

WORLD
NATION



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- A US journalist goes on trial in Russia on espionage charges
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Om Birla becomes LS speaker for 2nd term

NEW DELHI, June 26: NDA nominee Om Birla was elected as Lok Sabha speaker on Wednesday after a motion moved by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was adopted through voice vote, capping intense debate on the issue with the opposition in a rare move proposing its own candidate.

Pro-tem Speaker Bhartruhari Mahtab made the announcement after the opposition, which had forwarded the name of eight-term Congress MP Kodikunni Suresh as its candidate, did not press for votes to the motion. With this, Birla, the BJP's MP from Kota, gets a second consecutive term in the chair, the fifth time that a speaker will serve beyond the tenure of one Lok Sabha. It is also amongst the few occasions that an election became necessary for a post conventionally decided by consensus.

"I announce Om Birla elected as the speaker," Mahtab said.

Soon after, Modi and Parliamentary Affairs minister Kiren Rijiju went to Birla's seat in the front row of the treasury benches to escort him to the chair. Congress leader and leader of opposition Rahul Gandhi also joined them. Gandhi greeted Birla and also shook hands with the prime minister. After that, Modi, Gandhi and Rijiju escorted Birla to the chair where



Mahtab welcomed him saying, "It is your chair, please occupy."

In his address, the first in the 18th Lok Sabha, Modi said Birla's work as a parliamentarian should be an inspiration for new Lok Sabha members.

"It is a matter of honour that you have been elected to this chair for a second time," the prime minister said. "I congratulate you on behalf of the entire House and look forward to your guidance for next five years," he said, adding that Birla's "sweet smile" keeps the entire Lok Sabha happy.

Congratulating Birla on his election, Gandhi said he hoped the opposition would be allowed to raise the voice of people in the House.

He also said the opposition wanted the House to function "often and well" and added that it was very important that cooperation happens with trust. "This House represents the voice of the people of India... Of course the government has political power, but the opposition also represents the voice of India's people," the Congress leader said.

"The opposition would like to assist you in your work. I am confident you will allow us to speak in the House," he said.

Gandhi also pointed out that the opposition this time represents significantly more voices of the Indian people than last time.

Several opposition leaders, including Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, echoed him. "We believe you will move forward without discrimination and as the speaker, you will give equal opportunity and respect to every party. Impartiality is a great responsibility of this great post. You... are the chief justice of the court of democracy," Yadav said. Birla, 62, who has risen through the ranks in the BJP, is a third-term MP of the party and also a three-term former Rajasthan MLA. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Court awards lifer-term under Section 302 IPC ● Incident took place on Oct 7, 2013 at Ambikapur market

Tinsukia murder case: Six cops awarded lifer



TINSUKIA, June 26: Six police personnel were on Wednesday awarded life imprisonment by a local court in Tinsukia district of Assam for beating one person to death in an open market 11 years ago. Tinsukia District and Sessions

Judge Dipankar Bora sentenced the six policemen to life term under Section 302 (murder) of the Indian Penal Code.

The incident dates back to October 7, 2013, when a person named Ajit Sonawal was beaten at Ambikapur market.

Subsequently, he was transferred to the Assam Medical College and Hospital in Dibrugarh for treatment. However, he had succumbed to his injuries. Sonawal's father filed an FIR at Sadiya Police Station on October 9, 2013. After a thorough investigation, the chargesheet was filed and the trial began in the Tinsukia District and Sessions Court. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

HT BRIEFS

War against drugs

GUWAHATI: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma today has commemorated the International Day Against Drug Abuse by sharing an old video of him driving a Joseph Cyril Bamford (JCB) over numerous seized drug bottles. Taking to micro-blogging site X, the Chief Minister conveyed the state's unwavering dedication to creating a drug-free Assam. He emphasised the state's substantial endeavours in combating drug trafficking, underscoring its commitment to this cause. Sarma stated, "Assam has been waging a war against drugs, striking at this menace at regular intervals and recovering drugs worth over ₹ 2,100 crore. We remain committed to creating a Drug-Free Assam, where our children are safe from the threat of narcotics and can lead a healthy life."

Probe ordered

GUWAHATI: Director General of Police (DGP) GP Singh has ordered to initiate a probe into claims that three officers from the Basishtha police force attacked a young individual, leading to a fractured leg during an incident that occurred at night. As per reports, the alleged incident took place shortly after the officers were observed bathing in the Basishtha river. According to eyewitnesses, the officers allegedly assaulted the young individual without any provocation while being suspected of being under the influence. As a result, the victim sustained severe injuries and was promptly admitted to the hospital for urgent medical care.

Heroin seized

GUWAHATI: Heroin worth ₹ 4.5 crore was seized and a person arrested during an operation in Assam's Cachar district on Wednesday, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said. Acting on specific inputs, an anti-narcotics operation was conducted by the Special Task Force and Cachar Police. The security forces intercepted a vehicle travelling from neighbouring Mizoram in Silchar and during its search, 900 gm of heroin was recovered and a person apprehended.

Assam flood situation improves; nearly 1.4 lakh people still affected



GUWAHATI, June 26: The flood situation in Assam improved on Wednesday even as almost 1.4 lakh people are still reeling under the deluge in seven districts, an official bulletin said.

According to the daily flood report of the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA), more than 1,37,800 people are hit due to the floods in Barpeta, Cachar, Darrang, Dhemaji, Goalpara, Kamrup and Karimganj districts.

Cachar is the worst hit with nearly 75,000 people affected, followed by Karimganj with more than 56,500 people and Dhemaji with almost 3,800 people reeling under flood waters, it added. Till Tuesday, over 1.5 lakh people were affected by flood in seven districts of the state. The total number of people losing their

lives in this year's flood, landslide and storm stands at 41. The administration has been operating 109 relief camps and relief distribution centres in five districts, where 37,799 persons have taken shelter at present. The authority has distributed 523.72 quintals of rice, 98.64 quintals of dal, 29.64 quintals of salt and 2,963.39 litres of mustard oil among the flood victims of the state during the last 24 hours. At present, 487 villages are under water and 1,334.51 hectares of crop areas have been damaged across Assam, the ASDMA said.

Embankments, roads, bridges and other infrastructure have been damaged by flood waters in Barpeta, Chirang, Dhubri, Kamrup, West Karbi Anglong, Lakhimpur, Udalguri, Kokrajhar and Karimganj districts.

At present, Kushiyara at Karimganj town is flowing above the danger mark in Assam, ASDMA said.

On account of widespread flooding, over 1,24,800 domestic animals and poultry are affected across the state. (PTI)

Speaker recognises Rahul as Leader of Oppn in LS

NEW DELHI, June 26: Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla recognised Rahul Gandhi as the leader of opposition on Wednesday, a day after the Congress communicated its decision to name him for the position to the Lok Sabha Secretariat. In a notification issued on Wednesday, the Lok Sabha secretariat said Gandhi, leader of the Indian National Congress, had officially been recognised as the leader of opposition in the Lok Sabha with effect from June 9. The Congress MP from Rai Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh has been recognised as the leader of opposition under Section 2 of the Salary and Allowances of Leaders of Opposition in Parliament Act, 1977. Gandhi, who earlier in the day joined Prime Minister Narendra Modi and parliamentary affairs minister Kiren Rijiju in escorting the newly-elected Birla to the speaker's chair, thanked Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge for his appointment to the role.



"I thank Congress president @kharge ji, and all the Congress leaders and 'babbar sher' karyakartas from across the country for their overwhelming support and warm wishes. Together, we will raise the voice of every Indian in Parliament, protect our Constitution, and hold the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) government accountable for their actions," Gandhi said. (PTI)

Accused of raping minor injured in police firing: CM

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, June 26: One of the accused apprehended on charges of raping a minor girl was injured in police firing while attempting to escape custody in Assam's Udalguri district, said chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday.

Altogether five people were arrested on the charge of raping the girl. Following this, the chief minister directed director general of police G P Singh to investigate the matter under the supervision of a senior officer.

"In connection with Mazbat PS Case No. 30/24, involving the rape of a minor girl by several boys on June 22, five miscreants have been arrested. The main accused was injured in (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

We easily fall prey to false propaganda during elections, says Tuliram

HT Correspondent

DONGKAMUKAM, June 26: Tuliram Ronghang, Chief Executive Member (CEM) of KAAC, highlighted how people easily fall victim to false propaganda spread by certain political parties during election periods.

He made these remarks while addressing a gathering at Kollonga playground, West Karbi Anglong, during a ceremonial distribution of paddy seeds and mosquito nets.

Referring to a regional party that recently secured a leading position in several MAC constituencies without naming it, he cautioned the audience against their deceptive agendas.

