our external affairs secretary meeting the Russian Ambassador in New Delhi," said the external affairs minister. He said India's stand is very clear on this issue. "This is totally wrong. An Indian must never serve in some other country's army. If any middlemen are involved in hiring Indians, then it is the responsibility of Russia to stop them. We are trying to bring back nearly 23 to 24 Indians who are still there," Jaishankar added.

Responding to Ladakh-based climate activist Sonam Wangchuk's allegation that China has encroached upon Indian territory, Jaishankar said the Indian Army knows what to do in such situations.

"Every activist has his own thoughts. See, you all know that our Army is already deployed there to stop any attempt of infiltration along the Line of Actual Control. The Army knows what they are supposed to do," he said. Queried on the progress made in signing a Free Trade Agreement with the European Union (EU), he said negotiations are underway because India is also keen to sign the pact so that the country's textile industry gets a level-playing field in Europe. On the issue of Indian baby girl Ariha Shah, who has been in the custody of German authorities since 2021 when she was just seven months old, Jaishankar said efforts are on to bring her back.

He also said, "We are trying to see that her custody is given to an Indian couple if not her parents." "We have been raising this issue with the German government for some time. I have also met with the parents of the girl. However, since the matter is in court there, it will take some time. Some progress has been made so far. Our embassy officials met her and tried to familiarise her with Indian culture," Jaishankar added. (PTI)

Assam govt announces localised

Dhubri, Barpeta, and Kokrajhar - will go to the polls in the third phase on May 7. All government and non-government offices, PRIs, urban local bodies, educational institutions, business and commercial establishments including banks, tea gardens, and industries within the specified jurisdiction of the constituencies will remain closed on polling days, the general administration department order said. (PTI)

No coercive action against

At the outset, Mehta said, "To balance the equity. The petitioner is a political party. Based upon the 2016 judgement, which is under challenge, we have raised the demand of ₹ 1700 crore. Since the election is going on we would not like any problem to arise for any party and therefore, till the matter is heard after the election, we will not take any action for recovery of ₹1700 crore."

He said that the impugned judgement of the Delhi high court is of March 23, 2016, and based upon the parameters set by it, a tax demand was raised against the party in 2021. "They were given an option to pay 20 per cent of that demand but they did not avail. Thereafter, nothing was paid. Therefore in 2024, we recovered ₹ 135 crore of 2021 demand and based upon the same parameters, now we have issued a demand of ₹ 1700 crore approximately," Mehta submitted.

He added that the I-T department has a lot to say on the merit of the issue and they would like to file a reply to the main petition filed against the high court's verdict. Justice Nagarathna asked Mehta whether the demand notices were the subject matter of the petition.

Mehta replied, "No, that is not the subject matter of the petition." Elaborating on the sequence of events, Mehta said in 2016, the high court gave the judgement and laid down parameters. "Based upon that we (I-T department) have raised the demand of ₹ 135 crore and it is recovered. Now, based upon that very parameter which has been laid down by the high court in 2016, in different proceedings for different reasons, which I am not going into because that will muddy the water, but I have much to say, we have raised the demand of ₹ 1700 crore," he said. (PTI)

ASDC general secretary

He also said that after the signing of MoU the power to appoint LP and High school teachers was with KAAC. Even the principal of the Diphu Government College was appointed by KAAC at that time. However, in the subsequent 15 years of Congress rule in KAAC, it has surrendered its powers to the state government. These people are now in the BJP. Bey said the ASDC is doing what BJP MP and MLAs could not do. The ASDC has opposed the implementation of CAA and UCC in the sixth schedule districts of Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong and the government has agreed to it. The Congress and All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) are not opposed to UCC and CAA.

On the accusation that ASDC is contesting the Lok Sabha election to help BJP win the election, the general secretary said that it was for helping BJP win, then the ASDC would not have placed its candidate.

On not being able to place a consensus opposition candidate Bey clarified it was the APHLC and Congress that had not agreed to it. The celebrations were attended by ASDC vice president, Dhoniram Tisso, member, ASDC central committee, Bidyasing Kro and president of ASDC Lumbajong Constituent Committee, Ramsing Bey, KNCA president, Maikon Rongpharpi and ASDC Youth Front president, Premson Bey.

China releases 30 more

prestigious Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) of the National University of Singapore (NUS). "So, I think we've been very clear, very consistent on this. And I think you know that is something which will be part of the boundary discussions which are taking place," he said.

Beijing was also peeved over the US statement recognising Arunachal Pradesh as part of Indian territory. State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said on March 9 that "the US recognises Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory, and we strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to advance territorial claims by incursions or encroachments, military or civilian, across the Line of Actual Control." (PTI)

Two nominations filed for second phase

GUWAHATI, April 1: Two candidates, one each in Silchar (SC) and Nagaon, filed their nominations for the second phase of polls to five parliamentary constituencies in Assam on April 26, an election official said.

Radhey Shyam Biswas, a former Lok Sabha MP from All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), filed his nomination in Silchar, while Saiful Islam Chowdhury of Asom Jana Morcha filed in Nagaon.

Biswas, previously elected as an AIUDF candidate from Karimganj constituency in 2014, later joined AITC after losing to BJP's Kripanath Malah in 2019.

As of now, five nominations have been filed for the second phase, including two in Karimganj and one in Diphu.

The second phase will witness elections in Nagaon, Darrang-Udaluri, Diphu (ST), Silchar (SC), and Karimganj constituencies.

Notable candidates in this phase include Congress sitting MP Pradyut Bordoloi from Nagaon, BJP MP Dilip Saikia in Darrang-Udaluri, and Assam Excise minister Parimal Suklabaidya in Silchar, among others.

The last date for filing nominations is April 4, with scrutiny on April 5 and the last date for withdrawal of nominations being April 8.

Polling for the 14 Sabha constituencies in Assam will be conducted in the first three phases of the seven-phase general elections on April 19, 26, and May 7, with five constituencies each in the first and second phases and four in the third phase.

In the first phase, 35 candidates are in the fray from Kaziranga, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Sonitpur, and Lakhimpur constituencies.

In the outgoing Lok Sabha, BJP held nine seats, Congress three, AIUDF one, and an independent one from the state. (PTI)

UPPL welcomes 200 new members in Kokrajhar



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, April 1: More than 200 people from seven villages representing different communities have joined the UPPL party at a program held at the central youth office of UPPL party, Habrubari in Kokrajhar on Monday.

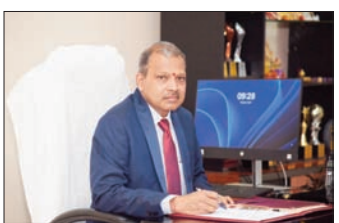
The newly joined members were from the BPF party under Kokrajhar subdivision, and UPPL party leaders offered them a warm welcome and felicitation with party mufflers.

Remarkably, people cutting across communities are coming forward to join and support the UPPL party in the Bodoland region. People have expressed their willingness to extend support, and accordingly, the UPPL party is gaining popularity among citizens as the UPPL-led UPPL-BJP-GSP alliance government is rendering services for bringing healthy welfare and development to society.

MLA of Kokrajhar East LAC, Lawrence Islay, UPPL Women Cell president, Pratibha Brahma, media secretary Hantigiri Narzary, and several senior party leaders were present at the event.

MLA Islay said that common masses across communities in the Bodoland region are coming forward to extend support to the UPPL party, and thus UPPL party's popularity is massively gaining among citizens in today's life. He said that the UPPL-BJP-GSP alliance government in Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) is relentlessly rendering services for the welfare and development of the common masses since its inception to power. He said that the UPPL party is committed to working for all-round development of society and accordingly initiated many humanitarian welfare and development schemes in the Bodoland region for paving healthy development.

New business unit head at NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, April 1: K C Muraleedharan has taken charge as the business unit head of NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati, effective from Monday i.e. April 1, 2024. With an illustrious career spanning over three decades, Muraleedharan brings with him a wealth of experience and expertise in the power sector across the country. A graduate in mechanical engineering from Bhopal University, Mu-

raleedharan has held key positions in various NTPC establishments, including NTPC Vindhyachal, Kawas, Ratnagiri, Vallur, and the Engineering Office Complex (EOC) at Noida. Muraleedharan commenced his journey with NTPC as an executive trainee in 1989 and has since demonstrated exemplary leadership and dedication in every role he has undertaken.

Prior to his current appointment, Muraleedharan served as the chief general manager (O&M) at NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati, where he played a pivotal role in overseeing operational efficiency and excellence. In his new capacity, he will be responsible for coordinating all activities at NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati in Kokrajhar district,

which boasts a generating capacity of 750 MW (3x250 MW).

Throughout his career, Muraleedharan has undergone extensive training in various domains, including safety, power plant efficiency, preventive vigilance, coal coordination, O&M practices, human resources, advance leadership programme, and commercial aspects specific to NTPC. His commitment to continuous learning and development depicts his dedication to excellence in the power sector.

Under his able guidance, NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati is poised to further strengthen its position as a key player in the power generation landscape while upholding the highest standards of efficiency, safety, and sustainability.

Union minister criticises Congress's legacy, highlights BJP's inclusive growth agenda

BJP's developmental politics triumphs over divisive tactics: Sarbananda Sonowal



HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, April 1: The Union minister, Sarbananda Sonowal, addressed a series of meetings in the Khowang Legislative constituency as the campaigning for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections picks up.

Sonowal tore through the inept and corrupt regimes of Congress for failing to deliver and betraying the trust of the people during six decades of misrule.

Speaking on the occasion, the senior BJP leader, Sarbananda

Sonowal, said, "It is evident that people have chosen BJP's developmental politics over the divisive plots of Congress, which divided our society for far too long. Under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, we are driven by a vision of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas', essentially delivering inclusive growth and development for all sections of society. For six decades, the misrule of Congress has created rifts, resulting in unrest, differential treatment, and

rampant corruption. Congress has become synonymous with rampant corruption, nepotism, and their obsession to please one family. Their complete oblivion for public welfare policies, disregard for the cause of nation-building, and living inside a bubble of nepotism has resulted in their irrelevance in this election."

Criticising the Opposition, Sarbananda Sonowal said, "Those who are riding on the back of Congress must ask themselves and answer people about this un-

Sonitpur police recovers stolen vehicle

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, April 1: In connection with the theft of a departmental vehicle of an additional district commissioner of Sonitpur district, the police apprehended one person identified as Sohildul Islam, son of Habibur Rahman, from No 2 Rangagara village under Dhekiajuli Police Station. Additionally, the police team, comprising inspector Bhaskar Jyoti Bezbarua and sub-inspector Rahul Bora under the officer-in-charge of Tezpur Police Station, also recovered the stolen vehicle on Sunday from Thaheku Village of Dimapur district in Nagaland.

It is to be mentioned here that in this regard, an FIR was lodged on March 23, and a case was registered vide Tezpur PS Case No 148/2024 U/S 379 IPC, endorsing SI(P) Rahul Borah as investigating officer.

Child dies, two missing as boat capsizes in Brahmaputra amid heavy rain, storm

GUWAHATI, April 1: A four-year-old child died and two persons were reported missing after a boat capsized in the Brahmaputra in South Salmara-Mankachar district, amid heavy rain and hailstorm across the state, a senior official said on Monday.

Union Home minister Amit Shah dialled chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma to enquire about the situation in the state, and assured of all assistance, he said.

The sudden storm accompanied with hail and a downpour lashed several parts of the state since Sunday evening, uprooting trees, electric poles and damaging houses, Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) CEO Gyanendra Dev Tripathi said.

"A country boat sank at Nepur Alga village while travelling from Sishumara ghat to Nepur Alga ghat. A child's body was recovered by locals and two people are missing," he told PTI.

The deceased has been identified as Samin Mondal (4), while Kobat Ali Mondal (56) and Ismail Ali (8) are missing, Tripathi said.

"An SDRF team started a search operation this morning and deep divers from Dhubri and Goalpara districts also joined them. An NDRF team is en route to the site to assist in the rescue efforts," he said.

The ASDMA is sending drones with pilots for surveillance during the operation, the CEO said.

New principal of Sibsagar Girls' College

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, April 1: Dr Pratim Sarmah, an associate professor of Dikhowmukh College and a regular columnist of The Assam Tribune, took over as the new principal of the premier institution of women's education in Upper Assam, Sibsagar Girls' College, on Monday from Utpala Gohain Samua, principal (i/c), in the presence of Jogesh Bora, president, governing body of the college.

He said there were 15 passengers in the boat, and the rest of them swam to safety with the help of locals from nearby 'Char' areas (riverine vegetative islands).

Tripathi also said a number of lightning incidents have taken place in several districts, but no report of any casualty has been received so far.

"We are still compiling reports from different districts, while some are yet to send their assessment. Once the exercise is complete, only then will we be able to give a complete picture of the damage," he said.

Several houses, schools and shops along with scores of vehicles were damaged across the state due to the rain and storm, officials said. Hundreds of visitors were stranded inside the Garbhanga Reserve Forest near Guwahati till the early hours of Monday, as uprooted trees blocked roads, they said. "The district administration carried out rescue operations till around 3 am and cleared the roads. The rush was a little more as it was a Sunday," an official said.

People had a harrowing time to reach their destinations in the morning hours, as several roads were blocked and electric poles and trees lay scattered.

Meanwhile, Sarma in a post on X said Shah's assurance of full support and assistance for relief and rehabilitation is deeply appreciated.

holy tie-up for political convenience. They must answer people as to why they chose to align with Congress when the same party made Assam bleed with the martyrdom of 855 young students during Assam agitation. They must answer as to how they aligned with Congress when the same party brought the IMDT Act. Congress robbed the Bhumiputras of their due land rights by denying legal ownership of land to the indigenous people of Assam for sixty years, which deprived them of security, dignity, and honour. It was only in 2016 when BJP came to power in Assam that we gave them their Patta, bestowing the Bhumiputras with legal ownership over their ancestral land for many generations."

Sarbananda Sonowal, contesting from the Dibrugarh Lok Sabha constituency, was seen canvassing for BJP at public meetings held in Dhemasi Gaon Panchayat, Sepon Gaon Panchayat, Pathalibam Gaon Panchayat, Gajpuria Gaon Panchayat, Nahoroni Gaon Panchayat, and Haladhibari Gaon Panchayat. Sonowal was accompanied by the Union minister of State for Petroleum, Oil & Gas and Labour & Employment, Rameswar Teli; MLA of Khowang LAC, Chakradhar Gogoi; among others.

Joint election office inaugurated

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 1: Minister of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry & Veterinary, Atul Bora, inaugurated a joint election office of BJP-AGP-Sanmilita Ganashakti for the Bokakhat assembly constituency. He addressed the gathered populace during the event. The meeting, presided over by Bokakhat Assembly Constituency Committee president Jagat Chandra Kalita, saw the presence of notable figures including BJP district president Debapradip Bora, BJP leader Bismita Gogoi, AGP's Nurul Sultan, and Sanmilita Ganashakti's Maneswar Kutum and Sudhir Moran. Assam Yuva Parishad president, alongside local leadership from alliance parties, mandal committee officials, and dedicated party workers, also attended the event.

Randomisation of EVM and VVPAT conducted

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, April 1: The second randomisation of EVM and VVPAT in EVM Management Software 2.0 (EMS) for the general election to Lok Sabha 2024 for the 11-Sonitpur Parliamentary Constituency was held on Monday at the conference hall of the office of the district commissioner cum district election officer, Sonitpur.

The randomisation exercise was undertaken in the presence of general observer MR Ravi Kumar, IAS, the returning officer Deba Kumar Mishra, ACS, contesting candidates or their agents, representatives of recognised political parties concerned with 11-Sonitpur HPC along with other concerned officials and staff of the Sonitpur election district and 11-Sonitpur HPC.

SVEEP Cell conducts voter awareness camp in Cachar

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 1: A service voter awareness meeting was held at the auditorium of the army camp, Masimpur, as part of an awareness campaign for the parliamentary election organised by the Systematic Voters' Education & Electoral Participation Cell (SVEEP Cell) of Cachar district administration here on Monday. Three trainers from the district administration election cell participated in the meeting and underscored various benefits to the service voters through a PowerPoint presentation. In the meeting, associate professor of the Mass Communication department of Assam University Dr Alfarid Hussain, associate professor of Cachar College Dr Neetu Deb Nath, deputy director of Nehru Yuba Kendra, Silchar, Mehbub Alam, and on behalf of Cachar district administration, Lalan Prasad Goala were present.

During the meeting, the instructors spoke at length, urging service voters to exercise their right to vote. It is worth mentioning that several awareness programs have been undertaken under the initiative of the SVEEP Cell of Cachar district administration. From April 3, intensive awareness meetings on self-help groups and Anganwadi activities will be organised in each development block of Cachar district.

In every general election, the SVEEP Cell aims to ensure that every citizen participates in the voting process. On the day, about 200 army jawans also participated in the awareness meeting.

The India Meteorological Department had on Sunday issued an 'Orange Alert' and forecast 'heavy to very heavy' rainfall across several states of the northeast, including Assam, over the next five days.

In a special bulletin, IMD's Regional Meteorological Centre (RMC) in Guwahati issued the alert for Assam, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh for Sunday.

The states are likely to witness thunderstorms with lightning and heavy to very heavy rain accompanied with gusty wind at speeds of 30-40 km per hour, it said.

For the next four days, the RMC issued a 'Yellow Alert' for these states. An 'Orange Alert' implies "be prepared for action" and 'Yellow Alert' stands for "watch and be updated".

The weather report said a cyclonic circulation lies over Assam at 1.5 km above the mean sea level.

"Under the influence of the above synoptic conditions and moisture incursion from the Bay of Bengal to Northeastern region, light to moderate rainfall at many to most places with isolated heavy to very heavy rainfall will occur," it said.

The sudden downpour accompanied by storm also wreaked havoc at the Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport here on Sunday, prompting the authorities to briefly halt operations and divert six flights to other destinations. (PTI)

Dignitaries emphasise quality education's role in agricultural sector development

AAU marks 56th foundation day with convocation ceremony

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, April 1: The Assam Agricultural University (AAU) celebrated its 56th foundation day along with holding the 24th part convocation at its campus at Borbheta here on Monday. Secretary, DARE, Government of India, and director general, ICAR Dr Himanshu Pathak, while delivering the foundation day and convocation address as the chief guest, said that a university is evaluated on the quality of students. "Improving the quality of education and students means that a university has moved forward. Therefore, it is important to understand that improvement of agricultural education will translate into improvement of agricultural production, research, etc., and the agricultural sector will become a greater partner in the development of the country as a whole."

Vice chancellor of the university Dr Bidyut Chandan Deka, in his welcome address, highlighted the contribution of Assam Agricultural University in the field of agricultural education, research, and extension in the country and said that Assam Agricultural University has kept pace with the times with innovative thinking. The convocation ceremony was attended by 1120 students who received bachelor's and master's degrees and PhDs from nine colleges under Assam Agricultural University. The event was attended by the members of the Board of Directors of Assam Agricultural University.

First cochlear implant surgery

HT Correspondent

DEMOW, April 1: Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Vaidyakiya Pratishthan's Swargadeo Siu-Ka-Pha Multi Speciality Hospital, an ONGC CSR initiative situated at Rajabari near Demow of Sivasagar district, has successfully completed cochlear implant surgery for the first time ever in the upper area region. Notably, for the first time in Sivasagar, the Swargadeo Siu-Ka-Pha Multi Speciality Hospital officially launched the 'Cochlear Implant Programme' on Monday. Dr Saurav Gogoi, joint director Health Services Sivasagar, was present in the program as the chief guest. He inaugurated the 'Cochlear Implant Programme' in the presence of dignitaries at the hospital on Monday.

NF Railway achieves significant milestones in FY 2023-24

Record freight loading, electrification progress, and enhanced passenger amenities highlight achievements

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 1: During the financial year 2023-24, NF Railway (NFR) achieved milestones in various categories, including freight loading, electrification, introduction of new trains, and providing better amenities for passengers.

NFR achieved its best ever POL loading of 515 rakes in 2023-24. Facilitating ease of doing business, NFR achieved an impressive growth of 32 percent over the target in maize loading during 2023-24. NFR's relentless efforts resulted in carrying more tonnage despite limited line capacity. A whopping number of 453 bogie covered wagons (BCNHL) rakes were released in just 3 months over NFR. NFR improved system efficiency through proactive steps by starting closed circuit rakes examination of BCNHL rakes at New Guwahati, reducing the movement of invalid empty rakes. As a result of NFR's continuous efforts, the highest ever inward traffic of 35.30 million tonnes was achieved during FY 2023-24,



recording a growth of 6.9 percent compared to the previous financial year. NFR is rapidly progressing to accom-

plish 100 percent electrification across the zone. For that, 921.62 route kilometers & 1279.74 track kilometers have been electri-

fied during 2023-24. Cumulatively, 2583 route kilometers & 4485 track kilometers electrification over NFR completed, which is 61 percent of its total kilometers.

NFR is committed to providing better services to the public in quantity and quality. For that, NFR introduced eleven new trains in 2023-24. To provide a better travel experience, eleven conventional trains were converted to modern Linke Hofmann Busch rakes. On public demand, 34 pairs of mail express and passenger trains were provided additional stoppages at 35 stations by NFR in 2023-24. Also, 151 coaches were permanently augmented in 25 pairs (62 rakes) of mail express trains to create additional berths for the waiting-listed passengers.