"Their agenda serves only their self-interest, not the welfare of the general public," he asserted. Dr. Tuliram urged constituents to



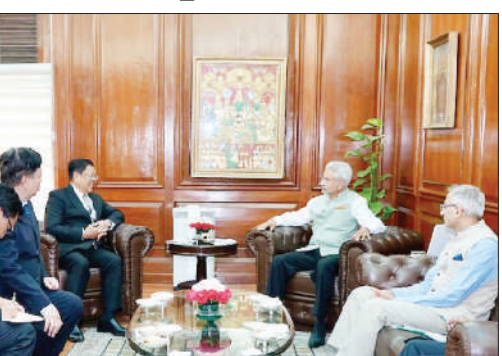
critically assess what is right and wrong, emphasising the importance of informed judgment.

"They claim that last year's MAC election conducted by the State Election Commission was illegal, leading to a PIL filed in the High

Court for re-election, but there has been no progress so far," he stated.

He reaffirmed the legality and adherence to the Sixth Schedule of all current CEMs, EMs, and MACs. Taking a swipe at the aforementioned (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

EAM Jaishankar meets Myanmar counterpart, raises border violence concerns



In a post on 'X' following the meeting, the external affairs minister said he pressed for "credible security" to India's ongoing projects in Myanmar and called for early return to the path of democratic transition in that country.

Jaishankar particularly pointed out the impact of continuing violence and instability in that country on the Indo-Myanmar border. Several parts of Myanmar have been witnessing intense fighting between the military junta and resistance forces. The resistance forces have already captured several towns.

The anti-junta forces seized control of several military bases and a command centre at Myawaddy in April. In the meeting, Jaishankar also told Shwe that India is open to engaging all stakeholders to address the situation in Myanmar.

"Met with Deputy PM and FM of Myanmar U Than Shwe as he transited New Delhi today. Discussed our deep concern at the impact of continuing violence and instability in Myanmar on our border. India is open to engaging all stakeholders in addressing this situation," Jaishankar said on 'X'. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

NEW DELHI, June 26: External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Wednesday conveyed to his Myanmar counterpart U Than Shwe India's deep concern over the impact of violence and instability in Myanmar on Indian border and sought cooperation for early return of Indians trapped in Myawaddy town. Jaishankar met Shwe, also Myanmar's deputy prime minister, as he transited New Delhi as part of a visit.

Women in the region had, on average, 14% lower physical activity levels than men

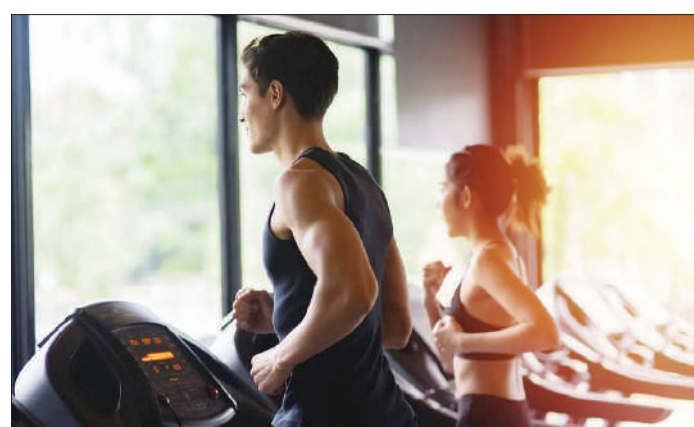
Nearly 50% adults in India insufficiently physically active in 2022: Lancet Study

NEW DELHI, June 26: Almost 50 per cent of adults in India engaged in insufficient levels of physical activity in 2022, according to a study published in The Lancet Global Health journal.

Far more women in India (57 per cent) were found to be insufficiently physically active, compared to men (42 per cent), in line with trends across the South Asian region, the study found.

The insufficient levels of physical activity in women in the region were, on average, 14 per cent higher than those in men, it said.

The South Asian region also ranked the second highest in terms of adults being insufficiently physically active after high-income Asia Pacific region, an international team of researchers, including those from the World Health Organization (WHO), said.



Globally, the authors found that about a third of the adults (31.3 per cent) were insufficiently physically active -- defined as not performing at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week or 75 minutes of vigorous-inten-

sity physical activity per week.

This was up by five per cent from 26.4 per cent of the adults worldwide insufficiently engaging in physical activity in 2010, they found, and if the 2010-2022 trends continued, the authors said that the

global target of improving physical activity engagement by 15 per cent would not be met.

In India, a little over 22 per cent of the adults engaged in insufficient physical activity in the year 2000, while in 2010, close to 34 per cent of the adults were insufficiently physically active, the researchers found. They projected that in 2030, 60 per cent of the adults could be insufficiently engaging in physical activity, should current trends continue.

For the study, the researchers analysed data of physical activity reported by adults (aged at least 18 years) in population-based surveys to estimate the number of adults performing insufficient physical activity for 197 countries and territories from 2000 to 2022. The team also found that around the world, older (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

India's spectrum auction ends early on day-2

Fetching over ₹ 11,300 crore

NEW DELHI, June 26: India's spectrum auction concluded within a few hours of bidding on day-2, with telcos buying over ₹ 11,300 crore worth of radio waves in all, which is just 12 per cent of the ₹ 96,238 crore minimum value that government had estimated for the spectrum on offer.

The auction, where a total of 10 GHz of spectrum ranging between 800 MHz to 26 GHz was placed on the block, fetched total bids worth ₹ 11,340 crore, sources with knowledge of the matter said. In all, only 140-150 MHz are estimated to have been sold in seven rounds.

Five rounds of bidding happened on the opening day on June 25, but Wednesday did not see much action, leading to officials declaring the end of the auction at around 1130 hrs.

The 2024 auction - that was held after a gap of nearly two years - saw radio waves in 800 MHz, 900 MHz, 1800 MHz, 2100 MHz, 2300 MHz, 2500 MHz, 3300 MHz and 26 GHz on offer.

On expected lines, the auction this time around has been low-key as market watchers had anticipated limited bidding, with telcos primarily focusing on spectrum renewals, and selective sprucing up on radio waves for boosting their



coverage.

Reliance Jio, Bharti Airtel and Vodafone Idea (VIL) are vying for the radio waves that support high-speed mobile services, in these auctions. The operator-wise breakup of the bids, or exact amount that telcos dish out individually, is not immediately clear and will be known once an official announcement comes.

As per the day-one spectrum auction report issued by the Department of Telecom on Tuesday evening, bidding took place mainly in the 900 and 1800 MHz bands. The operator also placed bids for the 2100 MHz band spec-

trum in three circles.

Analysts expect Bharti Airtel to bid for some of its expiring spectrum (it has renewals for 42 MHz of spectrum in 1800 MHz and 900 MHz band in six circles), while Jio - which has adequate spectrum across 4G and 5G bands - may be picky and selective, market watchers said. Jio, it is estimated, has shelled out ₹ 1,000 crore for spectrum in 1800 MHz bands in a couple of circles.

For the 2024 auction, the EMD submitted by telcos ranged between ₹ 300-3,000 crore - the lowest since the auctions in 2014 and down a staggering 80 per cent over the previous auction in 2022. Reliance Jio has deposited the highest earnest money of ₹3,000 crore for the spectrum auction, Bharti Airtel has submitted an EMD of ₹ 1,050 crore and Vodafone Idea (VIL) of ₹ 300 crore.

Telecom industry body Cellular Operators Association of India - which counts Reliance Jio, Bharti Airtel and Vodafone Idea as members - had stated that auctions will catalyse the rapid rollout of 5G services across the country, leading to enhanced coverage and vastly improved connectivity. (PTI)

LG Electronics India unveils Next-Gen AI TVs

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, June 26: LG Electronics, a leader in OLED technology for over a decade, has launched its latest innovation in home entertainment: the 2024 lineup of LGOLEDevo AI and LGQNEAI TVs. This collection, featuring 55 new models, includes the groundbreaking LG OLED 97G4, the world's largest OLED TV. Equipped with advanced artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities, these new models promise to enhance picture quality, audio quality, and personalization, elevating the viewing experience to unprecedented heights.

The 2024 LGQNEAI TVs represent the next generation of LCD technology, delivering vibrant, bright colors through the fusion of Quantum Dot and NanoCell technologies. The lineup also includes the QNED MiniLED TV, which offers a near-OLED viewing experience.

Hong Ju Jeon, Managing Director of LG Electronics India, commented, "We are proud to introduce the Next Generation of AI TVs, showcasing the forefront of innovation in both OLED and premium LED technologies. The LG 2024 LGOLEDevo AI and LGQNEAI TVs lineup takes the viewing experience to a new level with an advanced processor that enables outstanding audio-visual experiences across various screen sizes, while also providing a personalized user experience tailored to each individual's unique lifestyle and preferences." LG's latest OLED AI TVs feature enhanced AI upscaling capabilities, which refine objects and backgrounds through precise pixel-level image analysis. (PTI)

Name Correction

I, Afajuddin do hereby declare that I am a permanent resident of the below mentioned address and citizen of India by birth. That my name has been recorded in my Passport bearing No. J0971615 as Mohammed Afajuddin in place of Afajuddin. That both Mohammed and Afajuddin are the same and one person. That this affidavit is required to be produced before the authority concerned as a piece of document.

Sd/-
Afajuddin
SO- Safiruddin
RO- Bahabari
PO & PS- Kharupetia
Dist- Darrang (Assam)

Sensex, Nifty settle at new all-time high levels

MUMBAI, June 26: Stock market benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty rallied for the third straight session and ended at their fresh all-time high levels on Wednesday in tandem with Asian peers and buying in Reliance Industries.

The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 620.73 points or 0.80 per cent to settle at a new closing peak of 78,674.25. During the day, it rallied 705.88 points or 0.90 per cent to hit a fresh all-time high of 78,759.40.

The Nifty went up by 147.50 points or 0.62 per cent to settle at a record closing peak of 23,868.80. Intra-day, it surged 168.6 points or 0.71 per cent to hit the fresh lifetime high of 23,889.90. In the past three days of rally, investors' wealth have risen by ₹ 2.53 lakh crore.

Among the 30 Sensex companies, Reliance Industries, Bharti Airtel, UltraTech Cement, Sun Pharma, Adani Ports, Axis Bank, NTPC and Bajaj Finance were the biggest gainers.

Mahindra & Mahindra, Tata Steel, Tech Mahindra and JSW Steel were among the laggards. "The domestic market hit a new peak, bolstered by a rally in large-cap stocks, where the valuation is relatively fair. In contrast, mid and smallcap stocks saw profit-taking due to valuation concerns. Currently, the financials & consumption stocks are catching up driven by

improved balance sheets, a strong GDP growth forecast, and softening inflation.

"Global market sentiments reflected similar trends, with a consensus on imminent rate cuts," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge climbed 0.15 per cent while midcap index declined 0.29 per cent.

Among the indices, telecommunication jumped 2.30 per cent, energy (1.45 per cent), tech (0.78 per cent), bankx (0.58 per cent) and services (0.46 per cent).

Commodities, consumer discretionary, IT and auto were among the laggards.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled with gains. European markets were trading on a mixed note. US markets ended mostly higher on Tuesday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.80 per cent to USD 85.69 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth ₹ 1,175.91 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data.

The BSE benchmark jumped 712.44 points or 0.92 per cent to settle at 78,053.52 on Tuesday. The Nifty went up by 183.45 points or 0.78 per cent to settle at 23,721.30. (PTI)

Rupee trades in narrow range against US dollar in early trade

MUMBAI, June 26: The rupee witnessed range-bound trading against the US dollar in early trade on Wednesday and fell 3 paise amid a negative trend in domestic equities. Forex traders said the strength of the American currency in the overseas market and elevated crude oil prices also weighed on the local unit and restricted the upmove. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.45 and lost further ground to trade at 83.46 against the greenback in initial deals, registering a decrease of 3 paise from its previous closing level. On Tuesday, the rupee appreciated 4 paise and settled at 83.46 against the greenback. "The Indian rupee closed higher on Tuesday and

opened flat with most Asian currencies range-bound to weaker. Rupee is expected to remain in a range of 83.35 to 83.55 with dips to be bought by importers," said Anil Kumar Bhasali, Head of Treasury and Executive Director Finrex Treasury Advisors LLP. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading marginally higher by 0.05 per cent at 105.66. Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, were trading 0.42 per cent higher at USD 85.37 per barrel. In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex declined 81.42 points, or 0.10 per cent, to 77,972.10 points. The broader NSE Nifty fell 36.05 points, or 0.15 per cent, to 23,685.25 points. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net buyers in the capital markets on Tuesday, as they purchased shares worth ₹ 1,175.91 crore, according to exchange data. Meanwhile, Reserve Bank Governor Shaktikanta Das on Tuesday asserted that the high interest rates are not impeding growth, and made it clear that the monetary policy will "unambiguously" focus on getting down inflation going forward. The country is at the threshold of a "major structural shift" in its growth trajectory and is moving towards a path where 8 per cent real GDP growth can be sustained on a yearly basis, Das said addressing an event by Bombay Chamber of Commerce and Industry. (PTI)

Narrowing trade deficit aid current account surplus: CRISIL

KOLKATA, June 26: India's current account surplus in the fourth quarter of the 2023-24 fiscal was aided by narrowing of the merchandise trade deficit, an increase in remittances and a surplus in services trade, according to a CRISIL report released on Wednesday. The country's current account recorded a surplus of USD 5.7 billion, which is 0.6 per cent of the GDP, in the fourth quarter of the last financial year.

It was in deficit of USD 8.7 bil-

lion, equivalent to one per cent of GDP, in the third quarter of the 2023-24 fiscal, the report said.

In the corresponding fourth quarter of 2022-23, the country's current account was also in deficit of USD 1.3 billion, which was 0.2 per cent of the GDP. "The improvement in current account balance to 0.6 per cent of GDP surplus in Q4 fiscal 2024, from a deficit of 0.2 per cent of GDP a year ago reflects improvement on all three fronts i.e. merchandise trade deficit narrowed,

services trade surplus increased and remittances rose," the CRISIL report said. Financial flows also increased leading to accretion in foreign exchange reserves during the fourth quarter amounting to USD 30.8 billion, it said. The country's foreign reserves, as of June 14, 2024, stood at USD 652.9 billion. The report said even though the FDI inflows continued, there has also been a rise in outward FDI, leading to a reduction in net flows, the report said. (PTI)

Gender minorities, marginalised groups in Tata Steel workforce: Official

JAMSHEDPUR, June 26: Tata Steel aims at having a minimum of 25 per cent of its workforce made up of diverse groups, including gender minorities, marginalised communities, persons with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ individuals, within the next few years, a company official said.

It is one of the first companies in the country to roll out a special recruitment drive for transgender talent, having recruited over 100 members from the community for various roles across different locations, the official claimed. "Continuing this drive, we aim to have 25 per cent of our workforce from diverse groups in the next couple of years," the official said.

A total of 113 transgender individuals have been onboarded and posted at various locations, including manufacturing, operations and maintenance, mining, and services. These employees are stationed in Noamundi, West Bokaro, Kolkata, Kharagpur, Kalinganagar, and Jamshedpur. Some of these employees work all three shifts and operate Heavy Earth Moving Machinery (HEMM) at the Noamundi iron ore mine in Jharkhand's West Singhbhum and West Bokaro coal mine in Ramgarh district.

"Tata Steel appreciates the potential of diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) and has a tremendous organisational focus on it," the official said.

"In line with this, we renewed our commitment and refocused our approach to DE&I in 2015 by setting up MOSAIC - a platform for pioneering initiatives, diversity targets, and employee-friendly policies conceptualised and executed from the apex level," he added. The official admitted that the initial planning stage was challenging due to the inadequate knowledge about the transgender community.

"However, we made a detailed plan and imple-

mented it without any difficulty. To date, we have not received any complaint from either side of the employees since the first batch of transgender individuals was inducted following proper training in 2019," the official said. On the productivity of these employees compared to the general workforce, he said transgender individuals perform better in some areas.

Jaya Singh Panda, Chief Diversity Officer at Tata Steel, said, "We believe in nurturing a workplace where every person, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, feels valued, respected, and empowered. Diversity is one of our greatest strengths, and continuing this practice is key to long-term success and innovation."

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a transgender employee at the company's Jamshedpur plant said, "We feel very safe inside the company as coworkers are friendly, supportive, and cooperative. The company has also developed infrastructure, including separate toilets for us."

Another trans-female employee from Noamundi lamented that her parents never used to care about whether she ate or came home on time.

"When my father learned about my job at Tata Steel, he did not believe me. He came and stayed with me until I joined. Since then, he calls me every day to check on me," the worker said.

A trans-male employee in Jamshedpur said his job at the company enabled him to support his family and help with his sister's marriage, something he never imagined possible. Another trans-female employee in Jamshedpur expressed gratitude for the accommodation provided by the company. "I'm happy that my society has accepted me as an individual," another member of the group added. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Om Birla becomes LS

Earlier in the morning, the prime minister moved the motion for the election of Birla as the speaker. It was seconded by defence minister Rajnath Singh. NDA allies JD(U) member Rajiv Ranjan Singh, HAM(S) member Jitan Ram Manjhi, Shiv Sena member Prataprao Jadhav, LJP(RV) member Chirag Paswan also moved motions in Birla's favour. Shiv Sena (UBT) member Arvind Sawant moved the motion to elect Congress' Suresh to the post.