For crossing of passengers/pedestrians, during 2023-24, 10 foot over bridges were constructed over NFR. Also, to provide ease of movement for Divyangjans, the aged, and children on railway platforms, 4 lifts and 4 escalators were commissioned in 2023-24.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

It is not only fine feathers that make fine birds.
- Aesop

Gates-Modi rendezvous

In a landmark meeting last Friday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates convened at the Prime Minister's residence in Delhi. Their exchange delved into pivotal topics ranging from the trajectory of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to the imperative of Digital Public Infrastructure and the innovative 'Namoo Drone Didi' initiative. At the core of the dialogue was Modi's vision for an inclusively digital India, emphasizing the eradication of the 'digital divide' by extending technological infrastructure to even the remotest villages. Gates lauded India's strides in digital governance, commending the nation for not only embracing but also leading in technological innovation. The significance of the meeting extends beyond rhetoric. Microsoft's longstanding presence in India, celebrating 25 years, underscores the nation's pivotal role in global technological advancement. Gates expressed unwavering confidence in India's burgeoning tech community, particularly its prowess in AI development. Satya Nadella, Microsoft's CEO, echoed Gates' sentiment, highlighting India's vital role in driving AI innovation globally. India's developer community, evidenced by its exponential growth on platforms like GitHub, stands as a testament to its burgeoning influence in the tech landscape.

Microsoft's commitment to empowering India's tech ecosystem is palpable. Initiatives like the 'Code Without Barriers' program, aimed at fostering inclusivity and skill development, exemplify this dedication. Furthermore, the company's pledge to upskill millions of individuals in AI reflects a strategic investment in India's technological future. The meeting also spotlighted India's advancements in AI applications, particularly in language translation, showcased at international events like the G20 Summit and Kashi Tamil Sangamam. However, amidst the celebration of technological progress, concerns surrounding 'deepfakes' and data privacy emerged, prompting discussions on regulatory frameworks and public awareness. Modi underscored the transformative impact of technology on gender equality, citing initiatives like the 'Namoo Drone Didi' scheme, which empowers women as changemakers in rural communities. Additionally, light-hearted moments, such as Modi's invitation to explore the NaMo App, infused the dialogue with a sense of camaraderie. Gates' applause for India's commitment to sustainable development resonates with Modi's call for a paradigm shift towards 'Green GDP', emphasizing the importance of holistic progress beyond traditional metrics.

The Gates-Modi rendezvous marks a pivotal moment in India's technological journey. It signifies not only a reaffirmation of India's technological prowess but also a collaborative effort towards leveraging technology for inclusive growth and sustainable development. As India navigates the complexities of the digital age, such engagements serve as guiding beacons, illuminating pathways towards a technologically empowered and socially equitable future. Moreover, the meeting between Gates and Modi underscores the symbiotic relationship between government and industry in driving technological innovation. By fostering a conducive environment for collaboration and investment, policymakers can catalyze the development and deployment of cutting-edge technologies. Gates' recognition of India's digital leadership signals a vote of confidence in the nation's potential to shape the future of technology on a global scale. As India continues to harness the power of AI, there is a pressing need for robust regulatory frameworks and ethical guidelines to safeguard against potential risks. By prioritizing innovation alongside responsible governance, India can chart a course towards a digitally empowered society that leverages technology for the collective betterment of its citizens. The Gates-Modi meeting exemplifies a strategic partnership poised to drive India's digital transformation forward, with a focus on inclusive growth and sustainable development through innovative technological solutions.

The battle for 2024: BJP's dominance vs Opposition's unity bid

The electoral battlefield has taken shape after the Chief Election Commissioner unveiled the schedule for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections last week. The democratic exercise will commence in April, unfolding over several phases, before culminating on June 4 when the verdict of the electorate will be revealed. With the contours of the electoral contest now etched in stone, the political arena is abuzz with anticipation and strategizing as parties gear up to woo voters across the nation's diverse landscape.

The upcoming general elections in India are shaping up to be a high-stakes political showdown. On one side stands the formidable coalition of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies, forming the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Prime Minister Narendra Modi, seeking an unprecedented third consecutive term, has positioned the BJP as the frontrunner, capitalizing on its dominant position and the relative disarray among the opposition ranks.

On the other hand, a diverse array of opposition parties has coalesced under the banner of the INDIA (Indian National Democratic Inclusive Alliance) bloc, determined to mount a concerted challenge to the BJP's hegemony. This motley alliance encompasses a spectrum of ideologies and regional powerhouses, each vying for a share of the political pie.

As the campaign season intensifies, the air is thick with allegations of defections, secret pacts, and strategic maneuvering. Both sides are engaged in intricate negotiations, forging alliances and fielding candidates in a bid to secure a decisive mandate from the electorate.

While the BJP's well-oiled election machinery and Modi's personal appeal have afforded them a head start, the opposition remains undeterred, hoping to capitalize on any missteps or disenchantment among voters. The stage is set for a hard-fought battle, where the outcome will shape the nation's trajectory for the next five years and beyond.

Forging a united front, 26 political outfits have coalesced under the banner of INDIA, a pre-poll alliance determined to unseat the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the upcoming electoral contest.

Undeterred by successive setbacks in 2014 and 2019, which tarnished its reputation, this opposition coalition has resolved to

field a singular candidate against the BJP's nominees, underscoring their unwavering commitment to reclaiming the nation's mandate. However, beyond this strategic maneuvering, the INDIA coalition faces the daunting challenge of resonating with the electorate, particularly the influential demographic of millennials, whose support could prove pivotal in shaping the nation's political landscape.

The Congress party, once a formidable force in Indian politics, has seen a steady decline in its fortunes over the past few decades. Founded in 1885, the party has a storied history of championing the cause of the underprivileged sections of society, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and the Muslim community.

However, since the 1980s, the party's influence has been challenged by the rise of regional political outfits, each catering to specific geographic and demographic constituencies. Today, the Congress party finds itself grappling with a leadership crisis, struggling to regain its former glory and relevance in the country's political landscape. The party that once commanded a formidable presence across the nation now finds itself reduced to a mere shadow of its former self, searching for a way to reinvent itself and reclaim its position as a dominant force in Indian politics.

In the wake of its setbacks in the 2014 and 2019 elections, the Congress party now asserts its dedication to the cause of social justice and the upliftment of India's underprivileged segments, comprising the impoverished, the oppressed, the Dalits, the farming community, the youth, and women. This renewed commitment manifests itself through the party's five-pronged pledge, encompassing Yuva Nyay (justice for the youth), Bhagidaari Nyay (participatory justice), Naari Nyay (justice for women), Kisan Nyay (justice for farmers), and Shramik Nyay (justice for workers).

The Opposition's primary strategy revolves around uniting voters disgruntled with the BJP's rule and enticing them with alluring promises. This approach proved fruitful for the Congress party in the recent assembly elections held in Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, and Telangana, where they emerged victorious. The Congress party is banking on the anti-incumbency sentiment

against the BJP, amplified by the latter's efforts to placate the electorate through subsidies and populist schemes. Simultaneously, they are pinning their hopes on Rahul Gandhi's much-publicized Bharat Jodo Yatra, which were orchestrated to establish a connection with the masses and garner grassroots support.

To capture the attention and support of the younger electorate, whose participation plays a pivotal role in determining electoral outcomes, it is imperative for Congress to prioritize and address concerns that resonate deeply with this demographic.

DEGREE OF THOUGHT
By: Dipak Kurmi

Matters of pressing socioeconomic significance, such as rising inflationary pressures, unemployment rates, and societal tensions, must be placed at the forefront of their agenda. Failure to do so would risk alienating a substantial portion of the voting populace, thereby jeopardizing their prospects for success. To effectively engage and sway these voters, Congress must articulate and champion an alternative, compelling strategy that speaks directly to their aspirations and addresses their most pressing concerns.

Despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi's strong national presence, several influential chief ministers from regional parties wield significant authority within their respective states. These locally dominant leaders pose a formidable challenge for Modi's party in those regions, making it an uphill battle to gain traction and support. The prime minister faces stiff competition from these entrenched chief ministers, whose solid grip on power and popularity among their constituents could prove to be a hurdle for Modi's agenda and influence in those states.

The 2019 general elections witnessed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies securing a mere 45 per cent of the total votes cast. This left a substantial 55 per cent of the electorate's mandate up for grabs, presenting an opportunity for the opposition bloc, now known as the INDIA coalition, to capitalize on. Despite the absence of a national figure with the same level of popularity as Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the coalition boasts several influential regional leaders capable of swaying voters within their respective

strongholds. This phenomenon holds particularly true in states like West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh.

However, the INDIA coalition faces a formidable challenge in projecting a single, unified leadership figure as a counterweight to Modi. An apparent clash of egos among the coalition partners has made it arduous to reach a consensus on a singular candidate to rally behind. This internal discord poses a significant hurdle for the opposition bloc as it strives to present a cohesive and formidable front against the incumbent Prime Minister and his party.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) possesses a formidable organizational structure, backed by significant financial resources and political clout. On the other hand, the opposition parties appear to lack a cohesive and compelling narrative, with the exception of their stated commitment to upholding the Constitution and preserving democratic values.

However, the concerns of the electorate are often more deeply rooted in meeting their fundamental needs, such as access to food, clothing, and shelter. For instance, Sonia Gandhi's "Aam Admi" (common person) slogan during the 2004 elections struck a chord with the masses.

The lower-income segments of society, living from paycheck to paycheck, may find it challenging to relate to abstract political concepts and ideologies. Their immediate priorities revolve around securing their basic necessities and improving their economic well-being. Trapped in the sepia-tinted memories of its illustrious heritage, the Congress Party seems reluctant to confront the evolving political landscape.

As the second-largest force, it instinctively lays claim to the mantle of leading any opposition coalition. However, the steady exodus of its leaders to the BJP's fold has served as a demoralizing force, chipping away at its foundations. The opposition desperately needs a robust counter-narrative to the BJP's masterful propaganda machinery and its adept manipulation of religious sentiments.

Since its humble beginnings in 1980, the BJP has transformed into a political juggernaut, cementing its status as India's pre-eminent party. Its formidable organizational strength and deep financial reserves have enabled it to cast a long shadow across the nation's political landscape.

The ruling party is banking on the popularity and accomplishments of the Prime Minister to galvanize voter support. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is viewed as having an edge in the upcoming elections, with Narendra Modi being their talismanic figure. His advocates laud him as a man of action, pointing to initiatives like the Triple Talaq law, the Citizenship Amendment Act, the revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, and the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

The BJP's campaign highlights the government's achievements over the past decade, as well as various welfare schemes, in a bid to attract voters. The continuity has enabled Modi to pursue his agenda effectively. Over the past ten years, he has gained international recognition and fortified India's position on the global stage, exciting his supporters. The party hopes that Modi's image as a doer, coupled with the government's track record and welfare initiatives, will resonate with the electorate and propel them to victory.

Critics argue that the ruling administration led by Prime Minister Modi has employed investigative agencies as tools to persecute and harass political opponents. Additionally, they contend that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has adopted tactics to actively lure legislators and leaders from other parties, providing them with incentives to defect and join the saffron ranks. This strategy has enabled the BJP to assimilate numerous second-tier leaders who perceived better opportunities within the party's fold.

As the 2024 elections draw near, the political landscape is poised to witness an intensified battle of narratives, with both sides leaving no stone unturned in their efforts to discredit their opponents. This high-stakes contest will be pivotal in shaping the future trajectory of the Opposition and the assertive BJP. Prime Minister Modi's strategic advantage has been the fragmentation within the Opposition ranks.

As long as this disunity persists, Modi's position remains formidable. For the Opposition to gain ground or even emerge victorious, a resolute commitment to unity must become their unwavering mantra. Only through a cohesive front can they hope to counter the BJP's dominance. *(The writer can be reached at dipakkurmipltd@gmail.com)*

Modi backing lawyers letter about 'vested interest group' betrays a sinister plot

By: K Raveendran

In an unprecedented move, over 600 lawyers penned a letter to the Chief Justice of India, raising alarms about a 'vested interest group' allegedly attempting to influence the judiciary's decisions, particularly in cases involving political figures and corruption. This letter has garnered significant attention, not least because of the Prime Minister's endorsement, which he framed as a critique of the opposition's tactics, labelling it as 'vintage Congress culture'.

The letter, dated March 26, accuses this unnamed group of employing tactics that threaten the democratic fabric and the trust placed in judicial processes. The signatories, which include eminent advocates like Harish Salve and Manan Kumar Mishra, express deep concern over the propagation of false narratives aimed at discrediting the judiciary and undermining public confidence in the courts. The Prime Minister's support of the letter on social media adds an intriguing twist to the whole issue. While Modi has ostensibly used it to attack Congress, it may be part of a subtle game to shape public opinion in favour of the ruling party. And in many ways, the development is a reflection of the increasingly fraught relationship between the judiciary and the executive in India.

The letter as well as the Prime Minister's subsequent endorsement have sparked a debate on the independence of the judiciary and the role of the executive in safeguarding or undermining this principle. The opposition has countered the Prime Minister's support for the letter, accusing him of attempting to 'give legal guarantee to corruption.' The timing of the letter is also significant, coming as it does amidst a back-

drop of several high-profile judgments and ongoing cases that have political implications. The lawyers' letter alleges 'bench fixing', disrespectful comparisons of domestic courts to those in lawless regimes, and direct attacks on judges' honour. These are serious charges that, if true, could have far-reaching consequences for the rule of law in India.

The Prime Minister's backing of the letter has been interpreted by some as an attempt to discredit verdicts in cases that may not go in favour of the government. By framing the narrative around a 'vested interest group' trying to influence the judiciary, the ruling party can potentially discredit unfavourable judgments as being influenced by this group, rather than as independent decisions of the court. The letter and the Prime Minister's response must be viewed in the broader context of attempts to hijack public opinion. The ruling party has been using various means to shape public discourse in its favour, from influencing media narratives to the use of social media for political propaganda. The endorsement of the letter by the Prime Minister can be seen as part of this larger strategy to control the narrative and reinforce the government's position.

The implications of this episode are profound. It raises questions about the integrity of the judicial process and the independence of the judiciary, which are cornerstones of a functioning democracy. It also highlights the challenges faced by the judiciary in maintaining its autonomy in the face of political pressure. The support of the Prime Minister for the letter could be seen as an endorsement of the judiciary when it aligns with the government's views, but it also raises concerns about the potential for executive overreach.

The development no doubt

points to attempts being made on the sly to influence judicial decisions in important cases. This was clearly seen in action when the constitutional bench was handling the electoral bond case in which the government suffered a series of setbacks. The government and its supporters tried everything in the book, and outside of it, to prevent details from coming out ahead of the elections so as to save further embarrassment to the ruling party.

First, senior Supreme Court advocate Adish C Aggarwala, who is also the president of the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) and the All India Bar Association (AIBA), caused consternation when he wrote to Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud urging him to suo motu review the Supreme Court's direction that the poll panel shall publish the information shared by the State Bank of India on its official website in the electoral bonds case on the ground that the abrupt disclosures will have an adverse impact on the donors. A couple of days prior to that he had written to President Droupadi Murmu urging her to seek presidential reference of the apex court judgement in the electoral bonds scheme case and not to give effect to it unless the top court has reheard the matter. The Supreme Court Bar Association, however, distanced itself from Aggarwala's demand, saying his conduct was not authorised.

This has also to be seen in the context of major industries associations Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), seeking to defer the disclosure of electoral bond unique identification numbers, pointing to an orchestrated campaign against the truth coming out in the electoral bond case. *(IPA Service)*

Why did lawyers write a letter against lawyers?

By: Lalit Garg

In the legal system, lawyers and judges often engage in debate and argumentation to prove or disprove points of law. Maybe this practice weakens the country and hurts national values. This judicial fraternity, which is important among the four pillars of democracy, has a group of top lawyers active in protecting the accused of political criminals, scams and corruption, this is a natural part of our justice system, which is a big cause for concern. More than 600 lawyers from across India, including senior advocate Harish Salve and Bar Council of India Chairman Manan Kumar Mishra, have written a letter to Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud, expressing concern over the increasing efforts for protecting political criminals. This effort is commendable and inspired by nationalism. The 'vested interest groups' attempting to manipulate the judicial process, influence court decisions and tarnish the reputation of the judiciary with baseless allegations and political agenda must be widely condemned. There is also a question: why did the lawyers have to write letters against the lawyers?

The concern of 600 lawyers against these dangerous and anti-national attempts to influence the judiciary is not unwarranted. This awareness of lawyers has become necessary for the prestige and fairness of the justice process. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has appreciated this meaningful and relevant effort of the lawyers. He said that intimidating and threatening others is the old Congress culture. Five decades ago, the Prime Minister said he had called for a committed judiciary - they shamelessly seek commitment from others for their self-interests but avoid any commitment towards the nation. No wonder 140 core Indians are rejecting him. This is the sacred responsibility of the judicial fraternity of our nation and all the lawyers take an oath in the witness of God and the soul to fulfill this responsibility with devotion and honesty. But for the past few years we have been seeing that a certain section of our lawyers are ignoring the sanctity and dignity of the Indian judicial process. The big reason for concern is that this group is creating such pressure in its favor, which is creating a threat to the integrity of the judiciary. But in the last two decades, more responsibility, awareness and sensitivity have been seen among the judges and they have not accepted to bow down to any economic or political

pressure in the interest of the country.

Since independence, a special kind of group of lawyers has developed in our country, which has been getting the protection and encouragement of the ruling parties. They have become adept at covering up crimes and saving hardened criminals and political criminals facing serious charges and are earning huge sums of money and holding big positions in politics. Such big lawyers often appear in the cases of big people and politicians and the income disparity among lawyers also shows that politically and economically capable people have more chances of getting justice than the common people. The law and order system becoming expensive for the general public and the hopelessness of fair justice also stems from such selfish lawyers. This big discrepancy and irony has also encouraged crime in politics. Due to this, the profession of lawyers has become controversial and the credibility of the judicial process has also been questioned.

The question is, why did the lawyers feel the need to write such a letter? Because these days some politicians are standing in the dock and a special group of lawyers is active to save them, who, while trying to cover up the truth, work in various ways to save the so-called criminals in political interest. Such selfish lawyers, in a special way, create false stories of the so-called better past and the golden era of the courts, comparing it with what is happening in the present. These are nothing but deliberate statements made to influence court decisions and to embarrass the courts for some political gain. It is disturbing to see that some lawyers defend politicians during the day and then try to influence judges through the media at night. The statement by such self-serving lawyers that it was easy to influence the courts in the past shakes public confidence in them. That is why there was a need for the lawyers to write a letter to the other side.

There is no political purpose in writing such a letter, but there is a moral and national urge. In this letter, the Supreme Court has been requested to take strict and concrete steps to protect our courts from such attacks. Lawyers expressed concern that 'special groups' were trying to obstruct the proceedings of the courts. Especially efforts are being made to create obstacles on those issues which are related to politicians and political parties. Such tactics are damaging our courts and endangering our democratic structure. The lawyers allege that their actions are

spoiling the atmosphere of nationalism, development, trust and harmony, which is the fundamental characteristic of the functioning of the judiciary. In the letter, the lawyers have called for a united, equitable, impartial stand in support of the judiciary to ensure that the judiciary remains a strong pillar of democracy. Certainly, judges should behave equally in front of well-known lawyers or powerful accused, without any political bias or prejudice and our judges do the same. Still, there remains scope for complaint and if some lawyers together feel the need to write such letters, then it only shows the country's awareness and loyalty towards the country. Such letters cannot be criticized, such letters are tools to control the corrupt winds of politics. Such letters demand more awareness and sensitivity especially from the judges. If something goes against the values and standards anywhere in the society, in any part of the country, then we should not remain neutral thinking what should we do? Remaining silent after seeing something wrong is also a crime. Therefore, there should be no escape from evils and inconsistencies; there should be refinement of them. This letter of the lawyers is indicative of such sophistication which is required to maintain democracy as well as the well-established Constitution.

Another group of lawyers has become active against the group of lawyers who wrote the letter, it is natural for them to be active because their wrong intentions have been thwarted along with their huge earnings. The mutual allegations and counter-allegations between the two groups of lawyers are also quite serious and sad. In the election season, this is an issue on which debate may continue for some days to come. The matter is really serious. Keep in mind, the letter of 600 lawyers also raises concerns about the fabricated theory of bench fixing, whereby attempts to influence the composition of judicial benches and question the integrity of judges is perhaps not new. In such a situation, it must be said that the dignity of any pillar or constitutional institution in the country should not be tarnished. The platforms that provide justice to the public should not be clouded by injustice, selfishness and demands. As a people working to uphold the Constitution while building a New India and a Strong India, it is time for our courts to stand up and keep a strong guard against attempts to blur its existence and identity. *(The author is a journalist & columnist who can be reached at lalitgarg11@gmail.com)*

Integrating paratransit to address India's urban transport concerns

By: Nandan Dawda

Increasing urbanisation has altered travel patterns and increased transportation demands in India's cities. Enhanced mobility needs have led to an explosion of two- and four-wheelers, exacerbating urban transport and environmental challenges. Despite government initiatives to develop public transport systems, insufficient capital investments and persistent infrastructural deficits in most cities have widened the gap between transport planning and execution. Consequently, only a few large cities benefit from extensive transport systems, while people in smaller cities and towns grapple with limited or no public transport options.

Such dichotomy has catalysed the emergence of paratransit or Intermediate Public Transport (IPT) services in urban India. Privately owned and informally operated, they offer shared mobility typically facilitated by three-wheeled auto rickshaws with a capacity of three to six passengers per vehicle. Paratransit services, encompassing both point-to-point (P2P) and shuttle services between fixed origins and destinations, constitute a significant portion of shared trips, especially with increasing app-based 'shared mobility' solutions offered by companies like Ola, Uber, and many more. These apps aggregate shared vehicles, including motorcycles, taxis, three-wheelers, and two-wheelers, to serve rental as well as on-demand mobility needs.

Paratransit scenarios in Indian cities
Paratransit vehicles in India include for-hire light motor vehicles (LMVs), taxis, and two-wheelers. According to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) data, LMVs, taxis, and two-wheelers for hire accounted for 26 percent, 12 percent, and 1 percent of the 25.89 billion vehicles registered in 2019. While three-seaters constitute 67 percent of the total LMVs, four-to-six-seaters constitute nearly 33 percent respectively.