However, after the voice votes, Mahtab announced that all other motions, barring the prime minister's, became infructuous. In what some see as a sign of things to come, Birla's election follows a rare showdown by both the ruling alliance and the opposition bloc after the effort for a consensus was failed. The opposition's last-minute decision to go for a contest came after senior BJP leaders did not agree to the precondition that the INDIA bloc must be offered the post of deputy speaker in lieu of supporting Birla.

A brief interaction involving Congress' K C Venugopal and DMK's T R Bala in the opposition side and Union ministers Rajnath Singh, Amit Shah and J P Nadda on Tuesday to evolve a consensus ended in acrimony with both sides sticking to their positions.

Both opposition leaders walked out of Singh's office where they met, with Venugopal accusing the government of not following the "convention" of an opposition candidate for the deputy speaker's position and then announcing the decision to field a candidate against Birla.

Union ministers Piyush Goyal of the BJP and Lalan Singh of the JD(U) accused the opposition of resorting to pressure politics and putting forth preconditions despite senior ministers' assurance that its demand will be considered when the time to pick the deputy speaker comes.

With the NDA having 293 MPs in its kitty and the INDIA bloc 233 in the Lok Sabha, the numbers were clearly in favour of Birla. The Lok Sabha currently has 542 members after Rahul Gandhi resigned from one of the two seats he was elected from. At least three independent members also support the opposition. Balram Jakhar is the only presiding officer to have served two complete terms extending the seventh and eighth Lok Sabha. (PTI)

Tinsukia murder case:

The court, considering the evidence, witness testimonies and the arguments presented by government advocate Ashok Chaudhary, found the six police personnel guilty. (PTI)

Nagaland civic body polls

Peoples' Organisation (ENPO), however, had declared that six districts in the region would not participate in the elections. ENPO, the apex body of seven Naga tribes in the six eastern districts, has been demanding a 'Frontier Nagaland Territory', claiming that the region has been neglected for years. There are 14 town councils in the ENPO area. (PTI)

Accused of raping minor injured

police firing yesterday while attempting to escape," Sarma wrote on micro-blogging site X. The girl was allegedly lured to a secluded place on some pretext by the five men at Dhunuri tea estate in Mazbat police station on Saturday and the family filed a police complaint on the next day. The police arrested the five accused from different places in Udalguri and Darrang districts since then.

One of the accused attempted to escape from custody on Tuesday night and was injured when the police opened fire to stop him from fleeing. "I have directed the @DGPAssamPolice to thoroughly investigate the matter under the supervision of a senior officer," the chief minister added. (With inputs from PTI)

We easily fall prey to false

party, he pointed out their consecutive electoral defeats and predicted their continued inability to win future elections, branding them as a party rejected by the people. He concluded by urging attendees to avoid a return to the turbulent days experienced during the ASCD's tenure.

Similar meetings were also held at Memmiji and Karbi Rongso. Organised by the Bithung Rengthama BJP Mandal Committee, the meeting was attended by MAC Pawan Kumar Ray, MAC Headings Rongphar, chairman of the Veterinary Development Board Ditolal Hasnu, chairman of the Forest Board Sarthe Kramsa, chairman of Rongkhang Lamps Mongol Bey, former PDCK leader Songbijit Kathar, and others.

EAM Jaishankar meets Myanmar

"Particularly flagged illegal narcotics, arms smuggling and trafficking in persons as priority challenges. Sought cooperation for early return of Indian nationals trapped in Myanmar," he said. "Pressed for credible security protection for our ongoing projects in the country. Urged early return to the path of democratic transition in Myanmar. India stands ready to help in any manner," he added.

The resistance forces have already captured many key trading points along the borders with India, China and Bangladesh.

Myanmar has been witnessing wide-spread violent protests demanding restoration of democracy since the military seized power in the coup on February 1, 2021. Rakhine state and many other regions have reported severe fighting between armed ethnic groups and the Myanmar military since October last year.

The hostilities between the two sides saw a rapid spike since last November in several key Myanmar towns and regions near the border with India as well, fuelling concerns in New Delhi over the possible ramifications for security of Manipur and Mizoram. (PTI)

Nearly 50% adults in India

adults, both men and women, aged 60 years and above, were increasingly engaging in insufficient physical activity.

Physical inactivity is known to heighten risk of developing non-communicable diseases, including diabetes and heart disease. Rising levels of physical activity, along with an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, are contributing to increase in cases of these diseases and burdening healthcare systems around the world, according to the WHO.

A 2023 Indian Council of Medical Research-India Diabetes (ICMR-INDIAB) study, published in The Lancet Diabetes and Endocrinology journal, estimated that 101 million people in India were diabetic in 2021, and about 315 million had hypertension the same year.

Further, 254 million were estimated to have obesity and 185 million estimated to have high levels of LDL or 'bad' cholesterol, according to the study. (PTI)

GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR (HILLS) PANCHAVAT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG

No. DDP/PRD/H/Acctts-275/AA-SOPD/AAP/2023-24/917

Dated: Diphu the 26th June 2024

CORRIGENDUM

This is for general information to all concerned to kindly refer to the Notice Inviting Tender No. DDP/PRD/H/Acctts-275/AA-SOPD/AAP/2023-24/916, Dated: 24/06/2024. All concerned/interested parties are requested/directed to read the tender received date as "from 25/06/2024 to 09/07/2024" instead of "25/06/2024 to 09/06/2024" as wrongly given due to typo error in point No. 1 of the terms and conditions given in the above noted tender. The same will be applicable for the dates mentioned in the first para of the tender. All other terms and conditions will remain intact.

Sd/-
Deputy Director (Hills)
Panchayat and Rural Development,
DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG

Memo No. DDP/PRD/1-1/Acctts-275/AA-SOPD/AAP/2023-24/917A Dated: Diphu the 26th June 2024

United Nations General Assembly recognised the day in December 1987

International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking observed across state

HT Bureau
HAF LONG, June 26: The International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking has been observed across state on Wednesday.

On the occasion, the Dima Hasao district NCOR organised a foot march in Haflong town along with the rest of the world.

The foot march started in the morning by police officials from Cultural Institute Hall (CIH) till SP office with captions which read about importance to eliminate drugs from the society.

ADC Shhaurya Sharma in his speech thanked all the participants and spoke how the drugs have become a menace in the society. He said, "Crimes by drug addicts are rising in society and it has to be a joint effort by everyone to remove this from the roof".

Others who spoke on the occasion were additional SP Faruque Ahmed, APS and secretary, DLSA Gautam Daimary and officials from other departments such as Medical, Social Welfare, Information & Public Relations etc. The programme ended with a vote of thanks after which the crowd was offered light refreshment till they disbursed.

Our Margherita correspondent adds: Recognizing the profound impact of drugs and illicit trafficking on national security and public health, the Indian Army on Wednesday initiated an extensive awareness drive at Don Bosco High School and Drug De-Addiction Center, at Bordumsa under Tinsukia.

This awareness lecture was attended by 15 Teachers and 150 students from Don Bosco High School, Bordumsa and 20 individuals (under rehab and care taker) from Drug De-Addiction Center, Bordumsa who gained thorough insight

into this critical issue on the "International Day Against drug abuse and Illicit Trafficking".

Based on this year's theme "The evidence is clear: invest in prevention", the lecture was focused on the steps which have to be taken in order to prevent this menace at the grassroot level and call for a coordinated effort by all the agencies was highlighted in the interaction.

The United Nations General Assembly recognised the day in December 1987 with the goal of enhancing global cooperation against drug trafficking and promoting efforts to create drug-free communities. Drug addiction and illicit trafficking present major obstacles in India, impacting people and communities nationwide and from cities to rural areas a variety of substances such as heroin, cocaine and synthetic drugs permeate the market.

This has far-reaching effects causing health emergencies, rising crime levels and societal breakdown.

The Indian Army remains committed to empower the communities of upper Assam to address the issue of drugs and its undesirable contribution towards financing inimical organisations working to destabilize the area and induce violence.

Our Jorhat correspondent adds: The District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), Jorhat, in association with the Jorhat district administration on Wednesday observed 'International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking' by organising a street play to create awareness against drug abuse and illicit trade.

Paralegal volunteers performed the play with mythical characters at the busy Baruah Chari-Ali here that drew the attention of commuters.



Leaflets and T-shirts bearing messages on harmful effects of drug consumption and not to get involved in the illicit business of narcotics were distributed to 50 rickshaw pullers with an aim to spread awareness at the grass-root level.

Jorhat district commissioner Pulak Mahanta, Ranjita Agarwalla, additional district & sessions judge Jorhat, Dhiraj Kalita chief judicial magistrate, Jorhat and other judicial officers of Jorhat Judiciary took part in the distribution programme.