Additionally, registered taxis such as motor cabs, maxi cabs, or other variants also serve paratransit needs. Ola and Uber offer shared and rental cab, auto-rickshaw, two-wheeler, and taxi services across more than 75 Tier I and II cities in India. Other companies such as Meru, BluSmart, Quick Ride, and Lyft also provide shared and rental cab services nationwide. Established in 2006, Meru

operates in 24 cities, while BluSmart, founded in 2019, operates in 10 cities. Quick Ride serves nine Tier I cities in India, and Lyft, which was launched in 2021, operates exclusively in West Bengal.

Rapido commenced operations in 2015, offering bike and taxi services in 100 cities and auto rickshaws in 26 cities. Another significant player, Jugnoo, has provided cab and auto rickshaw services in 50 cities since 2014.

While the average modal share of paratransit services is 25 percent of the total motorised trips, it exceeds the use of public transport by ninefold in most smaller- and medium-sized Indian cities. This trend indicates the significant dependence of city dwellers on paratransit services as a convenient mode of transport.

Challenges to paratransit
The paratransit system in India primarily encompasses three principal stakeholders: users, paratransit operators (comprising auto rickshaw drivers and shared mobility service providers), and the government. Auto-rickshaw drivers face many challenges, including internal competition, meagre monthly earnings, non-revenue-generating kilometres, elevated maintenance expenses, obligatory payments to traffic authorities for operational purposes, exposure to environmental pollutants, and the deficiency of fundamental infrastructure, including designated stands and parking facilities.

Conversely, shared mobility providers encounter obstacles such as operational deficits, lack of comprehensive policy frameworks and regulatory guidelines, inadequate supporting infrastructure such as designated pick-up and drop-off locations, and societal preference towards private transportation modes. They are also often accused of unprofessional driver behaviour, fare overcharges, safety deficiencies, subpar travel experiences, prolonged wait times during peak hours and reliance on cash transactions, among other issues.

The government, as a key stakeholder, also grapples with concerns regarding paratransit services, including heightened competition vis-à-vis the formal transit system, resultant declines in transit ridership, exacerbated traffic congestion, resistance from union entities towards policy enforcement and escalated levels of air pollution.

Policy interventions to integrate paratransit systems

Paratransit services have been a contentious topic of sustainable urban transportation in metropolitan areas. As feeders or complementing formal transportation networks, these services have spurred debates regarding their efficacy. Notably, Tier I and II cities of India, where formal transit systems were introduced at later stages, witness a conflict of interest between paratransit services and formal transportation modes—paratransit services are often found competing with, rather than complementing the extant formal public transport system. Regardless, paratransit systems play a pivotal role in developing economies like India, facilitating the realisation of sustainable and integrated multimodal transport systems within urban landscapes.

The current situation underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive policy and regulatory framework to govern paratransit services effectively across Indian cities. Present policy formulation concerning auto-rickshaws exhibits shortcomings, failing to adequately consider the needs of the drivers who provide a valuable and cost-effective transportation service. The absence of coordination and communication among diverse governmental bodies and stakeholders involved in regulating and managing paratransit services impedes effective policy implementation.

The National Urban Transport Policy emphasises the integration of diverse urban transportation modes. Still, it fails to delineate strategies for integrating paratransit services with formal transit systems, which are critical to addressing first and last-mile connectivity gaps within urban transit networks. Achieving seamless operational, informational, institutional and fare integration between these systems necessitates heightened attention.

Moreover, the quality of paratransit services suffers from a lack of formal training and skill development initiatives, hindering service excellence. Enhancing the professionalism and service quality of paratransit operators through comprehensive skills development and training initiatives is imperative for the successful execution of policies aimed at fostering sustainable and efficient urban transportation systems across cities. A robust

monitoring and evaluation framework is essential to facilitate timely adjustments and enhancements, fostering effective policy interventions. The absence of comprehensive data on policy impact contributes to a lack of accountability and ability to make well-informed future policy decisions.

Implementing institutional frameworks, such as Public Transport Authorities (PTAs), emerges as imperative for ensuring cohesive governance and regulation across diverse mobility modes in urban India. A Public Transport Authority (PTA) or a Public Transport Council (PTC) assumes responsibility for pivotal policy determinations, including service standards spanning various transportation modalities.

It formulates a comprehensive multimodal public transport blueprint tailored to the city's needs. The PTA/PTC is tasked with issuing contracts to operators, mandating that services are aligned with pre-defined service schedules and mutually agreed terms of remuneration. Such a structured approach will foster efficiency and accountability within the public transport sector, enhancing of urban mobility standards.

Furthermore, the prevailing regulations for shared mobility solutions position them as contenders to the established auto-rickshaw services. Consequently, the regulatory frameworks such as 'Aggregator Rules' and 'Taxi Regulation' of various municipalities put permit limitations and minimum fare regulations in place to mitigate competition with alternative shared modes. Conversely, the 'Taxi Guideline' delineated by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) advocate for a more inclusive approach, framing shared mobility as a component of the solution rather than a contributor to congestion issues.

Cities must consider shared mobility services as on-demand solutions capable of diminishing reliance on personal vehicular transportation rather than direct competitors to public transit. Models like 'Mobility as a Service (MaaS)' implemented in cities such as Vienna and Helsinki exemplify effective integration of 'new mobility' solutions with formal public transport networks. Piloting such initiatives in Indian cities can facilitate thorough assessments of their influence on public transit ridership. (Courtesy: ORF)

The era of the silenced academic must end

By: Vinod Kottavil Kalidasan

Academic freedom has become a central issue of concern in India. Many have blamed the illiberal political climate in the country and the quality of individual institutions in question for the decline in academic freedom. While all of these are important factors, the question of academic freedom is complex and cannot be easily answered.

Not many have, nevertheless, noticed the V-Dem Academic Freedom Index (AFI) published in 2023 in which India is ranked in the bottom 20-30% category below countries such as Libya, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Chad, Bhutan, Ukraine, and Palestine. In the 2024 report published a few days ago, India is further pushed to the 10-20% category placed between Rwanda and South Sudan.

The situation is so dire that even the reputed institutions do not fully comprehend, practice, and respect academic freedom as a fundamental right. Faculty members can get fired for reasons as silly as publishing a critical piece, supporting a cause, clothing in certain ways and even smoking! So, what explains this?

Medieval India and Europe
India and the West historically had two distinct traditions of education. Colonial experience, however, changed the way India learned and taught.

India had a number of great universities, many of them centuries older than any in the West. Some of them, such as Nalanda and Taxila, attracted scholars from across the globe. India had its share of brilliant rational and materialistic thinkers, mathematicians, scientists, and geographers.

After this glorious era, the Indian system of higher education began to decline into mindless ritual and repetition. It became regimented along the lines of caste and a strict code of conduct came into place that opposed the spread of enlightenment. The notorious edicts in Manusmriti and other ancient texts embody this decay.

As a result, education merely enabled a person to become the grantor and maintainer of tradition and not its challenger, disruptor, or reformer. It emphasised rote learning and ritual while discouraging creativity. It routinely punished students for questioning authority and ritual. Critical thought was suppressed as feudal allegiance was constantly demanded.

The West, on the other hand, followed, with steadfast astuteness, the ancient Greek tradition of education. It was largely secular and focused on the individual rather than communities. Massive events such as the French Revolution made sure that education shaped the public by enhancing enlightenment and reason. While this was in no way perfect, the freedom to think and publish was cherished and promoted. The separation of church and state led to more secular and rational thought.

Modern higher education in India

The persistent nature of the ancient Indian tradition insisted that children take up their parents' professions. Even those educated in the West came back to settle in India, keeping the ancient rules of privilege intact. Education was either a means to achieve 'a dream job' or a choice of the parents.

It was rarely a process of enlightenment. Even in modern India, everyone expected students to follow their parents' footsteps. An engineer's child becoming an engineer, a professor's child becoming a professor, and a doctor's child becoming a doctor was still the norm. There were no laurels for unsettling the apple cart in India.

Modern India witnessed attempts from progressive sections to educate people from all quarters of society — people from lower-castes, workers, women, rural folk — which yielded mixed results.

The modern democratic state, with a constitution that promised equal rights to all, aspired to usher in a revolution. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar recognised early on that political democracy hinges upon social democracy and that social democracy is closely linked to equal opportunities for all — including the opportunity to study. Whatever little has been achieved today is a result of this effort.

Modern science evolved with the strength of values such as falsifiability, objectivity, proof, and, finally, the concept of peer review. Whatever is not supported by proof is not acceptable. Similarly, concepts like equality, fraternity, freedom, rights, rule of law, aesthetics, and many more complex ideas came to define the humanities and social sciences scholarship.

The university in India
What exactly are the institutions of higher education and how are

they different from other institutions such as a home, village, city, neighbourhood and residential societies? Universities could very well belong to what the French philosopher Michel Foucault elaborated as heterotopia or the 'other places'. Universities are where new ideas are tested and that testing requires encouragement and a collaborative atmosphere. What one cannot discuss at home or in society, one must be able to discuss at the university.

Institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and visionaries who founded aspirational universities such as Rabindranath Tagore (Visva Bharati), Jamsetji Tata (IISc), and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (Aligarh Muslim University) were attempting to create enlightened spaces. Nevertheless, the spirit of academic freedom and free inquiry has petered out gradually.

Most other universities, however, had no such ambitions. Some of them have been wary of imbibing the harder part of the idea of a university. Others were simply unaware that the idea of a university was a far deeper one than they had initially imagined and no number of glittering edifices would be able to capture it. Yet others were there for purposes unrelated to enlightenment in the first place.

All of these led to an atmosphere of scepticism and fear among academics who constantly worried about the implications of their work and indulged in self-censorship. A large number of them have been weak and vulnerable. This nagging fear of retribution led to silence marking the times, what I call the 'era of the silenced academic'. This situation is even more alarming in the private universities where no job security is assured. Interestingly, it was all very much in line with what a traditional Indian family taught its kids: "be a good child and never question your elders".

The era of the silenced academic augmented the process of anti-enlightenment skilling in disciplines not limited to engineering, medicine, and information technology. A large number of coaching institutes and ed-tech businesses followed. All that mindless drilling took a heavy toll on the mental health of students and ultimately paved the way for a society where independent thought is penalised.

In the process, the idea of a university changed too. A university has become a place where the government in power is venerated by sycophants. The word 'critical', though widely used as in 'critical theory', aroused suspicion. The last decade under the current regime, which is opposed to criticism of any kind, streamlined the process that was already underway. A vicious government, lack of occupational freedoms and securities, and deep socio-cultural intolerance have all contributed to the frozen silence of the Indian academic.

The way forward
India must think of a system that defines the rights, tenure, duties, and privileges of academics and make its academic pillar as strong as the judicial, executive, and the legislative ones. The 1915 Declaration of Principles — a document that proclaimed the principles regarding freedom of speech and tenure — by the American Association of University Professors is one such example. This document remains the Magna Carta for the western academic system.

If India wants to produce some excellent universities and aspires to become a genuine Vishva Guru, a teacher of the world, it should strengthen its academic pillar. The government and the academic bureaucracy should enable this process wholeheartedly instead of getting insecure about academics critiquing the system. They should realize that critical thought is a product of great value and nothing else can compensate for it. Constant governmental intervention in the everyday life of universities must stop.

More importantly, ensuring job security and regular, decent payment for academics across different kinds of institutions — public, private and institutions where the two work in partnership — is a necessary and unavoidable first step. Legal protection must be ensured to make this work.

Ad hoc exploitation of teachers and temporary appointments must give way to regularised positions. Academic appointments must be made fair and academic institutions should be better regulated to make sure that a fair and open internal system is always maintained.

It is high time India turns an ancient, regimented nightmare into an inclusive, rational, and democratic dream. The era of the silenced academic must end, and the time has come for the academics to fearlessly express their views. (Courtesy: The Wire)

An avocado a day may improve diet quality, researchers suggest

By: Kelsey Costa

In the United States, many adults have poor diet quality and do not meet key dietary recommendations provided by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. With poor diet quality being the leading risk factor for cardiometabolic diseases, this increases the risk for chronic health conditions that are among the leading causes of death.

Finding ways to improve diet quality in the general population is crucial for promoting better health outcomes.

Now, a recent study from Penn State University analyzed the impact of a food-based intervention — daily avocado intake — on diet quality and cardiometabolic risk.

The findings, published in Current Developments in Nutrition, revealed that consuming one avocado daily for 26 weeks improved adherence to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans among adults with abdominal obesity. However, the changes in diet quality did not directly influence cardiometabolic disease risk factors.

What happens if you eat an avocado every day?
In this 26-week, multi-center, randomized controlled trial, researchers studied 1,008 participants aged 25 and older with abdominal obesity and typically low avocado intake.

Participants were divided into two groups. One group was provided with a daily supply of one avocado (approximately 168 grams) and received guidance on how to include it in their daily diet. The other (control) group was asked to maintain their usual dietary habits, limiting their avocado consumption to two or fewer per month, and received no dietary counselling.

Diet quality was evaluated through unannounced 24-hour recalls at various intervals during the study, and scored with the Healthy Eating Index-2015 (HEI-2015) to measure adherence to dietary guidelines.

As per the USDA's classification, this clinical trial considered avocado servings — one-half cup chopped or approximately 75 grams — as part of the total vegetable component in the HEI-2015 scores.

The participants' cardiometabolic disease risk factors, including visceral fat volume, liver fat fraction, C-reactive protein, metabolic syndrome criteria, body weight, body mass index (BMI), insulin, VLDL cholesterol, and the total cholesterol to HDL cholesterol ratio, were also monitored to understand the effects of daily avocado consumption on these factors.

Daily avocado consumption linked to improved diet

During the study, researchers found that individuals who consumed avocados daily showed a "potentially clinically relevant" increase of 4.74 points in their HEI-2015 scores compared to the control group that consumed their regular diet.

This improvement was mainly attributed to an increase in total vegetable intake and a more favourable ratio of unsaturated to saturated fats, both of which were directly related to daily avocado consumption.

In comparison to the control group, individuals who consumed avocados daily did not show any significant difference in their intake of saturated or polyunsaturated fats.

However, their consumption of monounsaturated fatty acids (MUFAs) increased by 13 grams per day, which was almost equivalent to the MUFA content of the avocados provided to them (17 grams).

Despite an overall increased adherence to the dietary guidelines with daily avocado consumption, these dietary improvements did not lead to significant changes in cardiometabolic disease risk factors over the 26-week period, the study authors found.

Effects of diet quality on cardiometabolic health

Studies have consistently shown that enhancing the quality of the diet over time leads to a lower risk of cardiometabolic diseases and mortality.

The authors of the present study proposed two explanations for why their findings did not align with the scientific consensus on diet quality and disease risk.

First, the intervention period of 26 weeks may have been too short to change these risk factors significantly.

Second, the study participants' initial diet scores were poor and slightly below average. So, despite a notable improvement in diet quality, the follow-up diet scores still received an "F," the lowest grade.

Therefore, it is unlikely that the overall diet quality was high enough to have a significant impact on cardiometabolic risk factors.

According to Alyssa Simpson, registered dietitian and owner of Nutrition Resolution, not involved in the study, further limitations arose from the study's non-blinded design; potential biases associated with self-reported dietary intake, and restricted generalizability.

Avocado consumption may lead to healthier food choices

Considering the methodology and avocados' nutritional composition, it's not surprising that avocado consumption was found to enhance diet quality scores, especially in terms of total vegetable and fatty acid components.

"Avocados are rich in monounsaturated fats, fiber, essential nutrients, and phytochemicals that are beneficial for health," shared Claire Rifkin, a registered dietitian not involved in the study.

Perhaps more interestingly, participants following the avocado-enriched diet exhibited reductions in their consumption of sodium, refined grains, and added sugars compared with those who continued their regular eating patterns.

These changes suggest avocados may have partially replaced foods containing sodium, added sugars, and refined grains in the diet.

Simpson explained that this substitution effect "promotes an overall improvement in diet quality by increasing nutrient-dense foods rich in healthy fats and fiber while decreasing the intake of less nutritious, processed foods."

In the present study, however, avocado consumption had no effect on the participants' saturated fat intake. Additionally, avocados replaced small amounts of total protein, seafood, and plant protein components in the diet, the impacts of which were not explored.

Is it OK to eat an avocado every day?

Long-term avocado consumption could potentially improve lipid profiles and help regulate blood glucose levels, reducing cardiovascular disease risk and aiding in diabetes prevention and management, Rifkin said.

These effects can be attributed to the high monounsaturated fat and dietary fiber content in avocados. In general, most adults can benefit from including avocados in their daily diet in moderation. However, Simpson expressed: "[Promoting] avocados as a singular solution for improving dietary

habits may overlook the importance of nutritional diversity, accessibility, and affordability, while also neglecting environmental considerations and cultural dietary preferences."

Instead, aim to include a variety of nutrient-rich foods to foster a more sustainable and inclusive approach, she said.

For individuals seeking nutritional alternatives to avocados, Simpson and Rifkin recommended incorporating various sources of healthy fats and fiber into their diet. Similar options include nuts and seeds such as:

- Almonds
- Walnuts
- Chia seeds
- Pumpkin seeds

Some people may need to limit avocado intake
While avocados are nutrient-dense, their high fat content also makes them calorie-dense.

Consuming avocados daily may contribute significantly to caloric intake, so portion size is something to be mindful of for individuals with health-related weight management goals.

Additionally, individuals following a low-FODMAP diet, which is often recommended for managing symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), may need to limit avocado consumption to smaller servings.

For those with gastrointestinal conditions requiring limited fiber during symptom-flare-ups, like diverticulitis or ulcerative colitis, avocado intake may also need to be managed according to dietary recommendations from a healthcare professional.

More research on diet quality and longevity needed

Long-term improvements in diet quality can greatly reduce the risk of chronic conditions such as obesity, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes, potentially leading to a longer and disease-free lifespan.

This research highlights the role that specific foods, such as avocados, can play in diet improvement strategies.

According to Kiran Campbell, a registered dietitian not involved in the study, "[a]dding in one specific healthy food is a good start to a healthy diet." However, strategies for promoting adherence to dietary guidelines, improving diet quality, and promoting longevity may need to extend beyond specific food-based interventions.

"Relying solely on one or even a few foods would likely not give you enough varied nutrition to reduce the risk of chronic disease or extend longevity. A comprehensive pattern of eating that includes a wide range of nutrient-dense foods is essential for reducing the risk of chronic disease and living a long healthy life." — Claire Rifkin, registered dietitian.

Campbell agreed, suggesting that "[s]peaking with health professionals like registered dietitians can help to individualize a healthy meal plan that works long-term and includes a larger variety of healthy foods to help meet the dietary guidelines."

Beyond an individual focus on diet quality, Rifkin stressed the importance of addressing systemic factors, including:

- Corporate marketing of unhealthy foods
- Lack of government incentives for healthier options
- Food inequities and insecurities

Such a transition is crucial for achieving significant and widespread improvements in diet quality and disease risk — increasing longevity across populations. (Courtesy: Medical News Today)

The war began on Oct. 7, when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people

Israeli troops withdraw from Shifa Hospital, Gaza's largest, after 2-week raid

DEIR AL-BALAH, April 1: The Israeli military withdrew from Gaza's largest hospital early on Monday after a two-week raid, leaving behind several bodies and a vast swath of destruction, according to Palestinian residents.

The military has described the raid on Shifa Hospital as one of the most successful operations of the nearly six-month war. It says it killed scores of Hamas and other militants, including senior operatives, and that it seized weapons and valuable intelligence. It confirmed forces had withdrawn Monday.

The U.N. health agency said several patients died and dozens were put at risk during the raid, which brought even further destruction to a hospital that had already largely ceased to function. Days of heavy fighting showed that Hamas can still put up resistance even in one of the hardest-hit areas of Gaza.

Mohammed Mahdi, who was among hundreds of Palestinians who returned to the area, described a scene of "total destruction." He said several buildings had been burned down and that he had counted six bodies in the area, including two in the hospital courtyard.

Video footage circulating online showed heavily damaged and charred buildings, mounds of dirt that had been churned up by bulldozers and patients on stretchers in darkened corridors.

Another resident, Yahia Abu Auf, said there were still patients, medical workers and displaced people sheltering inside the medical compound after several patients



had been taken to the nearby Ahli Hospital. He said army bulldozers had plowed over a makeshift cemetery in Shifa's courtyard. "The situation is indescribable," he said. "The occupation destroyed all sense of life here."

Israel has accused Hamas of using hospitals for military purposes and has raided several medical facilities. It says it launched the raid on Shifa after Hamas and other militants had regrouped there.

Health officials in Gaza deny those allegations. Critics accuse the army of recklessly endangering civilians and of decimating a health sector already overwhelmed with war-wounded. Palestinians say Israeli troops forcibly evacuated homes near Shifa Hospital in downtown Gaza City and forced hundreds of residents to march south.

At least 21 patients have died since the raid began, World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus posted late on Sunday on X, formerly Twitter.

He said over a hundred patients were still inside the compound, including four children and 28 critical patients. He also said there were no diapers, urine bags or water to clean wounds, and that many patients suffered from infected wounds and dehydration.

The military had previously raided Shifa, Gaza's largest hospital, in November, after saying Hamas maintained an elaborate command and control center inside and beneath the compound. It revealed a tunnel running beneath the hospital that led to a few rooms, as well as weapons it said it had confiscated from inside medical buildings, but nothing on the scale of what it had alleged prior to the raid.

The war began on Oct. 7, when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking around 250 people hostage. Israel responded with an air, land and sea offensive that has killed at least 32,782 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.

The ministry does not distinguish between civilians and combatants in its count but says women and children have made up around two-thirds of those killed.

The Israeli military says it has killed over 13,000 Hamas fighters, and blames the civilian death toll on Palestinian militants because they fight in dense residential areas.