Speaking on the occasion the district commissioner praised the initiative taken by DLSA, Jorhat and urged all to join hands to fight menace of drug abuse.

DLSA secretary-cum judicial officer DLSA, Devojyoti Bhuyan who anchored the event, thanked the district administration, rickshaw pullers and the public for organizing the awareness programme successfully.

Our Nagaon correspondent adds: Along with the rest of the globe, District

Legal Services Authority, Nagaon, various educational institutions as well as Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) also observed the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking with a motto 'The evidence is clear : Let's reach out for prevention' on Wednesday and launched day long campaigns against drugs menace in the district here.

District Legal Services Authority, Nagaon in association with Dronacharya Junior College and Gram Vikas Parishad, Nagaon organized two separate sensitisation campaigns against drugs menace at Fouzdaripatty based Dronacharya Junior College and Rangolu based Gram Vikas Parishad campus respectively.

On occasion of the day, a community walk was taken out with a view to make people aware of drugs menace from the college. The chairman of DLSA, Nagaon and District and Session Judge Biswajit Chakraborty inaugurated the community walk in which the secretary of DLSA,

Nagaon Munni Neog, principal as well as other teaching faculties of the college participated.

Following the event, a sensitisation programme against drugs menace was also organised at the college auditorium. Similarly, DLSA, Nagaon in association with Gram Vikas Parishad also organised a sensitisation campaign against drugs abuse at its Rangolu based office where secretary of DLSA, Nagaon Munni Neog, chief adviser to Gram Vikas Parishad Sirajuddin Ahmed, senior scribe and educationist Ghanakanta Bora were present. Srimanta Sankar Mission and Sadou Asom Gramya Puthibharal Sangstha also observed the day with a slew of anti drugs campaigns at its respective offices in the small town today here.

On the other hand, Najir Ajmal Memorial College of Education, Hojai, also observed the day with a three day long campaigns against drugs menace. Besides, the college management authority also organised a sensitisation programme on the fatal issue at the college auditorium today.

Manager of the college Jahidul Haque Chowdhury presented a brief note on the issue while Dr Ashish Shah, the principal of the college delivered the welcome address in the programme. Besides, a procession was taken out on occasion of the day where thousands from the college as well as other well wishers participated. Anamika Bora, Miss Assam and brand ambassador of Recovery Wellness Society, Dr Khasrul Islam, director of Ajmal Foundation attended the sensitisation campaign as the chief guests, it is said in a press note here.

Our Biswanath Chariali correspondent adds: The Assam Rifles successful-

fully observed the International Day against Drug Abuse & Illicit Trafficking on Wednesday at Gyan Vikash Academy, Charduar, stated a press release. The event witnessed the participation of 255 civilians and 8 personnel from the Assam Rifles. The program aimed to raise awareness about the dangers of drug abuse and the significance of combating illicit trafficking. Through engaging activities, informative sessions, and community interaction, Assam Rifles highlighted their commitment to fostering a drug-free society. The event concluded with a call to action for all attendees to join hands in the fight against drug abuse and illicit trafficking, reinforcing the importance of collective efforts in addressing this global issue.

Our Tezpur correspondent adds: The International day against drug abuse and illicit trafficking along with 2nd CME and PG development program on addiction medicine with the theme: Addiction medicine - contemporary dialectics was observed on the occasion.

The programme was organised by the department of addiction medicine and addiction treatment facility of LGBRIMH, Tezpur in collaboration with east zone Indian psychiatric society from Wednesday in the institute. Dr Hemanta Datta, head of the department of addiction medicine welcomed the guests and participants during his inaugural address. Renowned psychiatrist Prof RK Lenin Singh, Professor department of psychiatry, RIMS, Imphal, Dr SK Deuri, director of LGBRIMH and Dr Jyoti Hazarika, medical superintendent of the Institute, participants, faculty members from various departments, students along with the staff were present in the inauguration programme held on Wednesday.

No school in Hojai with single teacher: DC

HT Correspondent

HOJAI, June 26: The Hojai district administration has transferred teachers from schools which have teachers more than necessary to schools having shortage of teachers.

As per information, district commissioner Lachit Kumar Das via an order has transferred 161 teachers (118 from lower primary and 43 from elementary schools) from the two educational blocks namely, Lanka and Juggiajan within the district.



Talking to the reporters recently, DC Lachit Kumar Das said that the teachers are transferred from those schools which had excess teachers in proportion to students, to those schools which had shortage of teachers in proportion to students, to bring a balance in students-teachers ratio.

He said around 116 schools in the district had excess teachers and 85 schools had single teachers.

He said these transfer order is released on basis of rationalization, via lottery without any manipulation, to improve the quality of education within the district.

He said requirement of around 250-300 teachers in the district is still relevant in the district, however after this order, the problem is solved to an extent. He added, "Now I can say with pride there is no school with single teacher in Hojai."

KADAC holds one day interactive programme



HT Bureau

DIPHU, June 26: Karbi Anglong District Academic Council (KADAC) has organised a one day interactive programme with principals and headmasters of all government provincialised and government aided secondary schools of Karbi Anglong, held here at Chandra Sing Teron High School Dharamnala.

KADAC invited all principals and headmasters of secondary schools, with the sole purpose of knowing from teachers about the various problems, difficulties and needs in their respective schools.

Addressing the teachers in the interactive session the Executive Member (EM), Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) for Education, Richard Tokbi said that the government of Assam is doing away with the setting up of new venture schools. Under the jurisdiction of KAAC also government assistance like receiving of grant-in-aid will be stopped.

"It has been discussed in the Executive Committee (EC) meeting of KAAC, that financial benefits like receiving of grant-in-aid will be stopped to venture schools from KAAC. This discussion has been taken," the EM informed.

On the good performance of matric results the EM thanked all the teachers for their untiring effort and dedication made by them.

The EM said, "I congratulate all the teachers for securing 8th position in the HSLC result from Karbi Anglong this year. I also thanked our Chief Executive Member (CEM) of KAAC, Tulrim Ronghang as under his able leadership this year we were able to achieve the unthinkable feat of achievement. I would like to share this credit to dedicated teachers for their untiring effort towards giving the right guidance and knowledge to our students."

Drug peddlers in police net

HT Correspondent

MARGHERITA, June 26: Ledo police apprehended two individuals allegedly for peddling drugs on Wednesday afternoon.

The arrest coincides with the day when the world has been observing International Day against Drug Abuse.

The ongoing crackdown on drugs by Ledo Police resulted in the arrest of Gautam Debmath and Tahir on Wednesday at Ledo Bazaar, where they were caught red-handed with drugs.

During the operation, Ledo Police seized 4.84 grams of suspected drugs, a Yamaha bike with bearing registration number AR 12 227, and a sum of cash from the apprehended individuals.

Training on cultivation methods of flowers held

HT Correspondent

MORIGAON, June 26: A special training on cultivation methods and market addition of Tuberose (Rajanigandha flower) and Flamingo Lily (Anthurium flower) was organized under the State Floriculture Mission in collaboration with Morigaon district agriculture department.

The training was held at the district agriculture office auditorium on Wednesday. About 35 farmers were given training on how to become self-dependable by cultivating Anthurium and Tuberose flowers with modern methods. The trainers provided training to the farmers on weather and climate required for Anthurium and Tuberose cultivation, soil properties, varieties, market prices and demand, precautions and processes to be followed for cultivation, use of fertilizers and pesticides etc.

The training programme was moderated by the assistant director of agriculture dept Tapan Kumar Brahma in presence of the district agriculture officer Ashok Kumar Sharma.

Minister Singhal takes stock of Arun TE rape case

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, June 26: Assam cabinet minister cum Dhekiajuli MLA Ashok Singhal visited the Polish Basti-Arun Tea Estate area under the Dhekiajuli PS and Dhekiajuli LAC in Sonitpur District on Wednesday to take stock of the overall situation arisen following a rape incident of a 15 year old school going girl of Arun TE on Tuesday.

He also visited the victim's house and assured to provide adequate compensation to the fateful girl child. He also interacted with a

Morigaon district admin action on birth certificate irregularities

HT Correspondent

MORIGAON, June 26: Irregularities in the application process for obtaining permission for delayed birth certificates have been uncovered in Morigaon, following a preliminary investigation by the district administration.

Several instances of suspected document forgery in application for permission for delayed birth certificates have come to light, prompting swift action. It has been underscored that obtaining a delayed birth certificate (birth with more than one year) necessitates prior permission from the district administration, without which no hospital is authorized to issue such certificates.

Applicants must submit seven essential documents, including affidavits, Gaonburha certificates, medical certificates, non-availability certificates (Form 10), school certificate (for children above six years), and proof of address, along with their application.

Executive magistrate, Morigaon district administration initiated an inquiry based on suspicions regarding several submitted certificates. The inquiry uncovered instances where applicants had allegedly presented falsified documents in the name of Baralimari State Dispensary and Laharighat Block Primary Health Centre, as well as school certificates from Tengaguri MV School. Additionally, on physical verification by

executive magistrate, Morigaon district administration, it was uncovered that Moirabari Community Health Centre issued medical certificates, and non-availability certificates (Form 10) mentioning issue number with dates but the hospital authorities failed to show the official record thereby fooling the district administration. Subsequent, the district administration's filled an FIR, a case has been registered at Laharighat police station, resulting in the arrest of two individuals, Moinul Haque and Nurul Islam, on charges related to document forgery, with efforts underway to locate others involved.

Morigaon district commissioner, Devasish Sharma, IAS lamented the incident as unfortunate, emphasizing that such breaches of trust would face unwavering consequences. He asserted that no one would evade justice for falsifying documents. "Such incidents will not be tolerated," he asserted, underscoring the district administration's resolve to crack down on fraudulent practices. He affirmed the district administration's commitment to vigilantly monitor and take legal action against those involved.

Sharma issued a stern warning to document fraudsters, urging them to abstain from illicit activities. He expressed confidence that thorough investigations would uncover more instances of malpractice in the future.

British Colonial Govt during the pre independence promulgated laws in favour of the rulers

Awareness meeting on 'New Criminal Law 2023' held

HT Correspondent

JAGIROAD, June 26: 'The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagrik Suraksha Sanhita and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam that will replace the Indian Penal Code, 1860; Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898; and the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, respectively, received President Droupadi Murmu's assent on December 25, 2023 and will come into force from July 1.' Explaining this in an awareness meeting organised by Jagiroad Police in conjunction with the Jagiroad Nagarik Committee on Wednesday at Kalamandir premises, with an objectives to aware the people about the new law, the superintendent of police, Morigaon Hemanta Kumar Das said that Indian people are accustomed to run the society with the help of Indian laws. The British Colonial Government during the pre independence promulgated laws in favour of the rulers and not in the interest of the public and now following the drastic change in the society, the Government of India has enacted the new



law to maintain peace and tranquility in the society, the SP said.

The SP called upon one and all particularly the upcoming youths to adhere to the new laws for a healthy social environment. The meeting chaired by Nagarik Committee president Prabir Deka was also addressed by working president Jitendra Kumar Deka and was attended by Jagiroad Development Authority Chairman, Dibyajit Neog, Jagiroad Higher Secondary School managing committee president Manoranjan Tamuly, Jonbeel

Development Committee secretary Jursingh Bordoloi, Nagarik Committee secretary Manindra Deka, VDP president Ashok Deka, CO, vdo Puspendra Mahanta among others. The meeting felicitated Asom Saurav, nriyita guru Nadiram Deuri and two students Sristy Kandarpa and Riya Deka who secured 94 and 93 percent respectively in the recently announced class 12 board examination.

Earlier the objectives of the meeting was explained by OC, Jagiroad PS Bhadreswar Pegu.

₹ 50 lakh property tax due in Sivasagar

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, June 26: As a Local Self Government, the Sivasagar Municipality Board (SMB) is perennially beleaguered by financial crisis for many reasons. Some of them are irrational appointment policy, financial mismanagement, politics over primary duties and responsibilities towards the taxpayers, and awful lack of gut to raise tax from the influential section. While it takes immediate action against petty traders and vendors on the roadside for crossing the line, it gets jittery when serving notices to big business establishments, Nursing Homes, Multi-stores shopping complexes, Hotels, etc., and government offices for giving urban property tax.

Mrinali Konwar, the chairperson of the SMB on Wednesday had to answer a barrage of questions on these issues from the media persons in a press meeting in her office.

Mrinali Konwar said that the SMB has over the years an accumulated property tax of around ₹ 11 crores due to it from various houses, companies, and government offices. But despite repeated notices, some of the houses and establishments do not even bother to send them a reply. The SMB is yet to receive ₹ 47, 65, 214 property tax from the 571 government of-

ice buildings within the municipality area. After receiving a sizeable amount this year's tax collection has gone up to over ₹ 6 crores and yet it is not free of anxiety as the monthly expenditure on salary head alone is ₹ 55 lakhs (annually ₹ 6.6 Crore).

Regarding traffic congestion in the town, Konwar said, the SMB has made plans to widen the roads. However the contractor dug up both sides of the AT Road from the ASTC Tinali to the KPM Chalioli which has created a chaos along the road with no place for parking vehicles, and uprooting the roadside vendors. The nursing homes and the shopping malls in the town violate the civic rules freely by discouraging parking cars in their limited parking slots while creating huge traffic congestion on the main roads. The footpath built along the Boarding road from KPM Chalioli, the repairing works of the footpaths and the pool constructions in Babupatty, etc development works are being done with financial grants from the 15th Finance Commission. Therefore, the SMB does not have much problem in attending to the civic problems of the taxpayers like flash flood, footpaths encroachment by vendors etc, but the SMB remains indifferent to them.

Don't forget to love yourself
- Soren Kirkegaard

Julian Assange's Journey

Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, has long been a contentious figure, eliciting strong reactions from governments and media alike. Branded a rapist and an information terrorist, Assange has faced relentless condemnation from establishment media and political figures. In particular, the administrations in Washington and London have aggressively pursued his downfall, accusing him of endangering lives and national security with his revelations. The 2016 U.S. presidential election further amplified the vitriol against Assange. The Hillary Clinton campaign accused him of being a Russian asset, colluding with Donald Trump to undermine the Democratic candidate. This narrative was bolstered by major media outlets such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Guardian, which echoed these claims without substantial evidence. Amid this onslaught, Assange's defense was sustained by a dedicated group of supporters. Independent media organizations provided platforms for human rights lawyers, journalists, and intellectuals to defend Assange against what they saw as a concerted effort to discredit him. His wife, Stella Assange, emerged as a key figure, tirelessly campaigning for his release. High-profile supporters, including former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, former European Parliament members Clare Daly and Mick Wallace, singer Roger Waters of Pink Floyd, public intellectual Noam Chomsky, and writer Arundhati Roy, lent their voices to the cause.

Today, as Assange returns to Australia a free man, his plea bargain casts a harsh light on the Anglo-American establishment. His release is a stark reminder of the lengths to which powerful entities will go to suppress truth and justice, especially when their interests are at stake. Assange's work has consistently exposed the dark underbelly of endless wars, driven not by the desire for peace but by the quest for profit. As he famously said, "The point is to take money out of the tax bases of the United States and Europe, route it through Iraq, Afghanistan, etc., and back into the hands of the transnational security elite; the goal is not a successful war, but an endless war." He also asserted, "Behind every war are the lies the media told to justify it." These insights have made Assange a target, but they have also inspired a global movement of admirers who value transparency and accountability. His return to Australia will be closely watched by supporters and detractors alike, as the world waits to see if he will continue his journalistic endeavors.

As the world observes the next chapter of Assange's life, it is crucial to remember the broader implications of his work. His publications have not only exposed the lies that lead to war but also highlighted the essential need for a free press that can hold power to account. In a time when misinformation and propaganda are rampant, Assange's commitment to revealing the truth serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of transparency in a democratic society. The fight for Julian Assange's freedom is emblematic of the larger struggle for press freedom and the right to information. His journey underscores the risks faced by those who dare to challenge the status quo, and his resilience serves as an inspiration to all who value truth and justice. As he reintegrates into Australian society, the world will be watching, hopeful that his voice will continue to resonate in the ongoing battle for a more informed and just world.

NEET scandal exposes flaws in India's centralized exam system

The nation must reconsider its approach to centralizing entrance exams, given the significant issues plaguing major tests like JEE, NEET, CUET, and UGC-NET, which have raised serious concerns about the National Testing Agency (NTA).

The recent NEET scandal and the abrupt cancellation of the NET exam have sent shockwaves through the youth, casting doubts on the credibility of the testing agency. It is concerning to note that within 48 hours of the NEET results, four students tragically ended their lives. Isn't it time for the country to reconsider the concept of One Nation-One Test? These exams were intended to minimize the need for coaching institutes, yet current events suggest a critical reassessment is necessary.

The financial burden of conducting the NEET (National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test), formerly known as the Pre-Medical Exam, is staggering but often overlooked. In 2024 alone, the cost exceeded Rs 400 crore, with 2,406,079 candidates paying Rs 1700 each to register. Despite these substantial fees, transparency regarding the NTA's profits remains unclear. It's widely understood that entrance exam fees typically exceed operational costs, prompting questions about whether this amounts to an unintended tax on aspiring students seeking educational opportunities.