The war has displaced most of the territory's population and driven a third of its residents to the brink of famine. Northern Gaza, where Shifa is located, has suffered

vast destruction and has been largely isolated since October, leading to widespread hunger.

Israel said late last year that it had largely dismantled Hamas in northern Gaza and withdrew thousands of troops. But it has battled militants there on a number of occasions since then, and the two weeks of heavy fighting around Shifa highlighted the staying power of the armed groups.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to keep up the offensive until Hamas is destroyed and all of the hostages are freed. He says Israel will soon expand ground operations to the southern city of Rafah, where some 1.4 million people — more than half of Gaza's population — have sought refuge.

But he faces mounting pressure from Israelis who blame him for the security failures of Oct. 7 and from some families of the hostages who blame him for the failure to reach a deal despite several weeks of talks mediated by the United States, Qatar and Egypt.

Hamas and other militants are still believed to be holding some 100 hostages and the remains of 30 others, after freeing most of the rest during a cease-fire last November in exchange for the release of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Tens of thousands of Israelis thronged central Jerusalem on Sunday in the largest anti-government protest since the country went to war in October. Deep divisions over Netanyahu's leadership long predate the war, which still enjoys strong public support. (AP)

Pak court suspends 14-year jail term of Imran Khan and his wife in Toshakhana corruption case

ISLAMABAD, April 1: In a major relief to jailed former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan, a high court on Monday suspended the 14-year sentence given to him and his wife Bushra Bibi in the Toshakhana corruption case.

The two were sentenced to 14 years in jail each by an accountability court on January 31 for alleged corruption in state gifts they got from the state depository, days before the general elections.

They challenged the conviction in the Islamabad High Court where a two-member bench headed by IHC Chief Justice Aamer Farooq heard the case.

On Monday, the Islamabad High Court (IHC) gave temporary relief to the couple in the case by suspending their sentences and granting them bail in the case.

However, the court announced that their appeals against the conviction would be heard after the Eid festival next month.

But Khan may not be released as he is convicted in other cases and cannot be released until absolved from charges in other cases. Similarly, Bushra is also convicted in another case and may not be released after her sentence has been suspended.

In the Toshakhana corruption case, the

71-year-old former cricketer-turned-politician is accused of retaining expensive state gifts they received during his tenure as Pakistan's premier.

Under the rules governing Toshakhana — a Persian word meaning "treasure house" — government officials can keep gifts by paying a price for them but first the gift should be deposited. Khan and his wife either failed to deposit the gift or got it for a low price by allegedly using their authority.

The conviction of Khan in the Toshakhana case had come a day after he was awarded 10 years in jail in the cipher case on January 30. Earlier, he was also convicted in a

different Toshakhana case in August 2023, leading to his arrest.

The latest conviction was based on the charges of misusing his authority as prime minister to retain gifts he or his spouse got during his tenure. It was filed by the National Accountability Bureau.

The previous Toshakhana graft case was filed by the Election Commission of Pakistan in the charges of hiring the sale of state gifts.

Khan so far has been convicted in four different cases since losing power in April 2022. He has got bail in both Toshakhana cases. (PTI)



Bodies of 5 Chinese killed in suicide bombing in NW Pak flown to China

ISLAMABAD, April 1: The bodies of five Chinese nationals who were killed last week in a suicide bombing in northwestern Pakistan were flown to Beijing on a special plane, Pakistani officials and state media said on Monday.

The bodies were sent to Beijing overnight from a military air base in the garrison city of Rawalpindi.

The development came a week after the Chinese, along with their Pakistani driver, were killed when the suicide bomber rammed his explosive-laden car into their vehicle in the volatile northwest as they were heading to Pakistan's biggest hydropower project, Dasu Dam, where they worked.

On Monday, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif was also visiting Dasu Dam to meet with Chinese engineers and workers. Pakistani officials will brief Sharif on the project's progress.

Chinese and Pakistani investigators are conducting separate probes into the attack, which drew nationwide condemnation. China has also asked Pakistan to ensure the protection of its nationals working in various parts of Pakistan on projects in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Authorities say the Chinese bombing victims were heading to the project site amid tight security.

Other Chinese working on CPEC-related projects have faced similar attacks in recent years. In July 2021, at least 13 people, including nine Chinese nationals, were killed when a suicide bomber detonated explosives in his vehicle near a bus carrying Chinese and Pakistani engineers and laborers, prompting Chinese companies to temporarily suspend work. (AP)

US military says it destroyed Houthi drones over the Red Sea and in Yemen

CAIRO, April 1: The U.S. military said Sunday its forces destroyed one unmanned aerial vehicle in a Houthi rebel-held area of war-ravaged Yemen and another over a crucial shipping route in the Red Sea. It was the latest development in months of tension between the Iran-backed rebels and the U.S.

The drones, which were destroyed on Saturday morning, posed a threat to U.S. and coalition forces and merchant vessels in the region, said the U.S. Central Command.

It said that one drone was destroyed over the Red Sea, while the second was destroyed on the ground as it was prepared to launch.

"These actions are necessary to protect our forces, ensure freedom of navigation, and make international waters safer and more secure for U.S., coalition, and merchant vessels," CENTCOM said. There was no comment from the Houthi rebels, which control much of Yemen's north and west.

The rebels launched a campaign of drone and missile attacks on shipping in the Red Sea in November. They have also fired missiles toward Israel, although those have largely fallen short or been intercepted.

The rebels have described their campaign as an effort to pressure Israel to end its war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The ships targeted by the Houthis, however, largely have had little or no connection to Israel, the U.S. or other nations involved in the war.

The Houthis have kept up their campaign of attacks despite more than two months of U.S.-led

airstrikes.

Earlier this month, CENTCOM said its forces also destroyed four unmanned aerial vehicles in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen. It also said Houthis fired four anti-ship ballistic missiles toward the Red Sea, but no injuries or damages were reported by U.S., coalition or commercial ships.

The escalation in the Red Sea and the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza impacted the U.N.-led efforts to relaunch political talks to end Yemen's years-long conflict, according to the U.N. envoy for Yemen. Hans Grundberg told the U.N. Security Council in mid-March that he had hoped to reach an agreement on a nationwide cease-fire in Yemen by the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which began early in March.

He warned that Yemen could be propelled back into war, saying that "the longer the escalatory environment (in the region) continues, the more challenging Yemen's mediation space will become."

The war between the Houthis and pro-government forces backed by a coalition of Gulf Arab states has raged since 2014, when the Houthis swept down from the mountains, seized much of northern Yemen and the country's capital, Sanaa, and forced the internationally recognized government to flee into exile to Saudi Arabia.

Since then, more than 150,000 people have been killed by the violence and 3 million have been displaced.

Fighting has decreased markedly in Yemen since a truce in April 2022, but there are still hotspots in the country. (AP)

Baltimore bridge collapse a 'national economic catastrophe', says Maryland Gov

WASHINGTON, April 1: Describing the collapse of Francis Scott Key bridge last week as America's "national economic catastrophe", Maryland Governor Wes Moore has said the removal of the wreckage of the bridge and the cargo ship that was mainly manned by an Indian crew is a complex and time-consuming operation.

The 2.6km-long, four-lane bridge over the Patapsco River in Baltimore came crashing down after Dali, a 984-foot cargo ship bound for Sri Lanka, collided against it in the early hours of Tuesday.

There were eight workers on the bridge at the time. Two survived, two bodies have been found, and four more men are presumed dead. The 22 crew members from India who have remained on the ship, named the Dali, since the disaster, the New York Times reported.

"This is not a Baltimore catastrophe, not a Maryland catastrophe. This is a national economic catastrophe," Moore told CNN in an interview on Sunday.

Moore said this port is one of the busiest, most active ports in the country. "So, this is not just going



to have an impact on Maryland. This is going to impact the farmers in Kentucky. This is going to impact the auto dealer in Ohio. This is going to impact the restaurant owner in Tennessee," he said.

"Whether you're talking about all those various industries, the Port of Baltimore is the largest in the country for all of those things. So, the reason that we need people to move on a bipartisan basis and move on a fast basis is not because we need you to do Maryland a favour. Maryland needs no favours. We need to make sure that we're moving quickly to get the American economy going again; because the Port of Baltimore is instrumental in our larger economic growth," he said. "This is not just about Maryland's economy. This is something that is impacting the nation's economy. This is the largest

port for new cars, for heavy trucks, for agricultural equipment. So, this is impacting people all over the country," Moore told MSNBC in another interview. Appearing on Sunday morning talk shows, Moore said that one of the largest cranes, which has the capacity of lifting 1,000 tonnes, had arrived to remove the wreckage of the bridge and the cargo ship that was mainly manned by all Indian crew.

The crane has begun to "cut up the remnants of the bridge that we can then prepare for removal. The complicated nature of this is, we have a ship that is nearly the size of the Eiffel Tower that is now stuck within the channel that has the Key Bridge sitting on top of it," Moore told CNN.

"We can't underestimate how difficult this task is. This is unprecedented where you have a ship that is almost the size of the Eiffel Tower that is stuck in the channel. That has the Key Bridge, which is 3,000 to 4,000 tonnes of steel that is sitting on top of it. This is a remarkably complex operation. And so frankly, our entire focus, all of our time, has been focused on that and nothing else," he told MSNBC. (PTI)

France presses China on trade and Ukraine ahead of upcoming Xi Jinping visit

BELJING, April 1: The French foreign minister pressed China on trade issues and the war in Ukraine on Monday ahead of a planned visit to France by Chinese leader Xi Jinping later this spring.

Stéphane Séjourné, in talks with his counterpart Wang Yi in the Chinese capital, largely echoed positions that have been laid out by European leaders, including Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte on a visit to Beijing last week.

"The rebalancing of our economic partnership is a priority, as it is for our European partners," Séjourné said at a joint news conference with Wang. "The European Union is a very open market, the most open in

the world. But the current deficits with a certain number of countries, including China, are not sustainable for us."

European officials have expressed concern that a flood of low-priced Chinese-made electric vehicles could disrupt production and displace jobs in Europe. The EU is investigating whether Chinese government subsidies for EVs give an unfair advantage to Chinese auto exporters. European companies operating in China are complaining that recent changes to national security laws have made it riskier to invest and do business in the country.

On the Chinese side, officials have raised concern about a "de-risking"

strategy being pursued by the EU to ensure that it is not overly dependent on any one country for vital supplies and minerals. Wang expressed understanding for the European position but said he hopes it doesn't negatively affect business sentiment.

"I believe the facts have proved and will continue to prove that China constitutes opportunities to Europe, rather than risks," he said. "The two sides are partners not opponents."

He also said that China is willing to import more "high-quality French products and services" and is working to resolve the concerns raised by European companies, including restrictions on the transfer of data overseas. (AP)

Pak witnessed 245 terror attacks, counter-terror operations in first quarter of 2024: Think tank report

ISLAMABAD, April 1: Pakistan witnessed as many as 245 incidents of terror attacks and counter-terror operations during the first quarter of 2024, resulting in 432 fatalities and 370 injuries among civilians, security personnel and rebels, according to a think tank report.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan provinces, both bordering Afghanistan, accounted for over 92 per cent of all fatalities and 86 per cent of attacks (including incidents of terrorism and security forces operations) during this period. Individually, the former suffered 51 per cent and the latter 41 per cent of all fatalities in the first quarter of 2024, according to the security report issued by the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS).

The data indicates that the remaining regions were relatively peaceful, suffering less than 8 per cent of all fatalities. Interestingly, militant organisations claimed responsibility for less than 20 per cent of the total casualties attributed to terrorism in the first quarter of 2024. A new militant group named Jabhat Ansar al-Mahdi Khorasan (JAMK), affiliated with the Gul Bahadur group, has emerged.

In addition to the casualties of terrorism and counter-terrorism, there were 64 incidents of sabotage in the country targeting properties of the government, politicians, and private and security properties.

In the first quarter, Balochistan recorded a staggering 96 per cent surge in violence, with fatalities jumping to 178 from 91 in the last quarter of 2023. Sindh saw a nearly 47 per cent rise in violence, though the number of fatalities was very low. However, the regions of KP, Punjab, and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) recorded encouraging decreases in violence by 24 per cent, 85 per cent, and 65 per cent, respectively.

Despite a notable decrease in violence observed in GB during the period under review, the GB home minister issued a terror threat alert on March 31, 2024, on the possibility of attacks by the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The alert came following a suicide attack on a convoy of Chinese engineers in the Shangla district of KP who were working on the Dasu Dam project, resulting in the deaths of five Chinese nationals and a local driver. It's worth noting that last year, GB suffered the highest number of fatalities in a decade, with 17 lives lost, the report stated.

In the first quarter of the current year, civilians and security forces personnel suffered over 65 per cent (281) of all fatalities in nearly 200 terror attacks, compared to outlaws suffering only 35 per cent (151) in



around 48 counter-terror operations. The attacks on security officials and civilians outnumbered the security operations conducted against the outlaws by almost fourfold. Civilians suffered 154 fatalities (36 per cent), which is more than any other category of victims.

Compared to the last quarter of 2023, the fatalities of civilians and security officials combined surged by 17 per cent, whereas the fatalities of outlaws, militants, and insurgents combined decreased by almost 15 per cent in the first quarter of 2024. Surprisingly, certain terrorist outfits, such as the banned Tehreek-i-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), Lashkar-i-Islami (LI), and Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (LeJ), which were highly active the previous year, have abstained from claiming any acts of terrorism this quarter. Only the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the militant Islamic State group, or Daesh, have claimed responsibility for some attacks.

The banned insurgent groups, Balochistan Liberation Army, Baloch Liberation Front, Baloch Raaji Ajoi Sangar, and Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army, claimed responsibility for 18 attacks (three times more than the claims of the militant groups) in the first quarter, causing 42 fatalities and 40 injuries. The prime targets of the insurgent groups were the security and government installations, including Gwadar Port Complex, Mach Jail, and Turbat Naval Base.

In the first quarter, eight incidents of sectarian violence were reported, impacting all religious communities, including Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Among the non-Muslim communities, Ahmadis endured the highest casualties (9), while three fatalities occurred among Shias due to violence. Additionally, a Sunni was also targeted in an act of violence, according to the report.

On Sunday, unidentified armed men opened indiscriminate fire on a Pakistan Army bomb disposal team near the port city of Gwadar, killing two soldiers and injuring four others. (PTI)

Prez Yoon vows not to back down in the face of doctors' strike over medical school plan

SEOUL, April 1: South Korea's president vowed on Monday not to back down in the face of vehement protests by doctors seeking to derail his plan to drastically increase medical school admissions, as he called their walkouts "an illegal collective action" that poses "a grave threat to our society."

About 12,000 medical interns and residents in South Korea have been on strike for six weeks, causing hundreds of cancelled surgeries and other treatments at university hospitals.

In support of their action, many senior doctors at their teaching schools have also submitted resignations though they haven't stopped treating patients.

Officials say they want to raise the yearly medical school cap by 2,000 from the current 3,058 to create more doctors to deal with the country's rapidly aging population.

Doctors counter that schools can't handle such an abrupt increase in students and that it would eventually hurt the country's medical services. But critics say doctors, one of the best-paid professions in South Korea, are simply worried that the supply of more doctors would result in lower future incomes.

Public surveys show that a majority of South Koreans support the government's push to create more doctors. But observers say many people are increasingly fed up with the protracted confrontation between the government and doctors, threatening to deal a blow to governing party candidates ahead of next week's parliamentary elections.

Korea's doctor-to-patient ratio — 2.1 physicians per 1,000 people — is far below the average of 3.7 in the developed world. (AP)

Gunmen in Ecuador kill 9, injure 10 others in attack in coastal city of Guayaquil as violence surges

QUITO, April 1: Gunmen attacked a group of people in Ecuador's coastal city of Guayaquil killing nine and injuring 10 others, police said Sunday, the latest in a string of violent incidents in the South American country.

The attack took place around 7 p.m. local time Saturday in the southern neighborhood of Guasmo. According to police, the armed group entered a pedestrian street in a grey Chevrolet Spark, where a group of people were practicing sports. The gunmen got out of the vehicle and proceeded to shoot people.

"So far, the result is nine people dead and 10 injured," police Col. Ramiro Arequipa told journalists around midday on Sunday.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. It was the second mass killing in as many days. On Friday, five people who had been kidnapped were killed execution style in the coastal province

of Manabi by an armed gang.

Police said there were signs the victims were tourists mistakenly caught up in a local drug-trafficking dispute. They didn't elaborate.

In that incident, an armed group had kidnapped a total of 11 people. Police said the other six, including five minors, were rescued and handed over to their families. Two suspects were arrested on Saturday morning, according to police.

The killings in Manabi "remind us that the battle continues," said Ecuador's President Daniel Noboa on the social media network X, formerly Twitter, on Saturday.

Ecuador was once considered a bastion of peace in Latin America, but in recent years has seen a surge in violent attacks. Noboa declared a

state of emergency in January, which provides for permanent operations by a security force made up of police and military. In addition, a five-hour curfew is in force in high-incidence areas such as Guayaquil.

On March 24, the 27-year-old mayor of a small town — also in the province of Manabi — was killed along with her collaborator. Brigitte Garcia and Jairo Looor were found inside a vehicle with gunshot wounds.

On Thursday, a riot in a Guayaquil prison under military and police control left three inmates dead and four injured. Ecuador surpassed a rate of 40 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants at the end of 2023, one of the highest in the region, according to police. (AP)



PDA candidate Murry will be voice of Nagas in Lok Sabha if elected

Three candidates - Murry, Congress nominee S Supongmeren Jamir and Independent candidate Hayithung Tungoe Lotha - are in the fray

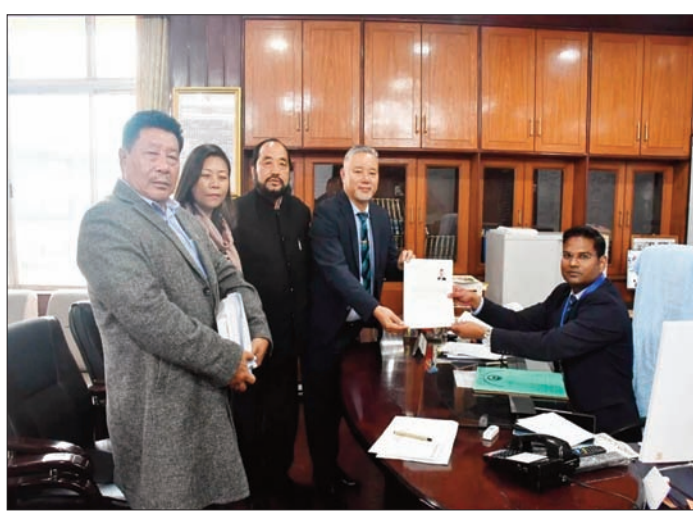
KOHIMA, April 1: People's Democratic Alliance (PDA) consensus candidate, Chumben Murry said he would be the voice of the people in matters relating to Naga political issue, concerns over CAA, UCC, FMR and developmental requirements if voted as next Lok Sabha MP from Nagaland.

Elections to the lone Lok Sabha seat in Nagaland will be held on April 19. Three candidates - Murry, Congress nominee S Supongmeren Jamir and Independent candidate Hayithung Tungoe Lotha - are in the fray.

"If elected being the consensus candidate of the 60 legislators of the state, I will represent their wisdom and also be the voice of the people on the issues concerning the state with the primary focus on facilitating the Naga political issue," Murry told PTI in an interview.

On the Naga issue, Murry the official nominee of the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) for the lone parliamentary seat said, "We will not be directly negotiating with the Centre but at the same time we have to keep the yearning of the people for a solution alive."

He said the Congress is banking on alleged Christian atrocities across India and its slogan is more or less anti-BJP but "We (NDPP) are a regional party and we will



represent Nagaland for its people and the issues that concern all of us."

"BJP-led NDA government is a centralist government so it formulates law according to the needs of the country but sometimes such decisions do not go well with the unique structure like ours. We have a unique history and also a totally different culture and customary system," he said.

On state Congress' accusation that the BJP-backed candidate would not be able to oppose the BJP government's decision to implement Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), Murry said Nagas are protected to have their

own ways of living through Article 371(A) of the Constitution but the UCC conflicts with that and therefore Nagas have to be exempted from it.

He expressed confidence and happiness that the Centre has assured to exempt Nagaland from UCC.

"Issues like UCC and scrapping of Free Movement Regime along Indo-Myanmar border will have to be taken up in Parliament, apart from the Naga Political Issue," he said.

The CAA is outwardly a good Act but Nagaland is protected from outsiders coming and owning properties under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act of

1883, he said. "CAA is not a very serious issue for us but it should not be exploited by outsiders. We have to be vigilant," he said.

Expounding his vision for youth and women of the state if elected as an MP, he said as of now Nagaland is not very comfortable with its own resources so it has to depend on the Centre.

For the women, he said the state government has already set 33 per cent reservation in the Urban Local Bodies, providing better opportunity for them to be in decision making bodies and work for the upliftment of women.

The NDA government is coming back at the Centre, he claimed and said the youths, for their future and all other developmental activities, must flow with the time. He expressed confidence that with BJP-led NDA returning at Centre Nagaland would see much more progress in the next five years.

On Nagaland Petroleum and Natural Gas Rules and Regulation, he said due to the relationship gap in the past, the Centre claimed that Petroleum and Natural Gas comes under the Centre's subject and the state does not have the authority.

Strongly supporting that Nagaland has the authority to frame petroleum rules and regulations under 371A, Murry said once in

parliament he would make efforts to bring an understanding among the central leaders on the matter.

On Congress' allegation that the RSS-BJP has forced the coming together of the 60 MLAs but without any outcome, he said the Congress' impression is wrong as a regional party in the state, we have never been forced by the Centre.

"We are an entity, and we represent the Naga people, so it is a different issue. But as a state, we are resource-crunch and don't have money to develop ourselves and so we have to rely on the Centre. And in this situation, with the NDA set to come back to the Centre, the relationship is working well with the Nagas," he said.

On Eastern Nagaland Peoples' Organisation demand for Frontier Nagaland Territory, Murry was in line with chief minister Neiphiu Rio in accepting that there are deficiencies in line with education, infrastructure development, etc in the area.

All these issues are "very genuine" and they have to be uplifted either by way of certain packages or giving them autonomy, he said.

On peoples' fear of scrapping of Article 371A like the abrogation of Article 370 of Jammu & Kashmir, he expressed confidence that it will not happen because the two PTIs are "totally different". (PTI)

NDA doing best to undermine INDIA bloc as it knows it won't be able to retain power: Mizoram Cong



AIZAWL, April 1: Mizoram Congress leader Lalinunmawia Chuango on Monday alleged that the NDA is "doing its best to undermine" the INDIA bloc as "it is fully aware that it would not be able to retain power".

Addressing party workers and common people during a rally brought out by the Congress here, Chuango, the Mizoram Pradesh Congress Committee vice chairman, claimed that the NDA is also undermining the INDIA bloc as it knows that the alliance of the opposition parties is the only alternative to the BJP-led government.

Chuango, who is also the party's campaign committee chairman for the Lok Sabha polls, alleged that "free and fair elections no longer take place" in the country under the BJP rule and urged people to vote for the Congress to "restore democracy".

"The NDA is doing its best to undermine the INDIA bloc because the BJP-led alliance is fully

aware that it would not be able to retain power and that the INDIA bloc is the only alternative to the NDA government," he said.

Chuango alleged that the Modi government has failed to fulfill poll promises of generating employment for youths.

He claimed that about 65 per cent of educated youths across the country are unemployed and because of its "poor performance", the youth have lost faith in the NDA government.

He claimed that Congress and other opposition parties have been "attacked" by the NDA government through the Income Tax department and bank accounts of the grand old party have been frozen to prevent it from campaigning for the polls.

Chuango said the arrest of Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal was just a political ploy and there was no concrete evidence of the crime he has been accused of.

The rally was also addressed by former minister and Congress leader Vanlalawmpui Chawngthu and Zoram Decentralisation Front (ZDF) president Lawmthang.

Congress has fielded retired Mizoram Police Service (MPS) officer and former state home secretary Lalbiakzama (64) for the Lok Sabha polls.

Polling for the lone Lok Sabha seat in the state will be held on April 19. (PTI)

SKM banking on welfare measures to win elections for second consecutive term in Sikkim

GANGTOK, April 1: The Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) led by Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang is banking on the welfare measures taken by its government in the last five years to win Assembly elections for the second consecutive term in the Himalayan state.

Elections to the 32-member Sikkim Assembly and the lone Lok Sabha seat in the state will be held on April 19.

The SKM is banking on welfare measures like free LPG cylinder to all households every quarter, Rs 40,000 annual cash transfer to the women head of family under 'Aamaa Yojana', extra increment to indigenous people in state government service for raising an additional child, an assistant to take care of infants for one year and regularisation of service of 27,000 temporary government employees among others.

"We have fulfilled all the promises we had made in 2019," Tamang said at a rally and urged the people of Sikkim to vote his party to power for a second term to make the Himalayan state a developed and prosperous one.

The SKM which was formed in 2013 had won 10 seats in the 32-member Assembly in the 2014 elections. In the 2019 Assembly elections, it won 17 seats and wrested power from the Sikkim Democratic Front which ruled the state for 25 years.

SKM supremo Tamang is contesting from two assembly seats - Rhenock and Soreng-Chakung. His wife Krishna Kimari Rai is contesting from the Namchi-Singhihang assembly seat.

The SKM is fighting the assembly elections alone as the BJP decided to break the alliance with it.

The BJP is contesting the elections in all the 32 seats independently.

The opposition SDF and the newly-formed Citizen Action Party (CAP) have been critical of the Tamang government for "failing" to provide reservation in assembly seats to the tribal Limboo and Tamang communities despite its good equation with the central government.

"With the chief minister himself being a Tamang, he should have made serious efforts to convince the central government to legislate on giving reserved assembly seats to the two tribal communities of Sikkim," an SDF leader said.

The opposition parties are also angry with the SKM for "failing" to address the issue of the tribal status of 12 left-out communities of Sikkim despite making a promise in its election manifesto in 2019.

The opposition had also criticised the SKM for remaining a mute spectator to the dilution of article 371(F) of the constitution which protects old laws of Sikkim and provides special status to the Himalayan state after its merger with India in 1974.

The expansion of the definition of the Sikkimese people by a Supreme Court order to include descendants of old settlers along with indigenous communities for entitlement to avail income tax exemption had created a storm in Sikkim with all opposition parties protesting the decision and demanding a rollback.

However, the Sikkim Chief Minister weathered the storm by getting the order modified through an application moved by the central government in the apex court. (PTI)

Gang members nabbed in Imphal

IMPHAL, April 1: Police in Imphal West district have arrested two members of a "gang" including a teenager with arms and ammunition.

"One of the arrested members is only 18 years old", the police said on Monday.

While accusing them to be the members of the Salailen Mapari Kangleipak Defence Force, the police said that the arrestees are part of a gang "Salailen Mapari (Kangleipak Defence Force) and involved in theft, extortion and anti-social activities.

One .32 pistol with one magazine, one 9mm pistol with one magazine loaded with four 9mm ammunition, one SBBL gun mounted with one telescope, one Chinese hand grenade and five wireless sets were recovered from the possessions of the two members along with some other

materials including seal and letterheads of the group, the police said.

It also said that one round seal of Salailen Mapari KDF, one blue flag of Salailen Mapari KDF, one each of camouflage cap, jacket, BP black vest, camouflage full shirt and trouser, eight letter heads of Salailen Mapari Kangleipak Defence Force signed by its chairman H Lalloiba and president O Meetei, eight letter heads of Salailen Mapari Kangleipak Defence Force signed by president O Meetei, one EECO van silver in colour, and one Himalayan Royal Enfield motorcycle were also recovered.

They were arrested during a counter insurgency operation at Kombirei Colony under Lamphel police station of Imphal West district on Sunday, the police said. (NNN)

40 paramilitaries to be deployed in Meghalaya



SHILLONG, April 1: 40 companies of paramilitary forces will be deployed in Meghalaya to ensure conduct of a free, fair and peaceful Lok Sabha elections, to be held on April 19.

Informing this on Monday, chief electoral officer (CEO) Dr BDR Tiwari said, "We have received sanction of 40 companies

of central armed police forces (CAPFs)."

Of these, five companies of CAPF have already been deployed in the state, he said while adding that the rest will be deployed accordingly as per plan.

Tiwari informed that all the necessary arrangements have been made as far as law-and-order issue

is concerned.

"Also border related issues have also been taken up (ahead of the elections). The Election Commission of India (ECI) is also issuing needful instructions and we are in consultation with the neighbouring state," he said.

The CEO did not provide the number of vulnerable and critical polling stations, which have been identified, citing that 'it is a very dynamic figure'.

Further, he informed that so far two complaints have been received in regards to the violation of the model code of conduct.

On the nature of these complaints, the CEO however said, "All those things you are supposed to find out from the respective DCs." He said that two complaints were received through the C-vigil and they have been disposed of accordingly. (NNN)



One child died, many injured, 679 houses damaged in the cyclone that hit on Sunday night that affected the Mairang and Mawthadraishan C&RD Block under Eastern West Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya, on 01-04-24. UB Photos

Several houses damaged as rain, storm lash Mizoram

AIZAWL, April 1: Several houses and churches have been damaged in Mizoram as heavy rain accompanied with hail lashed parts of the northeastern state, officials said Monday.

More than 300 houses were damaged by hail at Zohmun and Palsang villages in Aizawl district on Sunday night, they said.

A church at Lungtan village in Champhai district collapsed and another at Sialsuk in Aizawl also suffered damages, the officials said.

There were, however, no reports of any injury or death so far.

District officials are still collecting information about the extent of damage at various places in the state, they added.

The India Meteorological Department had on Sunday issued an 'Orange Alert' and forecast "heavy to very heavy" rainfall across several states of the northeast. (PTI)

PM Modi has brought peace, development to Northeast: Tripura CM

AGARTALA, April 1: Prime Minister Narendra Modi has brought peace and development to the Northeast by signing as many as 12 accords, Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha said on Monday.

The 12 accords include peace agreements with the outlawed group National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) in 2019, Bodo Accord and Bru agreement in 2019 and resolving the boundary dispute between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, he said.

"The prime minister believes that the country will not prosper if the Northeast is not developed. Since peace is the precondition for development, the Modi government has worked hard to bring peace to the region by signing 12 accords with various organisations. Today, peace prevails not only in Tripura but also in the entire region," he said at an election rally in Karbook in Gomati district.

Saha said that the Bru Accord resolved the 23-year-old problem of the internally displaced people.

"The Bru people were leading a miserable life in relief camps but no government could provide a solution... it was the Modi government that ended the problem by signing an agreement in 2020. Now, they are settled in 12 locations in Tripura and the Centre has provided Rs 600 crore for their rehabilitation," he said.



Claiming that the Act East policy has led to fast-track infrastructure building in the region, the chief minister said, "These measures have brought peace and development in the northeastern states."

Taking a dig at the opposition, he said, "They had tried to forge an alliance with the Tipra Motha before the elections but failed. Tipra Motha, having realised that only Modiji can provide solutions to problems, has joined the BJP government. Now, the opposition in Tripura means only the unholy alliance between the CPI (M) and Congress."

The chief minister urged the electors to vote for Kriti Devi Debbarman, who is contesting from Tripura East Lok Sabha constituency. (PTI)

India mourns loss of World War-II veteran Subedar Thanseia, a pillar of valour and inspiration

Remembering the remarkable life and legacy of a distinguished soldier from Mizoram

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 1: India stands in solemn tribute today as it mourns the passing of Subedar Thanseia, a revered veteran of the Indian Army's Assam Regiment, who breathed his last at the age of 102 on March 31, 2024, following a brief illness.

Hailing from the state of Mizoram, Subedar Thanseia's journey epitomised courage, dedication, and unwavering service to the nation, leaving an indelible mark on the annals of India's military history.

His saga of valour traces back to the crucible of World War-II, where his bravery shone brightly amidst the chaos of battle.

Renowned for his pivotal role in the Battle of Kohima, Subedar Thanseia's actions against formidable odds contributed significantly to the Allied forces' triumph, marking a turning point in the conflict in the East.

His leadership and unwavering commitment to duty established him as a stalwart of the 1st Assam Regi-



ment during their critical deployment at Jessami, further cementing his legacy as a distinguished soldier.

Beyond the battlefield, Subedar Thanseia continued to inspire generations through his post-retirement endeavors. Actively engaged in veteran

affairs and educational initiatives, he nurtured a spirit of patriotism and resilience, leaving an enduring impact on his community and country.

The outpouring of tributes and condolences from Army and civilian circles, including comrades from the

Assam Regiment, underscores the profound influence Subedar Thanseia wielded throughout his life.

His legacy serves as a poignant reminder of the sacrifices made by soldiers in the pursuit of peace and freedom, particularly in the North East region of India.

While the nation mourns his loss, Subedar Thanseia's extraordinary contributions and gallantry during the 2nd World War will be celebrated as a beacon of bravery and leadership.

His story transcends time, serving as a source of inspiration for future generations, honoring the steadfast dedication of all Indian soldiers who have served with distinction.

In remembrance of Subedar Thanseia, India pays homage to his memory, a guiding light illuminating the path of service and sacrifice for generations to come.

His life epitomized the best of humanity, embodying the virtues of courage, resilience, and unwavering commitment to duty.

Cong slams PM over his remarks on electoral bonds issue

At least 40 ED/IT/CBI raids on firms have been followed by hefty electoral bond donations by these firms to the BJP: Congress spokesperson Jairam Ramesh

NEW DELHI, April 1: The Congress on Monday hit out at Prime Minister Narendra Modi over his remarks on the electoral bonds issue, claiming that while the corruption of his government had been known for a while, the setback is that there are now "hard numbers to prove it".

Prime Minister Modi on Sunday rejected the suggestion that the electoral bond issue caused a setback to his government, saying no system is perfect and any shortcoming could be improved upon.

In an interview with Thanthi TV, he also said those who are "dancing" over the matter will regret it.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh attacked Modi over his remarks and charged, "Every single day the prime minister scales new heights of hypocrisy and plumbs new depths of dishonesty".

"The prime minister has fully lied to the nation in his latest interview to a Tamil television channel. He claims that 'where

funds have come from, how they are being used' is only known due to the Electoral Bond Scheme instituted by him," Ramesh said and put forward "relevant facts".

"The Electoral Bond Scheme was designed to be fully anonymous. In other words, Modi wanted to hide from the public the details of 'where funds have come from (to political parties), and how they are being used,' he alleged.

For six years, between 2018 and 2024, not a single detail of which party got funds from which donor was revealed to the public, Ramesh said in a post on X.

In 2024, the Supreme Court intervened to reject the electoral bond scheme as unconstitutional. Up until the last day in court, the Modi government tried to defend the anonymity of the scheme, the Congress leader said.

Finally, the Supreme Court demanded that the SBI publish the details of who donated to which party, he noted.



"Still, the remote-controlled SBI lied to the court, saying it did not collect this information. Then, it requested three months' time to collate the data, conveniently seeking an extension until after the election. It was only the Supreme Court's strong

intervention that forced the SBI to release the data publicly within days," Ramesh said.

He alleged that the SBI was lying in the Supreme Court when it demanded a three-month extension to match donor data with the political parties.

"It took our team five lines of Python code and less than fifteen seconds to match each donor with the political party they donated to," he said.

"As for the PM's question of 'what have I done that I should face a setback (due to Electoral Bonds)?' Mr. Modi, the data has revealed your party and Government's monumental corruption," Ramesh alleged.

He claimed that "₹ 4 lakh crores worth of contracts, projects, and environmental clearances can be linked to thousands of crores in electoral bond donations made by corporate donors to your party. The Government of India has been reduced to a supermarket - 'Chanda Do, Dhanda Lo'."

"At least 40 ED/IT/CBI raids on firms have been followed by hefty electoral bond donations by these firms to the BJP. The prime minister and his cronies have been engaged in a systematic 'hafta vasuli'," Ramesh alleged.

"The corruption of the Modi Sarkar has been known for a

while now; the setback is that there are now hard numbers to prove it. Unfortunately, we can expect the prime minister to continue his full-time job of lying to the Indian people to cover it up," the Congress leader said.

In his interview, Modi said, "Tell me what have we done that I should see it as a setback? I firmly believe that those dancing over it (bond details) and taking pride in it are going to regret."

The prime minister said it is due to the electoral bond system put in by his government that the sources of funding and its beneficiaries could be found out. If a trail is available today, it is because of the presence of bonds, he said, asking if any agency can tell about the sources of funding and their beneficiaries for the polls before 2014, the year he came to power.

"No system is perfect. There can be shortcomings which could be improved upon," he said. (PTI)

Oppn cites 2015 RTI reply, jabs govt over 'change in stance' on Katchatheevu island

NEW DELHI, April 1: Hitting back at the Centre over the Katchatheevu island issue, opposition leaders on Monday cited a 2015 RTI reply, which stated that the agreements in 1974 and 1976 did not involve either acquiring or ceding of territory belonging to India, and asked whether the "change" in Modi government's stance was for "election politics". The opposition's response came after External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Monday claimed that prime ministers from the Congress displayed indifference about Katchatheevu island and gave away Indian fishermen's rights despite legal views to the contrary.

Jaishankar's remarks at a press conference were made a day after Prime Minister Narendra Modi cited a media report to assert that new facts reveal that the Congress "callously" gave away Katchatheevu island to Sri Lanka.

Senior Congress leader P Chidambaram hit out at the government over the issue.

"Tit for tat is old. Tweet for Tweet is the new weapon. Will Foreign Minister Mr. Jaishankar please refer to the RTI reply dated 27-1-2015...The Reply justified the circumstances under which India acknowledged that a small island belonged to Sri Lanka," Chidambaram said.

Why is the Foreign Minister and his ministry doing a somersault now, he asked.

"How quickly can people change colours. From a suave liberal Foreign Service officer to a smart Foreign Secretary to a mouthpiece of the RSS-BJP, life and times of Mr Jaishankar will be recorded in the annals of acrobatic sports," Chidambaram said.

"It is true that fishermen were detained in the last 50 years. Likewise, India has detained many Sri Lankan fishermen. Every government has negotiated with Sri Lanka and freed our fishermen," the former home minister said.

"This has happened when Mr Jaishankar was a foreign service officer and when he was Foreign Secretary and when he is Foreign Minister. What has changed for Mr Jaishankar to launch a tirade against the Congress and DMK?" he said.

Were not fishermen detained by Sri Lanka when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was PM and the BJP was in power and in alliance with different political parties of Tamil Nadu, he asked.

"Were not fishermen detained by Sri Lanka when Mr Modi was in power since 2014?" he said.

In a post on X, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Priyanka Chaturvedi shared an RTI response from the ministry of external affairs in 2015 which said Katchatheevu Island lies on the Sri Lanka side of the India-Sri Lanka International Maritime Boundary Line, that was delineated by the 1974 Agreement demarcating it in the Palk Straits and a subsequent 1976 Agreement demarcating it in the Gulf of Mannar and Bay of Bengal. (PTI)

Rahul Gandhi has no right to talk about democracy, his grandmother imposed Emergency: Amit Shah

JODHPUR, April 1: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has no right to talk about democracy now as his grandmother and former prime minister Indira Gandhi put lakhs of people in jail and banned political parties during the Emergency, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on Monday.

He hit back at INDIA bloc parties over their 'Loktantra Bachao' (save democracy) rally at Delhi's Ramlila Maidan on Sunday, saying "no matter how many parties you gather, only Modi is going to come" as prime minister post-elections.

The one who commits corruption will go behind the bars, the home minister asserted at his election rally in Jodhpur.

The people of the country are ready to make Narendra Modi the prime minister for a third time, he said, adding India will become the third largest economy during his next term.

Shah's reaction came a day after top INDIA bloc leaders exhorted the people to defeat the BJP to save democracy and the Constitution and alleged that the opposition has been deprived of a level-playing field in the Lok Sabha elections due to the government's "dictatorial" actions.

Rahul Gandhi had accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of trying to do "match-fixing" in the Lok Sabha polls and warned that if the BJP wins the election through this endeavour and "changes" the Constitution, then the whole country would be "finished".

The public meeting was aimed at highlighting the issue of "attack on democracy" including the alleged misuse of agencies against opposition leaders in the aftermath of the arrest of AAP chief Kejriwal and JMM leader Hemant Soren and income tax notices to parties. (PTI)

Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal taken to Tihar jail



NEW DELHI, April 1: Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal was brought to Tihar Jail here on Monday after a city court sent him to judicial custody till April 15, officials said.

Kejriwal was arrested on March 21 by the Enforcement Directorate in connection with an excise policy-linked money laun-

dering case. "He was brought to Tihar jail and will be lodged in Jail number 2. He was taken for a medical examination. He will be kept in a separate cell," a jail official said.

AAP leader Sanjay Singh, who was arrested in October last year in the same case, was earlier lodged in jail number 2 but was shifted to Jail number 5 recently.

Kejriwal's former deputy Manish Sisodia, who is in jail in connection with the same case, is lodged in Jail number 1, while BRS leader K Kavitha is in Jail number 6 of the women's jail.

Earlier in the day, Kejriwal was produced in the court of Special Judge Kaveri Baweja after his Enforcement Directorate custody came to an end. The ED had sought 15-day judicial custody of Kejriwal, saying he was "totally uncooperative". (PTI)

Pappu Yadav says he will file nomination papers from Purnea



PATNA, April 1: Former MP Ramesh Ranjan alias Pappu Yadav on Monday said he will file his nomination papers for Purnea in Bihar later this week, and urged RJD president Lalu Prasad to forego the Lok Sabha seat for ally Congress.

Yadav, who joined the Congress less than a fortnight ago, made the announcement on X, a day before Bima Bharti, the RJD candidate, was likely to file her nomination from the seat.

Yadav, who has merged his Jan Adhikar Party with the Congress, wrote "people from across the country, hailing from Purnea, want to join me during filing of nomination papers. For their convenience, proposed date has been deferred, from June 2 to June 4".

Neither the RJD, which has been distributing tickets, nor the Congress has formally declared candidates for any of the 40 seats in Bihar.

However, a seat-sharing formula was announced only after filing of nomination papers for the four seats going to polls in first phase was over.

Purnea, according to the formula made public several days after Bima Bharti, a JD(U) turncoat, announced having received the RJD ticket from Lalu Prasad, was predictably among the 26 seats claimed by the party.

The seat-sharing plan came as a huge setback to Yadav, who had been for months running a campaign 'Pranam Purnea', seeking to rebrand himself in the constituency he had represented thrice in the 1990s.

Yadav, who had earlier hoped that the Congress would back him for a "friendly fight" in Purnea, added in his post on X: "I once again urge RJD chief Lalu Prasad to review his decision on Purnea and give it up for the Congress, in larger interests of the coalition".

Sources in the state unit of the Congress said they were not aware whether Yadav was throwing his hat in the ring with the high command's approval, but if he was doing so of his own accord, disciplinary action would follow. (PTI)

Should I remain as CM or not: Siddaramaiah's emotional appeal to Varuna voters in LS polls

MYSURU/MANDYA (KARNATAKA), April 1: Amid speculations about leadership change, Karnataka chief minister Siddaramaiah on Monday asked the people of his Varuna assembly segment to give the Congress candidate a lead of at least 60,000 votes in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, to ensure that he remains in the post.

In Mandya, deputy chief minister and state Congress President D K Shivakumar, who has made no secret about his Chief Ministerial ambitions, told the people that the desire with which they supported the party in the assembly poll in May last year, keeping him in mind, "will not turn out to be false."