In NEET 2024, there are roughly 108,915 MBBS seats spread across 706 medical colleges. Government institutions offer about 55,000 of these seats, while private colleges make up the remainder. The inclusion of private medical colleges raises concerns due to their often opaque fee structures and reliance on capitation fees. Furthermore, questions surround the quality of faculty in both private and some newly established state medical colleges, with deficiencies noted in specialized areas like cardiology and neurology.

When factoring in coaching



fees, travel expenses, and other related costs, the financial burden of NEET and similar exams balloons by several hundred crores, posing a significant drain on the economy and causing immense stress for parents and society alike. For instance, the renowned coaching hub in Kota alone operates a business estimated at Rs 600 crore annually. Additionally, the cancellation of UGC-NET, which attracted nine lakh aspirants, underscores the serious issue of paper leaks, with reports indicating that each leaked question paper was sold for Rs 5,000 through platforms like Telegram to eager students.

Allegations of exorbitant fees ranging from Rs 30-35 lakh per student for NEET, coupled with reports of leaked papers circulated a day before the exam, have ignited what could be one of the largest scams spanning multiple cities including Vadodra, Godhra, and Patna. This scandal has sparked widespread protests across the country, revealing a stark reality where efforts to combat black money generation seem futile.

Furthermore, various recruitment processes have been marred by scandals, with 13 cases reported in Uttar Pradesh, numerous incidents in West Bengal, and the infamous VYA-PAM scam in Madhya Pradesh standing out as some of the worst examples. These irregularities persist amidst record high unemployment rates, exacerbating concerns over the integrity of our institutions and the fairness of opportunities for the youth.

The NEET scandal recently

management at the NTA, while BJP MP Rakesh Sinha calls for stringent legal action against any collusion between paper setters and coaching institutes. These revelations have sent shockwaves through the system. The critique extends to questioning the NTA's competency in conducting exams, a role traditionally handled capably by autonomous professional bodies like the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, which have a history of maintaining integrity and selecting students based on genuine aptitude. However, issues have surfaced recently with several national institutions, notably CUET, highlighting challenges in maintaining these standards.

Following the NEET debacle, the only response weeks later has been

the cancellation of the examination for students seeking grace marks. This highlights concerns about the NTA's oversight, suggesting it operates with minimal control. These tests serve as pivotal gateways to careers and future professional success.

Any infiltration of malpractices and financial influence jeopardizes the nation's future. It raises questions about the ethical standards of those resorting to deceitful means. The execution has been criticized as poorly managed. Notably, the NTA does not directly administer these tests; instead, it relies heavily on private sector service providers, IT firms, and outsourcing infrastructure organizations. This setup calls into question the NTA's capability to ensure robust cyber-security across thousands of examination centers.

The casual hiring of investigators and other staff has left the examination system vulnerable to potential attacks, theft, and compromise. There is growing suspicion surrounding nationwide coaching organizations, prompting a reconsideration of the exam structure. Are these organizations merely providing

guidance, or have they trans-

formed into corrupt entities focused solely on profit? Perhaps it's time for the country to eliminate this organized malpractice altogether. Examinations should be redesigned to empower students without the need for external coaching, ensuring fairness and integrity in the assessment process.

Devendra Singh, the National convener of Sanskriti Uththan Nyas, along with the Shiksha Bachao Andolan founded by Dinanath Batra and Atul Kothari, have both called for the cancellation of the NEET examination.

Excessive centralization may inadvertently foster irregularities. India's diversity spans across diverse state boards, languages, and educational systems. Each professional institution also has unique requirements for selecting candidates. Historically, decentralized selection systems managed by these institutions themselves have seldom been questioned.

The NTA urgently requires structural reforms to manage the complexities of professional examinations effectively. Minister for Education Dharmendra Pradhan has indicated that a decision on this matter will be made soon. The introduction of CUET (Central University Entrance Test) has faced widespread criticism from the entire university system, as it mandates testing even for subjects with limited demand. This influx of applicants has disrupted academic schedules in recent years. Many argue that returning autonomy to universities for conducting their own admissions would alleviate over-centralization, reduce delays, and lessen the stress on students and their families.

Academics should collaborate to minimize centralized admission exams and promote a more decentralized process. This approach not only ensures a cleaner and fairer system but also enhances India's global standing in education, free from the tarnish of compromised systems. (The writer can be reached at joysaikia1990@gmail.com)

Will there be another Sam Manekshaw?



By: R.K. Sinha

Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw became a legend in his lifetime. Whenever Sam Manekshaw's name comes up, the 1971 India-Pakistan war comes to our mind. He was leading the Indian Army in that war. Sam Manekshaw became the Chief of Army Staff of India in 1969, and the culmination of his illustrious career was the glorious victory in the 1971 war against Pakistan. It was after this war only the East Pakistan became an independent Bangladesh.

Sam Manekshaw paved the way for India's military victory in 1971. It is said that it was India's first victory in any war in thousands of years. It changed the map of the world. 93,000 Pakistani soldiers surrendered before Indian forces.

Sam Manekshaw ensured that Pakistani prisoners of war (POWs) were treated with dignity under the rules of Geneva Convention. Those Pakistani prisoners of war were allowed to celebrate Eid in India. They were given a copy of the Quran and gifts when they returned to their country.

New learn about the ungrateful act of Pakistan.

Captain Saurabh Kalia was the first martyr of the Kargil war. His sacrifice penned the initial lines of the Kargil war. At the mere age of 22, he endured unimaginable pain for 22 days at the hands of the enemy.

Pakistanis crossed all

boundaries of inhumanity with Saurabh Kalia, even gouging out his eyes and shooting him.

After training from the IMA in December 1998, he was posted in February 1999 in the 4 Jat Regiment in Kargil. When the news of his death arrived, he had been in the army for barely four months. On May 14th, Captain Saurabh Kalia and his five soldiers reached Bajrang Top.

After that, Pakistan captured them and handed over their bodies after 22 days. Sam Manekshaw's blood must have boiled seeing what happened to Saurabh Kalia.

After the 1971 war, Time magazine wrote, "A Parsi (Sam Manekshaw) led the military campaign of the 'Hindu' India." The head of the Eastern Command of the army that liberated Bangladesh was a Sikh (Lieutenant General J.S. Arora), and the plan for the campaign was devised by a Jewish (Lt. General J.F. Jacob).

Sam Manekshaw was a brave soldier and war strategist, but his tongue often slipped, which caused him a lot of damage. He was always keen on taking the credit for the victory in the 1971 war with Pakistan, knowingly or unknowingly.

In his recently published book - "@75- As I saw it: A Reporter Remembers", senior journalist Mahendra Ved rightly wrote: "Sam Manekshaw sometimes spoke without thinking. It also harmed him. After the 1971 war, a woman journalist asked him, 'Sir, if you were leading the

Pakistani army, who would have won the war?" Manekshaw's soldier-like, but non-diplomatic, answer was, "Pakistan would have won the war!"

Everything went topsy-turvy. Demands were made to strip him of the rank of Field Marshal. Although this was said in jest, he stood by his answer. It is said that this remark made the country's then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi quite angry.

Sam Manekshaw was critical of political leadership in private conversations, often being its victim. One of his memorable quips was: "Sam Bahadur chuckle: As he [Manekshaw] rightly surmised once: 'I wonder whether those of our political masters who have been put in charge of the defence of the country can distinguish a mortar from a motor, a gun from a howitzer, a guerrilla from a go-rilla - although a great many of them in the past have resembled the latter.'"

Surely, he had no political ambitions. A visiting American diplomat asked Sam when he was going to take over. Sam retorted: "As soon as General Westmoreland takes over in your country."

After independence, Sam Manekshaw was involved in all major military operations. He planned the Kashmir operation (1947-49) under the instructions of Jawaharlal Nehru and Home Minister Sardar Patel.

After the defeat in the 1962 war with China, he openly told Pandit Nehru

that we lost due to poor leadership.

Our soldiers fought very bravely. So it is very clear that Sam Manekshaw held Nehru's leadership responsible for the defeat in that war. Not only Sam Manekshaw, but the whole country considers Nehru the villain of the 1962 war. Seeing the life-size statue of V.K. Krishna Menon in the capital, many Indians are reminded of the China war.

In that war, our soldiers fought without adequate warm clothing in the severe cold. They also did not have the necessary weapons to fight the enemy. But, Menon continued to receive respect from Nehru and later Indira Gandhi. V.K. Krishna Menon was a very arrogant and stubborn man. When Nehru appointed Menon as Defense Minister in 1957, the country welcomed his appointment.