The statements gain significance amid persistent rumours about leadership change in the ruling Congress in the state after Lok Sabha polls or mid-way of the current assembly's tenure.

"In 2019 (Lok Sabha polls) Dhruvanarayan (Congress candidate) lost by a margin of only 1,817 votes.... This time in the Assembly you made me win by giving a lead of 48,000 votes (in Varuna). Will you give the same lead or more now? (Our candidate should win) with a lead of at least 60,000 votes," Siddaramaiah said.



Addressing a public meeting, he said: "In Varuna you know me, as well as (H C) Mahadevappa (minister). I'm your representative, (my son) Yathindra is a former MLA from here (Varuna). When we are all there there should be a lead of at least 60,000 votes."

"If you make (Congress candidate) victorious by a lead of 60,000 votes, I will be happy. No one will be able to touch me. Should I remain (as Chief Minister) or not? So I request you with folded hands...I will come back to thank you after winning," he added.

Siddaramaiah's Varuna assembly segment comes under Chamaraanagar Lok Sabha constituency, from where minister Mahadevappa's son Sunil Bose is the Congress candidate.

Meanwhile, asking voters to support Congress in the Vokkaliga bastion of Mandya, Shivakumar said: "I want to tell you that, keeping me in mind,

you gave more seats (in assembly polls to Congress) in Mandya district. Your desire will not turn out to be false. You need not worry."

He said Congress has given tickets to eight Vokkaligas in the Lok Sabha polls.

Openly expressing his chief ministerial aspirations ahead of assembly polls, Shivakumar had asked Vokkaliga community, to which he belongs, not to lose out an opportunity with him as the party's state unit president, while pointing out that S M Krishna was the last Vokkaliga to lead the party in the polls and then went on to become the CM in 1999.

There was stiff competition between Siddaramaiah and Shivakumar for the Chief Minister's post after the Assembly election results in May last year, and the Congress had managed to convince the latter and made him the Deputy Chief Minister.

There were some reports at the time that a compromise had been reached based on a "rotational chief minister formula," according to which Shivakumar will become CM after two-and-half years but they have not been officially confirmed by the party. (PTI)

Shah to interact with JD(S) leaders as joint campaign

BENGALURU, April 1: JD(S) leader H D Kumaraswamy said he along with his party colleagues will apprise Union Home Minister Amit Shah and share feedback on poll situation in various constituencies across Karnataka ahead of Lok Sabha polls, at Tuesday's breakfast meeting with him and state BJP state leaders. The joint breakfast meeting is being seen as a move by the BJP to plug any trust gaps with its alliance partner -- the JD(S).

As per the seat-sharing deal for the Lok Sabha polls, the BJP will contest in 25 constituencies and the JD(S) in the remaining three in the State. "At Amit Shah's breakfast meeting in the morning (on Tuesday), we will share our feedback and apprise him about the election process that has begun in the state. The target is to win all the 28 Lok Sabha seats in the state," Kumaraswamy said.

Speaking to reporters here on Monday, the JD(S) state unit President and son of former Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda, said poll preparations are going on well in all the constituencies.

"We don't want small minor issues to disturb the understanding between both the parties, and our intention is that there should not be even a minor fault in reaching our goal. So we will discuss all matters with him," he said.

Kumaraswamy said he will also take part in Shah's road show in Channarayana, the assembly segment which he represents, under the Bangalore Rural Lok Sabha constituency, where his brother-in-law and eminent cardiologist C N Manjunath is contesting the polls on a BJP ticket. Shah is also slated to attend BJP meetings and programmes during the day. Responding to a question on the possibility of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and JD(S) patriarch Deve Gowda sharing a stage during the campaign, Kumaraswamy said such plans have not been made yet, as the former has to travel across the country.

"At one or two events when he (Modi) comes to Karnataka, wherever there is a need to participate, we will participate. There is expectation for them (PM and Gowda) to share the stage, at some stage they will campaign together," he said.

Indicating confidence about independent MP from Mandya, Sumalatha Ambarish extending her support to him, in the upcoming polls, Kumaraswamy said: "you can understand from the fact that she called yesterday's meeting between us as a healthy discussion, there may be a meaning in it...understanding which Congress has stepped up its attack on us, out of fear." (PTI)

Gadkari vows to eliminate petrol, diesel vehicles in India, bats for lower tax for hybrid cars

NAGPUR, April 1: As part of his ambition to make India a green economy, Union minister Nitin Gadkari wants to slash GST on hybrid vehicles and has vowed to rid the country entirely of the over 36 crore petrol and diesel vehicles.

"One hundred per cent," Gadkari, the Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways, said when asked whether it is possible for India to get rid of petrol and diesel cars altogether.

"It is difficult but not impossible. This is my vision," Gadkari said in an interview to PTI.

He said India spends Rs 16 lakh crore on fuel imports. This money will be used for improving the life of farmers, villages will be prosperous and the youth will get employment, the minister said.

Gadkari did not give any timeline to meet this ambitious target which even proponents of green energy believe is mind bogglingly difficult.

The proposal to reduce GST on hybrid



vehicles to five per cent and to 12 per cent for flex engines has been sent to the Finance ministry which is considering the requisition, Gadkari said.

The minister said he firmly believes the country can end fuel import by promoting the use of biofuels.

Environmental activists welcomed

Gadkari's vision for increasing green mobility, but also struck a word of caution by flagging the use of fossil fuels in the production of electricity.

"In India, we are still heavily dependent on a fossil fuel-based energy system to power electric cars, and this needs to be changed. There is urgent need to ensure 100 per cent renewable energy alongside electric vehicles to tackle the climate crisis," Avinash Chanchal, a campaigner for Greenpeace India, told PTI.

Gadkari said he has been pitching for alternative fuels since 2004 and is confident things will change in the coming five to seven years.

"I cannot give you a date and year for this transformation to take place as it is very difficult. This is difficult but not impossible," Gadkari asserted.

He said he firmly believes that given the speed with which electric vehicles are being introduced, the coming era will be of alternative and biofuels and this dream

will come true.

Gadkari said auto companies such as Bajaj, TVS and Hero are also planning to manufacture motorcycles using flex engines and auto rickshaws using similar technology too were on the way.

"I roam around in a car that runs on hydrogen. You can see electric cars in every other household. People who used to say this was impossible, have changed their views now and started believing in what I have been saying for the last 20 years," the minister said.

"Tatas and Ashok Leyland have introduced trucks that run on hydrogen. There are trucks that run on LNG/CNG. There are 350 factories across the country of bio-CNG," he said.

"Definitely, a revolution is taking place. The fuel imports will end and this country will become self-reliant - Atmanirbhar Bharat. I strongly believe in this," Gadkari said. (PTI)

SC refuses to stay HC order directing judicial inquiry into farmer's death during protest

If the police have to face PIL for every incident, how will they maintain law and order: Solicitor General Tushar Mehta

NEW DELHI, April 1: The Supreme Court on Monday refused to stay the Punjab and Haryana High Court direction setting up a panel to probe farmer Shubhakaran Singh's death during a clash between the protesting farmers and the Haryana security personnel in February.

The SC said the supervision of the matter by a panel headed by a retired judge would infuse fairness and transparency.

The apex court was hearing a petition filed by the Haryana government challenging the high court's March 7 order which had formed a committee headed by a former high court judge to inquire into the death of Shubhakaran Singh during the clash.

Shubhakaran, 21, a native of Bathinda, was killed and several police personnel were injured in clashes at Khanauri on the Punjab-Haryana border on February 21.

The incident took place when some protesting farmers were trying to head towards barricades and were stopped by the security personnel from crossing the state border and marching to Delhi.

The plea came up for hearing before a bench of justices Surya Kant and K V Viswanathan on Monday.

Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, appearing for Haryana, referred to a paragraph from the high court's order and said this will demoralise the police force.



"If the police have to face PIL for every incident, how will they maintain law and order," he said, adding that hundreds of people had gathered there with lethal weapons.

The bench observed that sometimes, in public agitation, some miscreants take undue advantage of the situation.

Mehta said 67 police personnel were injured during the incident and if committees are to be appointed, what will be the morale of those who are maintaining law and order.

The bench said the high court was concerned with the homicidal death and the family members of the deceased had expressed some

apprehensions.

It said the three-member committee is headed by a retired high court judge.

"We also appoint former judges to infuse fairness and transparency," the bench observed.

Mehta said the apex court may choose an officer and monitor the investigation in the case.

The bench observed the high court will take up the matter again on April 10.

"Let us see what happens. The matter is pending before the high court," it said.

Mehta said he is not against the committee or its members.

He referred to one of the direc-

tions of the high court which said the "committee shall also examine the issue whether the force which was used on the dates mentioned above was commensurate with the situation and give its report".

The bench said the committee headed by the former judge would only supervise the matter and it would infuse confidence.

"We don't want the Supreme Court to become panacea of all problems," it said, adding the high court is also a constitutional court and it will deal with the issue.

"This is not something unusual which has been done," the bench said, adding that this was a case where two police forces of separate

states have different stances and the high court has appointed an "umpire".

The apex court said the judiciary will take care of the morale of the police force as well as of the people.

It posted the matter for further hearing on April 19.

The high court had formed the committee headed by retired HC judge Jaishree Thakur to inquire into the various aspects of the case, saying the investigation regarding the death of Shubhakaran cannot be entrusted solely either to Punjab or to Haryana for "reasons obvious as both states have several things to cover up".

It had said the committee will be assisted by Additional Director General of Police (Punjab) Parmod Ban and ADGP (Haryana) Amitabh Singh Dhillon.

The Punjab Police had registered a zero FIR in the matter.

The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha were spearheading the 'Delhi Chalo' march to press the government to accept their demands, including a legal guarantee for minimum support price for crops and a farm loan waiver.

The protesting farmers were staying put at the Shambhu and Khanauri border points between Punjab and Haryana after their 'Delhi Chalo' march was stopped by the security forces. (PTI)

West Bengal storm: Death toll rises to 5, CM meets families of victims



JALPAIGURI (WB), April 1:

The death toll due to a storm that wreaked havoc in parts of Jalpaiguri district in northern West Bengal has risen to five, chief minister Mamata Banerjee has said.

Over 100 people were injured while several hutments and houses were damaged, trees uprooted and electric poles came crashing down as strong winds accompanied by hail struck most parts of the district headquarters town and many areas of neighbouring Mainaguri on Sunday.

The chief minister, who rushed to the district late on Sunday night, assured the people of all help from the administration.

"So far, we have reports of the death of five people. The number of injured is quite high. I met the injured and the family members of those who died in the storm. The state administration will do everything to help the affected families," she said.

When asked about providing compensation, Banerjee said, "As the model code of conduct is in place, I can't say anything about it. You have to talk to the district administration."

The CM on Sunday night visited those injured and undergoing treatment at the hospital. She also spoke to the family members of those killed in the storm and assured them of all sorts of assistance.

"This is a disaster, an emergency situation. I have visited the families of those who have been killed and also those who are undergoing treatment at the hospital. I will thank the administration for their prompt action in the rescue operation. We are beside the people and will take care of their treatment and rebuilding the houses," Banerjee said, adding that the rescue operation is over.

Banerjee, accompanied by TMC party leaders, went to Jalpaiguri

Medical College and Hospital and on her way also spoke to those in the relief camps in other parts of the districts through video call.

Among the most affected areas in the district were Rajarhat, Barnish, Bakali, Jorpakdi, Madhabdanga and Saptibari, officials said, adding that several acres of agricultural land and crops suffered damage.

Governor C V Ananda Bose also left for the northern districts of Bengal early Monday morning.

"This is very unfortunate. There is loss of lives in the storm. All the agencies are working together. I will be visiting the area and speak to the people there. Everything will be done," Bose told reporters before boarding the flight.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi condoled the loss of lives in the storm and said he had spoken with officials and asked them to ensure proper assistance to those affected by it.

"Disaster response team has been deployed and helpdesks set up," a senior official of Jalpaiguri district said.

However, not much damage happened in Cooch Behar and Alipurduar districts, another official added.

Dhupguri MLA Nirmal Chandra Roy told PTI that several people have been admitted to hospital with injuries.

An emergency cell has also been opened at the Raj Bhavan to deal with the situation in Jalpaiguri, officials said.

According to an official statement, the governor is in touch with the disaster management authority in Delhi and has requested them to rush more reinforcement by way of manpower and materials to Jalpaiguri.

"He will camp in Jalpaiguri tomorrow and visit ground zero and houses of the victims," it said. (PTI)

President, PM, CM greet people of Odisha on 'Utkal Dibasa'

BHUBANESWAR, April 1: President Droupadi Murmu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, chief minister Naveen Patnaik and many other dignitaries on Monday greeted the people of Odisha on the occasion of 'Utkal Dibasa'.

Odisha Day or 'Utkala Dibasa' marks the formation of Odisha as a separate state on this day in 1936. The state was carved with the splitting of Bihar and Orissa provinces. Orissa was rechristened as Odisha in 2011. "Warm greetings to people on Odisha Day! Odisha is known for its vast natural wealth and rich cultural heritage. The resilient people of this state have made great contribution in the development of Odisha and the country."

"Odisha has produced many icons over the centuries, including several makers of modern India. May Lord Jagannath bless the state and its people with greater success and prosperity!" Murmu said in a post on X. The prime minister in a post on X in Odia language said: "Wishing everyone a very Happy Utkala Dibasa! This day reminds us of the rich culture and heritage of Odisha and its dynamic people. The state has made a rich contribution to national progress. I pray for the success and prosperity of the people of Odisha."

Odisha Governor Raghubar Das also greeted the people of the state.

"My greetings to the people of Odisha on this auspicious occasion of Odisha Dibasa. I call upon all to be committed to transform Odisha into a prosperous and developed Odisha," the governor said in a post on X.

Chief minister Naveen Patnaik in a post on X said "Odisha is writing a glorious history in all fields. Odisha has become prosperous due to the commitment of every Odia. In keeping with this era of transformation, the idea of creating a 'developed Odisha' is the idea of Odia. On this 'Odisha Day', let us strengthen our Asmita and Swaviman and move forward towards building 'Developed Odisha' #OdishaDibasa." (PTI)

Wild elephant kills man in Kerala; fifth life lost in three months

PATHANAMTHITTA (KERALA), April 1: A 53-year-old man was attacked and killed by a wild elephant when he tried to chase away the animal that strayed into the surroundings of his house on the forest fringes in Thulappally here in the early hours of Monday, police said.

This is the fifth death caused by wild elephants in Kerala in the past three months.

Biju, a local auto driver, came out of his house along with his wife, hearing the trumpets of an elephant outside. The animal grabbed him using its trunk and threw him to the ground twice, Biju's wife Daisy, who witnessed the terrible incident, said later.

The same elephant had strayed into the area and wreaked havoc here the other day, she said.

The animal was seen trying to uproot a coconut tree in the surrounding area and it moved towards him fast after trumpeting multiple times, she said.

The woman said she stepped back and moved to the house premises seeing the charged jumbo.

"We went out together, hearing the sounds of the elephant near our home in the early hours. The first time, we came back home together. But he went to the road near the house again as the

elephant was heard trumpeting again," Daisy told reporters here.

Recalling the tragic events, the teary-eyed woman said the animal rushed towards Biju suddenly and grabbed him by its trunk, throwing him to the ground twice.

It later ran away into the forest, she said.

"As there was no response, I went to the spot and saw him lying motionless on the floor," Daisy added. A police team rushed to the spot after being informed, and shifted Biju's body to Kottayam Medical College.

Local residents later staged a sit-in protest in the area, demanding a permanent solution to address the issue of human-animal conflict.

Later in the day, Health Minister Veena George visited Biju's house and consoled his family members.

She assured them that the government would provide adequate compensation to the family as early as possible.

Kerala has witnessed a series of deaths of people due to the attack of wild elephants in recent months.

A tribal woman was trampled to death by a wild elephant deep inside a forest area bordering Wayanad and Malappuram districts on March

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

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

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

In central Kerala's Idukki district, which is also heavily forested and mountainous but about 330 km away from the northern Kerala district of Wayanad, a woman identified as Indira Ramakrishnan was killed in an elephant attack in the first week of March.

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

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

UP govt official looted on board Shatabdi Express in Delhi

NEW DELHI, April 1: An assistant prosecution officer from Uttar Pradesh was allegedly assaulted and looted on a Shatabdi Express while travelling to New Delhi, officials said on Monday.

The incident took place on March 28 around 10 pm when the Lucknow Jn. Swarn Shatabdi Express was about 50 to 100 metres ahead of the Shivaji Bridge Railway Station in New Delhi, according to the FIR.

"I was sitting inside my coach, C-4, on seat number 2 when a man entered the coach and tried to snatch my handbag," Swati Mourya said in her complaint to police.

"When I resisted, he pushed and assaulted me due to which I sustained an injury on my left hand. He then snatched my bag and jumped out

of the moving train. I can identify the person," she added.

As per the FIR, Mourya lost ₹ 15,000, and various ID cards – PAN, Aadhar, driving licence, and prosecution identity card issued by the Uttar Pradesh government, along with two ATM cards, a mobile phone, four diamond rings, two gold bangles and two wrist watches in the incident. The police said the Government Railway Police, New Delhi received the complaint on the matter at 11.20 pm.

"We have registered an FIR under sections 356 (assault or criminal force in attempt to commit theft of property carried by a person) and 380 (Theft in dwelling house, etc.) of the IPC. The accused will be arrested soon," a senior police officer said. (PTI)

BCAS issues new guidelines, allows passenger exit through airport departure gates

NEW DELHI, April 1: Aviation security watchdog BCAS has issued new guidelines that will allow exit of passengers from an aircraft through an airport departure gate in case there is a long delay in operating the flight after boarding.

The latest directive from the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS) comes against the backdrop of rising instances of congestion and flight delays, resulting in passengers getting stuck in aircraft after boarding for long hours. BCAS Director General Zulfikar Hasan on Monday said the guidelines were issued to airlines and airport operators on March 30 and are now in force.

The guidelines will help in ensuring "less harassment" for passengers and they would not have to keep sitting inside an aircraft for long hours

after boarding, he said.

In case of long flight delays and other emergencies after boarding, passengers will be permitted to exit through the departure gate of the airport concerned.

"Airport operators have to make arrangements for the infrastructure, including for screening, for implementing the guidelines," Hasan said and added that a decision on deboarding the passengers will be taken by airlines and security agencies concerned. He was speaking on the sidelines of the function to mark the 38th Raising Day of the BCAS.

On January 17, BCAS had slapped fines totalling ₹ 1.80 crore on IndiGo and Mumbai airport operator MIAL over the incident of passengers having food on the airport tarmac.

A penalty of Rs 1.20 crore has been imposed on IndiGo, while the fine on MIAL is ₹ 60 lakh.

Many passengers rushed out of an IndiGo aircraft at the Mumbai airport, sat on the tarmac, and some were also seen having food there as soon as their diverted Goa-Delhi flight landed after a long delay on January 14.

Domestic air traffic is on the rise and around 3,500 flights take-off every day. Earlier, Hasan said congestion at airports is "unwelcome" and that the agency has developed optimum standards and tools to tackle the issue.

The aviation security watchdog will also put in place smart security lanes as part of efforts to ensure better experience for passengers at the airports. (PTI)

Leopard barges into house in Delhi's Wazirabad, 5 injured

NEW DELHI, April 1: At least five people were injured in an attack by a leopard which strayed into a village in north Delhi's Wazirabad on Monday morning, triggering panic among the locals, officials said.

The leopard was later rescued, Delhi Fire Service chief Atul Garg said. According to officials, the leopard had jumped from the terrace of a house in Jagatpur village early in the morning and barged into the next building where it was locked in a room. Videos on social media showed the leopard being chased by some people and others running in panic.

According to the Delhi Fire Service, information about the incident was received around 6.20 am and two fire tenders were sent to the spot. "With the help of the locals, the officials locked the leopard in a room. The injured were sent to a hospital," Delhi Fire Service (DFS) chief Atul Garg said.

A resident said the leopard was first spotted around 4.30 am and a PCR call was made at 5.15 am. It tried to attack over a dozen people and injured some of them, he said. Deputy Commissioner of Police

(north) M K Meena said a call about the leopard entering a house was received from Jagatpur village, following which the local police reached the spot and forest department officials were informed.

Police said that five people were injured in the leopard attack and three of them have been identified as Mahender, Akash and Rampal.

Seven personnel of the forest department, a team from the Delhi Fire Department along with the local police are present at the spot, the DCP said.

A local said the village is surrounded by jungle but there is no fencing or any other kind of security.

On December 1 last year, a leopard was sighted at Sainik Farms in South Delhi with some videos showing the spotted big cat strolling in the lanes of the residential area. It was last seen on December 6 and the forest department suspected it had returned to the Asola Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary. A week later, a leopard was killed after being hit by a car on the National Highway 44 near Khatuhyam temple in north Delhi's Alipur. (PTI)

Extreme heat to scorch India during election period, says IMD

NEW DELHI, April 1: India is set to experience extreme heat during the April to June period, with the central and the western peninsular parts expected to face the worst impact, the IMD said on Monday as the country prepares for the seven-phase general elections starting April 19.

Addressing a press conference, Union Minister for Earth Sciences Kiren Rijiju said India is anticipated to experience extreme weather conditions in the upcoming two-and-a-half months and this coincides with the general elections in which around a billion people are expected to exercise their franchise.

"It is going to be very challenging for all of us. Since we are the most populous country in the world and face extreme weather conditions, it makes it absolutely necessary for India to prepare in advance," he said.

India Meteorological Department (IMD) Director General Mrutyunjay Mohapatra said the anticipated increase in outdoor activities during the 2024 general elections could heighten public vulnerability to heat waves.

With greater exposure, there's an elevated risk of heatwave-re-



lated health issues among the electorate and election staff, he said.

The IMD chief said above-normal maximum temperatures are likely over most parts of the country during the April-June period, with a high probability over central and western peninsular India.

Normal to below-normal maximum temperatures are likely over some parts of the western Himalayan region, northeastern states and north Odisha, he said.

Above-normal heatwave days

are likely over most parts in the plains during April-June. Ten to 20 days of heat wave are expected in different parts of the country against a normal of four to eight days, he added.

Mohapatra said Gujarat, central Maharashtra, north Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, north Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh are likely to experience the worst impact of heat waves.

Though El Nino conditions -- the periodic warming of waters in

the central Pacific Ocean -- are weakening, these will continue during April and May, according to the IMD chief.

"It is in agreement with the forecast of above-normal maximum temperatures and heatwave conditions in India," he added.

The prevailing El Nino conditions fuelled record temperatures and extreme events the world over, with 2023 being the warmest on record. El Nino is associated with unusually dry and warm conditions over southeast Asia.

La Nina conditions -- associated with bountiful monsoon rain in India -- are likely to set in by the second half of the monsoon season, the IMD said.

The Met office said above-normal maximum temperatures are likely over most parts of the country in April, with a high probability over central south India.

Normal to below-normal maximum temperatures are likely over some parts of the western Himalayan region and northeastern states in April, the IMD said.

Above-normal heatwave days are likely over many areas in central India and the adjoining areas of the northern plains and south India in April, it said.

"Two to eight days of heat wave are expected in these regions against a normal of one to three days," Mohapatra said.

Gujarat, Maharashtra, north Karnataka, Odisha, west Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh are predicted to experience the worst impact of heat waves in April.

The IMD said the country is "most likely" to gauge normal rainfall (88-112 per cent of the long-period average of 39.2 mm) in April.

"Normal to above-normal rainfall is likely over most parts of the northwest, and some parts of central and north peninsular India. Below-normal rainfall is likely over the east and the west coasts, parts of east, northeast and south peninsular India," Mohapatra said.

Elevated temperatures pose significant risks, especially for vulnerable populations such as the elderly, children and those with pre-existing health conditions as they are more susceptible to heat-related illnesses such as heat exhaustion and heatstroke, the IMD said.

Lok Sabha polls in India will take place in seven phases between April 19 and June 1. (PTI)



GODZILLA X KONG: THE NEW EMPIRE' EARNES ₹ 47 CRORE IN INDIA

NEW DELHI, April 1: Director Adam Wingard's "Godzilla X Kong: The New Empire", which was released in India on Friday, has grossed ₹ 47 crore in its opening weekend. According to Warner Bros. Pictures, the monster film got the "biggest opening weekend" for a movie from the studio. "Godzilla X Kong: The New Empire" released in over 2,865 screens across the country in English, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu. Denzil Dias, VP & Managing Director, India Theatrical, Warner Bros. Discovery said the team is thrilled to see the "monumental success" of the film in India. "The film achieved the largest opening weekend for any Warner Bros. Pictures release in the country's history and currently holds the title of the highest-grossing Hollywood film opening of 2024 in India. This record-breaking debut stands as a testament to the Indian audience's unwavering passion for experiencing epic spectacles on the big screen.

"Godzilla X Kong: The New Empire" dominated the Indian box office over the weekend, firmly establishing itself as the No. 1 film. We are delighted by these outstanding results and heartened to witness the enduring vibrancy of cinema-going culture in India," Dias said in a statement.

"Godzilla X Kong: The New Empire" stars Rebecca Hall, Brian Tyree Henry, Dan Stevens, Kaylee Hottle, Alex Ferns and Fala Chen. It is produced by Mary Parent, Alex Garcia, Eric McLeod, Thomas Tull and Brian Rogers. (PTI)

Killing off Joffrey, Ramsay Bolton felt like balancing scales: 'Game of Thrones' co-creator DB Weiss

LOS ANGELES, April 1: "Game of Thrones" was popular for the sudden deaths of several fan-favourite characters and D B Weiss says he and co-creator David Benioff were thrilled when they got a chance to kill off Joffrey Baratheon and Ramsay Bolton, two of the most hated villains on the series.

During a new episode of the "Happy Sad Confused" podcast, the showrunners were asked to name their favourite character deaths.

"With 'Thrones', there was so much killing of good guys and we finally got to really kill both Joffrey in season four and Ramsay Bolton in season six. It was fun to go back to the old-fashioned joys of just killing off a really bad guy. ... It felt like it was balancing the scales a little," Weiss said.

Joffrey, played by Jack Gleeson, died after drinking poisoned wine, at the hands of Lady Olenna Tyrell and Lord Petyr Baelish. On the other hand, when Jon Snow beats him in a one-on-one fight, Ramsay essayed by Iwan Rheon is taken prisoner and eaten by his hungry hounds as Sophie Turner's Sansa watches.

Benioff said he was particularly happy when Turner nailed the shot where she had to react to Ramsay as he was being devoured by the canines.

"For me, at the end of Battle of Bastards, when Sophie sticks the hounds on the Bastard, she doesn't walk away. You don't really see the death. You see some of it in the background, but you don't really see the death. But what you do see is Sophie or Sansa's smile," he recalled.

Benioff said it was a one-shot scene and had to film it seven-eight times until Turner did it perfectly.

"It was just that feeling of — that's so epic. Sophie was so good. When she got that shot, I felt like I can now die happy," he added. Weiss and Benioff are currently promoting their new Netflix series, "3 Body Problem", for which they have collaborated with Alexander Woo. (PTI)

REEMA MAYA TO DIRECT DIGITAL VERSION OF 'STUDENT OF THE YEAR'

MUMBAI, April 1: Producer Karan Johar says Reema Maya of "Nocturnal Burger" fame will direct the series adaptation of his "Student of the Year" franchise.

The filmmaker made the announcement on the closing day of the Cinevesture International Film Festival (CIFF) in Chandigarh on Sunday.

"Reema Maya will be directing the digital version of 'Student of the Year'. But it will be her way and definitely not mine.

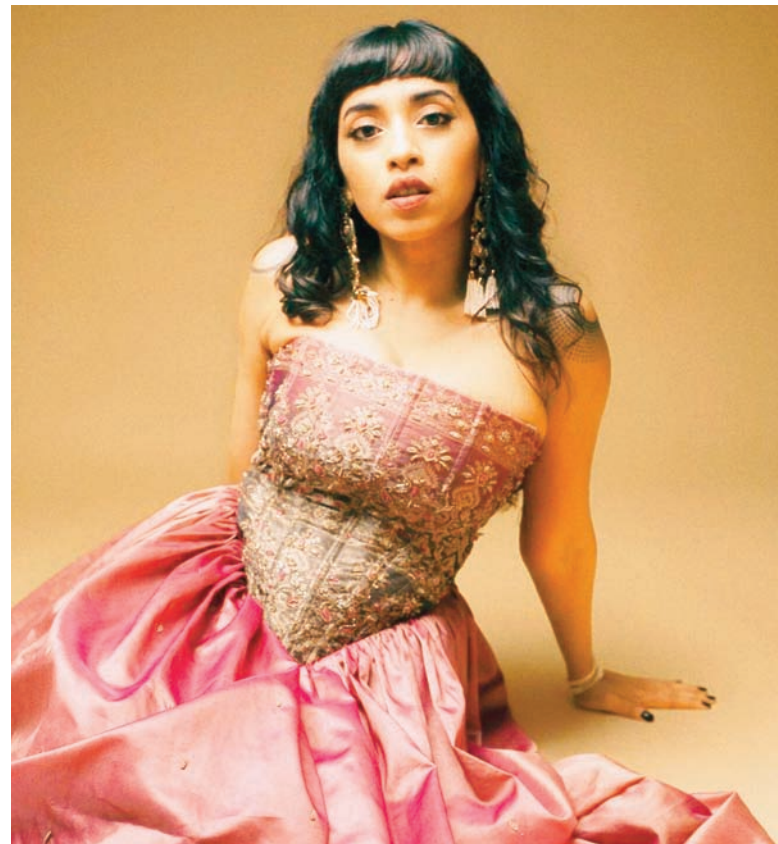
"If I'll enter Reema Maya's world then I will make it more of an illusion... I just wanted it to be her voice. She made it her own series," Johar said of Maya, whose acclaimed short "Nocturnal Burger" received its world premiere at 2023's Sundance Film Festival.

The filmmaker was speaking at a masterclass session, which was moderated by Namrata Joshi, CIFF Market Projects curator and film critic.

Johar directed "Student of the Year", the 2012 movie which launched Alia Bhatt, Varun Dhawan and Sidharth Malhotra into the film industry, under his banner Dharma Productions.

Seven years later, "Student of the Year 2" was released as a standalone sequel, directed by Punit Malhotra and featuring Tiger Shroff as well as Ananya Panday and Tara Sutaria in their film debut.

The CIFF, which began on March 27, showcased a line-up of over 67 titles, including world cinema, Indian feature films, classics as well as shorts films. (PTI)



Don't think they want to do 'Wonder Woman 3' unless there's fan pressure: Lynda Carter



LOS ANGELES, April 1: Actor Lynda Carter, who portrayed the character of superhero Wonder Woman in a 1970s TV series, says a third film in the DC franchise won't be made without fan demand. Carter appeared as the warrior Asteria in 2020's "Wonder Woman 1984", the follow-up of "Wonder Woman" (2017). Both movies were directed by Patty Jenkins and starred Gal Gadot in the title role. The actor said Warner Bros, the studio behind the comic book film series, doesn't seem interested in working on "Wonder Woman 3". "I don't think they want to do it unless there's enough pressure from fans. I just don't think they have the mind to do it. I don't understand that, because it seems to me that Wonder Woman is different from other characters." "She's not just a superhero. Her whole thing is about peaceful solutions. She's not aggressive to be aggressive. It's a different story. It's about inner strength, outer strength. I don't know why they tabled it, because it's a great franchise," Carter told Yahoo! Entertainment. She also praised Jenkins, saying the director had been working on something that "was really interesting, wonderful and about something important." (PTI)

Kartik Aaryan begins shooting for second schedule of 'Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3'

MUMBAI, April 1: Actor Kartik Aaryan on Monday said he has started shooting for the second schedule of his upcoming film "Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3".

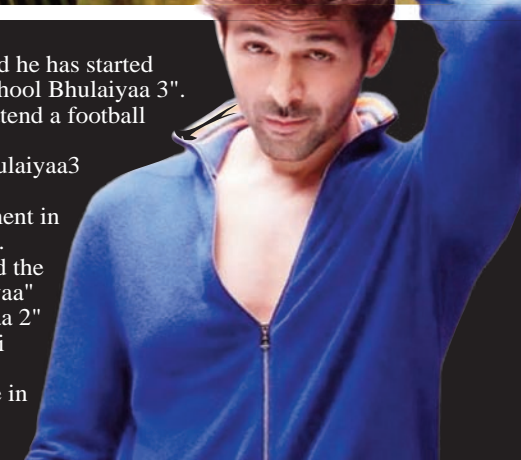
Aaryan, who was in Munich over the last few days to attend a football match, shared a work update on Instagram.

"Fun trip khatam Kaam Shuru. Shoot begins #BhoolBhulaiyaa3 #Schedule2," he wrote.

Directed by Anees Bazmee, the upcoming third installment in the horror comedy franchise features Tripti Dimri as well.

"Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3" also stars Vidya Balan, who played the iconic role of Manjulika in Priyadarshan's "Bhool Bhulaiyaa" (2007). The second film in the franchise, "Bhool Bhulaiyaa 2" was directed by Bazmee and starred Aaryan, Kiara Advani and Tabu.

"Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3", produced by T-Series, will release in theatres on Diwali. (PTI)



10th SIFFCY festival to focus on cinema from Germany, Poland, Czech Republic

NEW DELHI, April 1: Films from Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland will take center stage at the upcoming 10th edition of the Smile International Film Festival for Children & Youth, starting April 9.

Organised by Delhi-based NGO Smile Foundation in partnership with the delegation of the European Union in India, the gala, whose opening and award ceremonies are scheduled to be held here at PHD House, will feature 150 films from 40 countries.

Besides the national capital, the festival will also be hosted at as many as 50 different locations across the country simultaneously.

"As we celebrate the 10th anniversary edition of the festival, this year we are trying to reach out to a larger young audience in multiple locations across the country and spread extra smiles.

"We are going to screen 150 films from 40 countries, besides hosting ten different types of film-related interactive sessions and capacity building workshops for children and youth free of cost," SIFFCY festival director Jitendra Mishra said in a statement.

Touted as one of the biggest children's film festivals in India, the event will offer a potpourri of features, short-movies, documentaries and films made by children.

The festival will screen 10 films made by the students of BATA University, the Czech Republic, and eight award-

winning films from Germany which will be presented by SCHLINGEL Int'l Film Festival.

"Eight classic animations curated by TV Studio Animated Films, Poland will be presented by acclaimed film personality from Poland Mr. Jerzy Moszkowicz along with the Polish Institute New Delhi," the organisers added.

The event will also showcase films placed under various categories, including 'International Competition', offering feature and shorts; '70MM Smile', which will show non-feature films; and the 'Yellow Carpet' segment celebrating the diverse Indian regional cinema in Malayalam, Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali, Rajasthani, Karbi and more.

Multiple films made by children from more than 30 different countries including the USA, Spain, Columbia, Portugal, Belgium, Ukraine, Croatia, Greece, Austria, Germany and Estonia on important topics will be made available for the young film lovers.

Additionally, films made by children can be viewed at 'Take One', and 'Extra Smiles' will bring together the best of SIFFCY from the earlier editions as well as classics.

This year, the movie extravaganza will organise 10 different workshops, masterclasses and panel discussions on wide-ranging topics like environment, family values, war and peace and road safety.

It will come to a close on April 11. (PTI)



Dhoni will bat higher only if game is on the line: Clarke

Cameo against the Delhi Capitals included a thundering six over extra-cover



NEW DELHI, April 1: Calls for higher up the order have grown after his whirlwind effort against Delhi Capitals but Michael Clarke feels the former Chennai Super

Kings captain will continue to bat at no.8 and will only promote himself if the game "is on the line".

Dhoni's unbeaten 37 off 16 balls at number eight did not prove to be enough but his loyal fans believe the outcome would have been different had he batted higher up the order. Clarke, who like Dhoni is a World Cup-winning captain, said the Indian legend will continue to perform the finisher's role.

"I don't think he will. I think he'll stay where he is. I think every MS Dhoni fan wants to see him as high up the order as possible. We've all said throughout his career, he should open the batting," Clarke told Star Sports.

"But look, he's at a stage of his career where he's down from the captaincy. I don't think he'll come up the order. I think if there's a game on the line and he needs to go up the order because it's what's best for the team, I'm sure he will."

Dhoni's cameo against the Delhi Capitals included a thundering six over extra-cover before he unleashed a one handed maximum

over mid-wicket in the 20th over.

The 42-year-old, who last played for India in 2019, had undergone a knee surgery last year.

"...just because he's hitting the ball so well, I don't think you'll see him batting in the top five or top six. I think he's a genius at the dance. He's probably the best finisher I've ever seen. So, I think they'll continue to utilize him in that role," said Clarke. Steve Smith, who has also captained Australia, said Dhoni at higher than number eight could benefit CSK.

"Let's get him up the order. I think he did not miss the middle of the bat tonight. That was just incredible to witness. I think Jadeja, throughout the other end, was actually struggling to find the middle."

"They bowled really well to him but MS got there on strike. Obviously, in his first ball to the boundary and then from there, he just barely missed the middle of the bat. It was great to watch and I think the fans want to see him getting up the order and keep doing it more often," said Smith. (PTI)

LSG monitor Rahul's fitness Faltering RCB eye collective improvement



BENGALURU, April 1: An inconsistent Royal Challengers Bengaluru would be eager to hit the turnaround button when they host Lucknow Super Giants, who will keep an eye on regular skipper KL Rahul's fitness, in the IPL here on Tuesday.

The Royal Challengers are currently eighth on the table with two points from three matches, and alarmingly, their net run rate too has dipped to -0.71 after a heavy defeat against Kolkata Knight Riders here last week.

This is not to undermine the side under Faf du Plessis, who himself is struggling for big runs, but its ability to dish out consistent cricket is a matter of debate at this point.

Several reasons are there for that overbearing feeling. It starts with the RCB batting line-up in which Virat Kohli is the only constant with two fifties from three matches.

But Du Plessis, Glenn Maxwell, Rajat Patidar and Cameron Green, who constitute the cream of RCB's top and middle-order, have so far made up for a faltering coalition.

The quartet's collective returns from three matches stand at - Du Plessis (46, Avg: 15.33), Maxwell (31, Avg: 10.33), Green (54, Avg: 18) and Patidar (21, Avg: 7), and terming them underwhelming is an understatement.

It meant that RCB had to often rely on their late-order batters like Dinesh Karthik, Anuj Rawat and Mahipal Lomror to add meat to the total. In that context, the RCB might give a break to Patidar for this game and bring in someone like Suyash Prabhudessai, who can also roll his arm for an over or two.

The senior batters' struggles have percolated to their bowling department too. Mohammed Siraj offers the most glaring example.

The lead pacer has taken just two wickets in three matches, conceding 10 runs an over and he needs to step up immediately.

Siraj's lack of bite has robbed RCB of a chance to take some early wickets in the Power Play and put the opposition under pressure, something he had done quite consistently during IPL 2023.

The situation has turned even grimmer as Siraj's new-ball partner Alzarri Joseph, RCB's Rs 11.5 crore buy in the auction, has been totally rudderless, taking a solitary wicket and leaking 9.4 runs per over.

So, the hosts might ponder the inclusion of either Reece Topley or Lockie Ferguson against Lucknow in place of the West Indian.

The spin unit of RCB offers an even more bewildering view as none among Glenn Maxwell, Karn Sharma and Mayank Dagar, the most impressive of the lot, have bowled their full quota of four overs in any of the three previous matches.

In fact, Maxwell's off-spin was not even employed in their last match against the Knight Riders. To make matters worse, they don't have many reliable choices in the dugout too.

Rahul under scanner
On the other hand, the Super Giants have their own set of worries as the fitness of regular captain Rahul, who came in as an Impact Sub in their 21-run win over Punjab Kings, will be closely monitored.

Will the LSG continue to use Rahul as an impact player with Nicholas Pooran wearing the captain's armband or will he return to his normal three-in-one role of skipper, batter and wicketkeeper?

We will have to wait for the answer.

Be that as it may, the Lucknow side, the whole of the Indian cricket ecosystem too, will be delighted to see the emergence of Mayank Yadav, a fast bowler who can effortlessly touch 150 clicks.

But the 21-year-old Delhi quick will have a different kind of test at Chinnaswamy as compared to the Ekana Stadium, the venue of his IPL debut against Punjab.

Here, Mayank will have to nullify a smoother pitch and shorter boundaries but the current form of RCB batters will certainly fill him with the hopes of swelling his tally of wickets.

Teams (from):
Royal Challengers Bengaluru: Faf du Plessis (c), Glenn Maxwell, Virat Kohli, Rajat Patidar, Anuj Rawat, Dinesh Karthik, Suyash Prabhudessai, Will Jacks, Mahipal Lomror, Karn Sharma, Manoj Bhandage, Mayank Dagar, Vijaykumar Vysakh, Akash Deep, Mohammed Siraj, Reece Topley, Himanshu Sharma, Rajan Kumar, Cameron Green, Alzarri Joseph, Yash Dayal, Tom Curran, Lockie Ferguson, Swapnil Singh, Saurav Chauhan.

Lucknow Super Giants: KL Rahul (c), Quinton de Kock, Nicholas Pooran, Ayush Badoni, Kyle Mayers, Marcus Stoinis, Deepak Hooda, Devdutt Padikkal, Ravi Bishnoi, Naveen-ul-Haq, Krunal Pandya, Yuvraj Singh, Prerak Mankad, Yash Thakur, Amit Mishra, Shamar Joseph, Mayank Yadav, Mohsin Khan, K. Gowtham, Shivam Mavi, Arshin Kulkarni, M. Siddharth, Ashton Turner, Matt Henry, Mohd. Arshad Khan. (PTI)

Pant fined ₹ 12 lakh for slow over rate

VISAKHAPATNAM, April 1: Delhi Capitals skipper Rishabh Pant has copped a ₹ 12 lakh fine for maintaining a slow over rate during the IPL game against Chennai Super Kings here. Delhi Capitals pulled off a comfortable 20-run win over defending champions CSK here on Sunday.

"Rishabh Pant, the Delhi Capitals captain, has been fined after his team maintained a slow over rate during their IPL match against Chennai Super Kings," an IPL statement read. "As it was his team's first offence of the season under the IPL's Code of Conduct relating to minimum over rate offences, Pant was fined ₹ 12 lakhs," it added.

Openers Prithvi Shaw and David Warner provided a thunderous start to the Capitals before Pant provided the final flurry to post a challenging target with a gutsy fifty.

The DC bowlers, especially pacers Khaleel Ahmed and Mukesh Kumar, then rattled the CSK batters and despite veteran Mahendra Singh Dhoni's cracking 16-ball 37 not out, the defending champions suffered their first loss of the season. The win on Sunday was Delhi Capitals' first this season. (PTI)

BCCI invites IPL owners for informal meet on April 16

NEW DELHI, April 1: The BCCI has invited owners of the 10 IPL teams for an informal meeting in Ahmedabad on April 16 and there could be discussions on potential increase in auction purse for the franchises and player retention. The meeting will take place on the sidelines of the game between Delhi Capitals and Gujarat Titans at the Narendra Modi Stadium.

"The IPL owners have been invited for an informal meeting. There is no set agenda. Since IPL will be into its second month, it will be a good time for all stake-holders to get together," a BCCI official told PTI.

Likely discussions could be around the mega auction due later this year, covering player retention and potential increase in the auction purse which currently stands at ₹ 100 crore. BCCI secretary Jay Shah, president Roger Binny and IPL chairman Arun Dhumal will attend the meeting.

Currently, teams are allowed to retain four players ahead of every mega auction, which is conducted once in three years and was last held in 2022. (PTI)

Old and new faces in Hockey India's 60-strong women's assessment squad

BENGALURU, April 1: Veterans like goalkeeper Savita Punia and forward Vandana Kataria made the cut among a host of new faces in Hockey India's jumbo assessment squad of 60 for a seven-day camp starting Monday, at the end of which trials to pick 33 national probables would be conducted.

The assessment camp will be held at the Sports Authority of India centre here and selection trials to prune down the squad to 33 for future coaching camps and international exposure tours will be conducted on the April 6 and 7.

"The 60-player core group has been shortlisted following the stellar performances at the recently concluded 14th Hockey India Senior Women's National Championship in Pune," Hockey India said in a statement.

Hockey India had promised a revamp of the national camp after the team's failure to make the cut for Paris Olympics despite being the hosts of the qualifying tournament earlier this year.

"This selection identifies promising talent from across various states based on their impressive performances throughout the tournament," the HI stated.

"These players will now be closely monitored as they vie for a spot in the final 33-member core probables for the Indian Women's Hockey Team," it added.

The players will report to women's hockey team coach Ankitha BS, who has been handed the role after Dutch-woman Janneke Schopman resigned from the job citing lack of respect and hostile work environment.

HI said Ankitha will hold the position "until such time that a suitable chief coach is appointed."

The assessment squad includes goalkeepers Savita, Sonal Minj, Bichu Devi Kharibam, Madhuri Kindo, Bansari Solanki, Promila Kr, and Ramya Kurmapu. Barring Savita and Bichu, all others are new entrants with Uttar Pradesh's Bansari Solanki being touted as a promising talent.

The 22-year-old has done well at the junior level and was also a solid performer in the recent nationals for her state.

"The 14th Hockey India Senior Women



National Championship proved to be a gold mine. We have picked out the best performers from the teams in the National Championship, irrespective of prior involvement in the national setup," Hockey India High Performance Director Herman Kruis said. "Now we have a good mixture of players who have been around the National Team and players who displayed immense potential."

The objective going ahead is to pick the best 33 players for the Indian women's hockey team core probables," he added, referring to about 30 new names who have been picked.

The defenders reporting to the camp here will be Uditia, Nikki Pradhan, Ropni Kumari, Lalhlunmawii, Preeti, T Suman Devi, Anjana Ddungdung, and Nishi Yadav. A notable absentee is Gurjit Kaur, who was part of the squad during the fourth-place finish in the Tokyo Olympics.

Most of the mid-fielders picked for the camp have prior experience of national duty with Maharashtra's Bhavna Khade and Bengal's Maxima Toppo riding on their good national championship performance to be among the new entrants.

The new faces in the forwards line-up include Rutaja Dadaso Pisal, a 21-year-old

from Maharashtra who did well in the Nationals and also represented the country in the Hockey 5s World Cup in January this year.

Players selected for assessment camp:
Goalkeepers: Savita, Sonal Minj, Bichu Devi Kharibam, Madhuri Kindo, Bansari Solanki, Promila Kr, Ramya Kurmapu

Defenders: Uditia, Nikki Pradhan, Ropni Kumari, Lalhlunmawii, Preeti, T Suman Devi, Anjana Ddungdung, Nishi Yadav.

Midfielders: Monika, Sonika, Neha, Mahima Choudhary, Nisha, Jyoti, Salima Tete, Manashri Shedage, Akshata Abaso Dhekale, Lalruatfeli, Marina Lalramng-haki, Prabhleen Kaur, Manisha Chauhan, Ishika Chaudhary, Ritanyana Sahu, Jyoti Chhatrri, Ajmina Kujur, Sujata Kujur, Kruthika Sp, Mahima Tete, Mamta Bhat, Edula Jyothi, Anisha Ddungdung, Bhavna Khade, Maxima Toppo

Forwards: Deepika, Sharmila Devi, Navneet Kaur, Deepika Soreng, Sangita Kumari, Vaishnavi Vitthal Phalke, Rutaja Dadaso Pisal, Lalrindiki, Lalremiamsi, Vertika Rawat, Preeti Dubey, Hritika Singh, Mariana Kujur, Mumtaz Khan, Taranpreet Kaur, Baljeet Kaur, Vandana Kataria, Dipi Monika Toppo, Kajal S Atpadkar, Manju Chorsiya. (PTI)

Dhoni's batting was spectacular and lone positive on tough day: Fleming

VISAKHAPATNAM, April 1: There are not many better than the great Mahendra Singh Dhoni when it comes to game awareness and that reflected in his maiden outing with the bat this IPL season, said Chennai Super Kings head coach Stephen Fleming.

The margin of defeat for CSK's first loss of the season would have been bigger than 20 runs if it was not for Dhoni's unbeaten 37 off 16 balls at number eight.

Dhoni's cameo against the Delhi Capitals included a thundering six over extra-cover before he unleashed a one handed maximum over mid-wicket in the 20th over.

The 42-year-old, who last played for India in 2019, had undergone a knee surgery last year.

"It was beautiful wasn't it. He has been playing incredibly well pre-season. He is coming back from quite a serious injury. His batting has been superb. It gave us a positive vibe towards the end of a tough day."

"To get within 20 (runs of the target) run rate wise is important and he knows that. The way he played was spectacular," said the former New Zealand captain at the post match press conference on Sunday.

On the first loss of the season, Fleming added: "The result today



is a fair reflection of the team's play tonight. We were a little bit off tonight, we were slow at start in the first six overs of each innings. We gave away too many runs in the first six when we bowled.

"When we batted, they were very good, created pressure and used the conditions very well. The little cameos from David Warner and Rishabh Pant pushed them to a very good score (191/5)."

Was waiting for a long time to perform: Khaleel
Left-arm pacer Khaleel Ahmed's burst with the new ball put CSK on the backfoot from the

outset.
"I was waiting for a long time to perform for the team. When I started, I realised I was getting good swing, so I just backed it up and didn't allow the opposition any chance," said Ahmed.

"The more you play, the more you understand your game. The same happened with me as I have been playing continuously for six months, I got to understand my game plans, my body and managing to play in small niggles."

"It all came due to the domestic season, it gave me good confidence before coming into the IPL and it's been a great feeling." (PTI)

You're not a true human being if you're not inspired by Pant, says Watson

'But knowing him, that doesn't surprise me. He's so desperate to be the best he possibly can, and that showed tonight'

NEW DELHI, April 1: If Rishabh Pant's journey from a near death car accident to hitting one handed sixes in a space of 15 months does not inspire someone then they are probably "not true human beings", feels former Australia all-rounder Shane Watson.

The 26-year-old returned to competitive cricket in this IPL after recovering from a horrifying car crash in December 2022. The flamboyant batter had suffered multiple injuries, which required a major knee surgery and an extensive rehabilitation.

After two scratchy innings in the opening two games, Pant gave a glimpse of his devastating best as he hammered four boundaries and three maximums, including his trademark hand-off-the-bat six, to notch his maiden fifty of the season.

"It's inspirational, no question about it. To think that Rishabh had the ability to do this tonight, after the injuries that he sustained is unbelievable," Watson said on JioCinema.

"You're not a true human being if you're not inspired by Rishabh Pant, the way he was able to come out and turn it on like that. It took him a little while to find his feet but once he let those shackles off, he played some 'Rishabh Pant' shots, and they were extraordinary."

His knock helped Delhi Capitals register a 20-run win, their maiden victory of the season, over defending champions Chennai Super



Kings in Visakhapatnam on Sunday.

"It really was something special. I thought it might take him a few games, if not towards the backend of the IPL, to be able to play an innings like that."

Watson, who worked with Pant during his

stint at Delhi Capitals' assistant coach added "But knowing him, that doesn't surprise me. He's so desperate to be the best he possibly can, and that showed tonight," Watson added.

It was Pant's resilience and mental strength that helped him make an early recovery. (PTI)

Namdhari FC hold Aizawl FC after late equaliser

SRI BHAINI SAHIB (PUNJAB), April 1: Aizawl FC were held to a 1-1 draw by Namdhari FC in their I-League match here on Monday.

With an all-Indian starting lineup, Aizawl took the lead in the 40th minute thanks to 21-year-old R Ramdinthara's third league goal of the season.

Namdhari left it late to equalise, doing so in the 85th minute courtesy of their Spanish striker Ivan Garrido scoring for the second successive match.

With the draw, Aizawl moved up to the eighth spot in the table with 25 points from 21 matches. Namdhari, on the other hand, remained in 11th spot with 24 points from 23 games.

Aizawl will now travel to Vasco da Gama to face Churchill Brothers on April 5, while Namdhari have a 12-day gap until they take on Real Kashmir FC in Srinagar on April 13 to end their first-ever I-League campaign. (PTI)

Mirabai finishes 3rd in group B of World Cup, all but qualifies for Paris Olympics



PHUKET (THAILAND), April 1: Tokyo Olympics silver-medalist Mirabai Chanu all but qualified for the 2024 Paris Games after she finished third in the women's 49kg Group B event of the IWF World Cup here on Monday.

Returning from a six-month injury lay off, Chanu lifted a total of 184kg (81kg+103kg) at the tournament, which is the final and a mandatory qualifier for the Paris Olympics.

With the completion of her event, Chanu has fulfilled the criteria for the Paris Olympics, which is participating in two compulsory events and three other qualifiers.

The 2017 world champion is currently ranked second in the women's 49kg Olympic Qualification Ranking (OQR) behind China's Jian Huihua.

The official announcement for the qualification will come after the conclusion of the World Cup when the OQR will be updated. The top 10 lifters from each weight class will qualify for the Paris Olympics.

Chanu, who last competed at the Asian Games in September where she suffered a hip tendonitis injury, was not at her best, but was able to make five clean lifts. Her lifts in the snatch and clean and jerk sections were nowhere close to her personal best efforts.

The 29-year-old has a personal best of 88kg in snatch while she had lifted the then world record of 119kg in clean and jerk at the Asian Championships in 2021.

But given that she is coming off an injury and rehab, Chanu still has time to peak in July and her progress looks good.

Chanu will be the lone Indian weightlifter at the Paris Games, which will be her third appearance at the Olympics. (PTI)

RCB coach Andy Flower hopes top-order batsmen to fire soon

Chinnaswamy is not precisely a happy hunting ground for the Royal Challengers

BENGALURU, April 1: Head coach Andy Flower on Monday admitted that Royal Challengers Bengaluru's top-order batsmen have not fired in a desired manner, and hoped for them to find their rhythm sooner than later.

Except Virat Kohli, who made two fifties in three matches so far in IPL 2024, others like skipper Faf du Plessis, Glenn Maxwell, Cameron Green and Rajat Patidar have not been among runs for RCB.

"Our top five batsmen are yet to fire. There are big scores on offer at Chinnaswamy. So, once our big batsmen start scoring runs, I think we'll see some of those big scores. I have absolutely no doubt about that," Flower said in his pre-match press conference ahead of RCB's match against Lucknow Super Giants on Tuesday.

During the last two matches, the Chinnaswamy Stadium pitch

Set to be rescheduled due to Ram Navami KKR's home match against Rajasthan Royals on April 17



KOLKATA, April 1: Kolkata Knight Riders' home IPL match against Rajasthan Royals on April 17 is set to be rescheduled after the local police expressed its inability to provide adequate security due to Ram Navami celebrations on that day, the Cricket Association of Bengal (CAB) has informed the BCCI.

Bengal is also set to vote on

April 19 in the first phase of the seven-phase general elections. The voting in Kolkata will take place on June 1.

"Since the match is coinciding with Ram Navami and a portion of security is already deployed for elections, it won't be possible for us to provide adequate security for the match on April 17," Kolkata Police has stated in a letter to CAB

president Snehasish Ganguly.

The CAB has suggested that the match be advanced either by a day (April 16) or pushed back by 24 hours to April 18.

"Yes, the CAB has informed us that local police has asked for rescheduling of the date and the matter is being looked into. We haven't yet decided on the new date," a senior BCCI official

Indians are a long shot in candidates: Viswanathan Anand

NEW DELHI, April 1: Giving prominence to experience over youthful exuberance, five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand feels the three Indian participants remain far from winning the Candidates chess title, saying they "should first settle into the tournament."

The tournament, which will determine the challenger for the next World Championship, will be held in Toronto from April 3-22.

The immensely talented R Praggnandhaa, D Gukesh and Vidit Gujrathi are the three Indians competing in the meet's open category.

"The Indians are a long shot. If they can keep the tournament going that's good enough. If a late opportunity presents itself, they can grab it. They should first settle into the tournament and try to play good games. Let the big decisions come later," said Anand in a webcast published on a popular chess portal. The Indian stalwart was referring to those who have played at this level before. And it is only the first time that all the three have qualified and Anand singled out Gujrathi as someone who could fit on both sides - being experienced as well as a debutant.

The opinion is not much divided among the world elite as Anand also felt, like many others, that Fabiano Caruana and Hikaru Nakamura of the United States are the clear favourites while terming Ian Nepomniachtchi of Russia and Alireza Firouzja of France as the unpredictable players of the tournament.

According to Grandmaster N Srinath, one of the country's top trainers, Praggnandhaa has the best chance among Indians but picked Fabiano Caruana of United



States as the clear favourite for the title. Just a few days ahead of the elite event world number one and former world champion Magnus Carlsen said both Caruana and Nakamura have "excellent chances".

Carlsen thought that Nepomniachtchi could do well too. The Russian has been a World Championship challenger in the last two attempts but, apart from that, he does not have any great result to boot.

Despite that, according to Carlsen, "Ian has enough pedigree to be among the top contender."

The winner of the Candidates will qualify to challenge Ding Liren of China in the next World Championship match. Among Indians, Carlsen singled out Praggnandhaa as the player to watch out for.

"Pragg has his weak moments but he is also very stable psychologically, he will do well," he said.

The Norwegian also mentioned Gujrathi's capabilities to win the strongest tournament of his career. Vidit has improved quite a lot es-

pecially from a psychological point.

"He did poorly at Prague, which is not a good sign, but he has the capacity to win," Carlsen noted.

The eight-player double round-robin event will have 14 games in all and the player with the maximum score will qualify for the world championship battle.

It may be recalled that the race to the world championship was opened in 2022 after Carlsen refused to take part in it having won the title five times in a row.

Ding Liren and Ian Nepomniachtchi had played the match then, with the Chinese player coming out on top.

From the Indian perspective, Anand qualified for the Candidates for the first time in the early 1990s and since then he was part of every World Championship cycle till 2014, when he lost his last world title match to Carlsen.

Grandmasters Koneru Humpy and R Vaishali are the two Indians participating in the tournament's ladies section. (PTI)

told PTI. On part of CAB, a senior officer-informed: "We have suggested two dates, April 16 or 18. In any case, it is KKR's home match and will be played at the Eden Gardens."

The KKR squad is currently in Visakhapatnam for a game against Delhi Capitals on Wednesday.

Regarding the date change, there are a few practical issues bothering the BCCI.

"When you change one date, there is a chain reaction. Travel itinerary of teams change, broadcasters need to change their travel plans, ticketing and it becomes a huge logistical nightmare," the senior BCCI official said.

"So we need to weigh in a lot of things before finalising a schedule change. Obviously, if the city police is unable to deploy adequate security, there is little option left," he added.

Of the two dates suggested by the CAB, April 18 looks a bit problematic as the first phase of polls starts the very next day. On April 19, Cooch Behar, Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri in West Bengal go to polls.

However, Kolkata won't be going to polls till June 1, by which time the IPL will have ended. (PTI)

Sthavi Asthana crowned champion in individual category

NEW DELHI, April 1: Sthavi Asthana was crowned champion in the individual category at the National Eventing Championship that concluded here on Monday.

It is his second successive podium finish in the two-legged Nationals, having secured a third-place finish in the opening leg.

Ashish Malik took the second spot before his joy was doubled after earning a podium finish in the team event, finishing third.

Asthana copped four penalty points in the Jumps section, as the error was committed on obstacle number 10A. He also conceded four penalty points in Show Jumping but did not cop any time penalty before excelling in the Dressage and Cross Country section, recording 36.9 points.

On the other hand, Malik copped two penalty points (Time) but came out clean in jumps. He finished Dressage and Cross Country with 38.9 points.

Asthana and Malik were joined by Raju Singh (42.5) on the podium after he secured the third position. Prince Sharma (56.4) finished fourth. (PTI)

9th Beltola Badminton Championship concludes



HT Bureau GUWAHATI, April 1: The 9th Beltola Badminton Championship, a thrilling display of skill and sportsmanship, concluded at the Beltola Puberun Sangha Indoor Hall, Guwahati, from March 29 to 31. With participants showcasing their prowess across multiple categories, the championship culminated with deserving winners celebrated for their achievements.

In the highly competitive Open Category, Anajn Buragohain and Ranjan Buragohain emerged triumphant, displaying exceptional talent and determination. Zeliang and Teaching secured the 1st Runner-up position, followed closely by Sangram Chutia and Dixit Gogoi as the 2nd runner-up, with Harbaman and Amrit securing the 3rd runner-up position. Ranjan

National Esports Championships to begin from April 18



NEW DELHI, April 1: The National Esports Championships (NES) will start on April 18, the Esports Federation of India (ESFI) announced on Monday.

The NES will provide a platform for players across India to demonstrate their prowess in DOTA 2 (Open), eFootball (Open), and Counter-Strike 2 in the open and female categories.

The online qualifiers, set to commence from April 18, will be played in a double-elimination format.

The winners will advance to the regional qualifiers wherein they will compete against the other Asian countries to secure their berth for the global finals of the 16th World Esports Championships (WEC), starting on November 11 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Organised by the International Esports Federation (IESF), the WEC 2024 will wit-

ness a total of 609 teams representing their countries across five game titles — Counter Strike 2 (Open and Female), Dota2, eFootball series, Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (Open and Female), and PUBG MOBILE.

The tournament will feature a prize pool of USD 1 million to be distributed among the top eight teams in each game title and category for the first time.

"After a historic 2023, where India made its debut at the Asian Games 2022, we are excited to embark on a new year of opportunities with the NES 2024," EFSI President Vinod Tiwari said in a media release.

"Last year, we hosted the country's inaugural female CS:GO qualifiers, where the winning team made it all the way to the Asian qualifiers. This time, we anticipate even greater achievements from our country's talented female athletes," he added. (PTI)

KL Rahul engages in batting, fitness drills

BENGALURU, April 1: KL Rahul went through his paces at the nets and participated in fitness drills, but Lucknow Super Giants remained tight-lipped about his role against Royal Challengers Bengaluru in their IPL 2024 match here on Tuesday. Rahul was rather surprisingly used as an Impact Player during LSG's 21-run win over Punjab Kings, with Nicholas Pooran doing the captain's duty.

"We will see how he is pulling up at nets, and will make a decision based on that," said Pooran in his pre-match press conference here on Monday.

The right-handed Rahul, who opened the innings with Quinton de Kock, made a 9-ball 15 before perishing to Punjab pacer Arshdeep Singh. Later, LSG substituted him with pacer Naveen-ul-Haq.

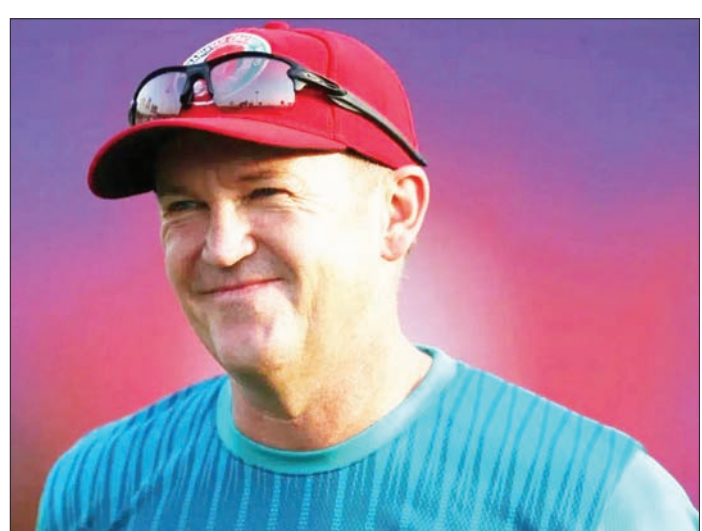
Though Rahul engaged himself in batting and other drills at the nets, the 31-year-old did not go through the wicket-keeping session, perhaps an indication that De Kock might continue to don the big gloves.

In some way, it has also increased the responsibility on Pooran, LSG's top-batter this season so far having made 104 runs from two matches at a strike-rate of 170 with a fifty.

The Trinidadian was ready to shoulder the burden too.

"I've worked tremendously hard over the last couple of years on my batting. I'm happy to do whatever the team needs me to do. So, whatever is required of me on a given day, I'm ready for that opportunity," said Pooran.

The 28-year-old was also pleased with the way pace sensation Mayank Yadav has handled his overnight fame. (PTI)



has offered some grip to the bowlers, particularly in the first innings.

Flower also expected to see a track that keeps its character

throughout Tuesday's match.

"To be honest, I expect the pitch to be a reasonable pitch tomorrow night. We scored 184 here a couple of nights ago and

that was chased down in 17 overs. So, there are big scores on offer and particularly the venue being a little smaller. The ball travels here on the field too," said Flower.

Unlike Chepauk for the Chennai Super Kings or Wankhede Stadium for Mumbai Indians, the Chinnaswamy is not precisely a happy hunting ground for the Royal Challengers.

Out of 84 matches that they played here, RCB have won 40 and lost 41 games with three others ending in no results.

Flower was mindful of that stat. "What we really need to do is to work out when we can attack and when we need to defend. This is a difficult place to defend no doubt, especially if the dew comes.

"But we don't want the toss to be a huge factor. We want to be in control of all our skills and our tactics. We've got to get that right." he added. (PTI)