Hope was pinned on the duo of Menon and Army Chief Kodandera Subayya Thimayya to strengthen the defence sector. But this did not happen. Menon would listen to no one. After the death of Krishna Menon on October 10, 1974, former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi dedicated a road in the heart of the capital in Menon's name.

China had occupied 37,244 square kilometers of India's territory in the 1962 war. Nehru and Menon were directly responsible for the 1962 debacle. Sam Manekshaw did not say anything wrong by indirectly blaming Nehru for the loss in the China war.

Of course, heroes of the battlefield like Sam Manekshaw are not born again and again. India would always remain indebted to him. Sam Manekshaw would continue to inspire the Indian army. (The author is a senior editor, columnist and former Rajya Sabha MP)

Bengal BJP to deal with its fault lines to do better in 2026 assembly polls

By: Tirthankar Mitra

Roundly defeated by ruling Trinamool Congress in recently held Lok Sabha elections, BJP, Congress and CPI(M) leaderships in West Bengal have gone into brainstorming sessions to find out the cause of their respective electoral reverses. Though all the three parties are seeking to strike deeper roots with a larger section of the people, the game plans to hit the "come back trails" differ.

With 12 candidates of the BJP winning from this state, the saffron camp is chalking out plans to consolidate these victories with an eye on the 2026 Assembly elections in the state. Meeting a larger section of the people in all these Assembly seats making up each parliamentary constituency and propagating the BJP's political philosophy in a language which they can understand will be the cornerstone of this policy; it was learnt from state BJP sources.

The language in which the people are to be addressed needs to be freed of Hindi words which are unfamiliar to the ears of the Bengali voters. Both meetings at local levels and social media interactions will be the twin tools to reach out to the voters. An internal analysis showed that in 2024 Lok Sabha polls, the BJP led in 90 assembly segments out of the total seats of 294 as against 77 won in 2021 assembly polls. So that way, though the Lok Sabha seats had gone down by six in 2024 polls, the prospects in assembly polls in 2026 look slightly better.

Zeroing in on the words of the saffron lexicon which are unfamiliar to the people of West Bengal, it has been pointed out that Bengali equivalents of these words are to be used to embed the saffron camp ideology in the mindset of the people of the state. It has been suggested instead of "karyakarta", the word "neta" or leader should be used.

Instead of "suchana", it is advisable to state that a person would be informed of a specific issue, it was learnt. Apart from this, campaigns highlighting achievements of the BJP-led NDA and shortcomings of TMC dispensation should be conducted statewide.

Such campaigns are to be marked out by its widespread nature and frequency. Several national level BJP leaders have pointed out that the party could have retained the 18 constituencies it had won in 2019 Lok Sabha elections and added a few more this year had a more vigorous campaign been carried throughout the past five years instead of being active only in pre Lok Sabha polls months.

Financial probity of several leaders have come under the scanner after complaints from candidates and booth level activists reached the national leadership of the BJP after the Lok Sabha polls. Several activists manning polling booths alleged that they did not receive the sum promised to them.

Things have come to such a pass that BJP nominee for Krishnanagar, Amrita Roy alleged she was clueless about spending of party funds in her constituency during election though she was made to sign several cheques. Roy was one of the few BJP nominees in the state when Prime Minister Narendra Modi rang up to encourage.

The attendance of huge crowds in the rallies of Prime Minister, Modi and other senior BJP leaders not being reflected at the ballot boxes have raised queries about the organisational skills of the state leadership. Several state leaders have been grilled by their national counterparts in BJP on this issue.

With the strong presence of central para-military forces before and during elections, the plea of terror tactics of some TMC backed goons preventing BJP supporters from casting their votes lack credibility, it was pointed out. In this backdrop, the state leadership has been asked to beef up the organisation both in terms of motivation and numbers with an eye on the 2026 elections, sources stated. The central BJP leadership is expected to make its own review of Bengal party's performance shortly and on that basis, the state BJP will adopt future programmes to fight better in 2026 assembly polls.

As regards the Congress, an electoral alliance between Congress and the Left rear CPI(M) in West Bengal is under scanner as national leadership of Congress is playing ball with TMC to corner BJP. Though most of the state Congress leaders are opposed to TMC, their position has weakened after PCC chief Adhir Ranjan Choudhury whose opposition to TMC is well known, was defeated in his pocket borough Behrampore.

The CPI(M) which is staunchly opposed to TMC is also having second thoughts about continuing its alliance with Congress. Ever since the alliance came into being in 2016, Congress has reaped the most advantages from it. In 2024 Lok Sabha polls also, the Congress got one seat while the CPI(M) and other parties of the Left Front got no seat just like 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

But as things stand now, the state Congress will be launching agitations against the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre, sources said. It will however,

steer clear of stirs against the Trinamool state government.

Congress -TMC ties received fresh wind in it's sails after a closed door meeting between chief minister Mamata Banerjee and senior Congress leader P. Chidambaram at Nabanna, the state secretary last week. The leaders remained tight-lipped though Banerjee is reported to have received a request to campaign for Priyanka Gandhi at Wayanad.

The Congress is seeking a proactive role from TMC against BJP at the Centre. Though both CPI(M) and TMC are part of the INDIA coalition with Congress, the Congress seeks to downplay it's proximity with the Left in the days to come.

With only the Malda (South) seat in it's kitty after the Lok Sabha elections, the Congress national leadership wants its counterpart in the state to cement its alliance with TMC at the state level. There has been reports of a drop in the animosity between Congress and TMC activists in the wake of Chidambaram's visit.

With its influence on the downside in West Bengal, the state Congress unit has ridden on the crest of organisational strength of the CPI(M) all these years. Despite central leadership wooing the Trinamool Congress at the national level, the state Congress is continuing its tie up with the Left in the coming four assembly by polls. Since Adhir Chowdhury may be replaced as the PCC president shortly, the future of the Congress -CPI(M) ties will be decided only after the takeover by the new president.

As regards the Bengal CPI(M), there was total gloom in the post-election meeting of the state committee held last week. There was no light at the end of the tunnel. The leadership took no lessons from the 2019 Lok Sabha polls as also 2021 assembly elections. The same reasons were mentioned - the party was the victim of the TMC-BJP binary.

However, the party leaders at least agreed that the CPI(M) has lost its political base among the most marginalized sections of the people in Bengal who stood by the party in substantial number even up to 2016 assembly elections. The downturn of the CPI(M) has been unstoppable in the last eight years.

For the Bengal CPI(M), the party is still not reconciled that Mamata Banerjee has hijacked the Left agenda and implementing it vigorously. The CPI(M) has to work for fresh agenda and carry out massive organizational rejig if the Party wants to come out of the Zero syndrome in 2026 assembly elections. (IPA Service)

Climate change driven shrimp farming in the Sundarbans is disrupting ecology, livelihoods

By: Niladry Sarkar

In the small village of Nandrapur, located in the Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve in West Bengal, a mere six-foot-wide lane separates a vast wetland used for aquaculture from a cluster of poorly constructed shanties. One of these shanties is home to Roshanara Piyada, her husband, Saidulla Piyada, and their three children.

"Every time it rains, saline water from the fishery overflows and floods our home," said 31-year-old Roshanara while washing dishes at a freshwater pond next to the fishery.

"We used to work as agricultural laborers before aquaculture started on this land. Now it has become tough to make ends meet," said Saidulla, pointing to the wide landscape of aquaculture ponds with a thin line of greenery at the other end, some 600-700 metres away. "That is mangroves. They were closer, but these aquaculture people keep destroying them every year."

The land where they once worked was converted into a fishery a decade ago, an increasing trend in the region. The landowners leased the land to an aquaculture operator who now employs his own workers, leaving Saidulla, Roshanara and their neighbors unemployed.

"We are called to either till the land or build embankments before they refill the water in the fisheries at the beginning of each season," said 48-year-old Saidulla. "But even that work is drying up now as the fishery people use heavy machinery," Roshanara added.

Their neighbors in the village and across other parts of the Sundarbans share similar stories. The Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve, located in West Bengal and the neighboring

country of Bangladesh, is one of the world's largest mangrove forests at the confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers, forming the world's largest river delta at the edge of the Bay of Bengal.

Agriculture to aquaculture Agriculture and saline water aquaculture were traditional livelihoods in the region. However, unseasonal rainfall, rising temperatures and sea levels and frequent tropical cyclones have adversely affected agriculture, leading to a rapid rise in saline water aquaculture. The increasing global demand for shrimp has further incentivised this shift.

India is one of the largest shrimp exporters in the world. While Andhra Pradesh, a state in southern coastal India, is the largest producer of shrimp in India, West Bengal, particularly the, leads in tiger shrimp cultivation.

As a result, aquaculture has steadily increased in the Sundarbans. According to a 2021 paper in Springer's Environment, Development, and Sustainability journal, the total aquaculture area in the Sundarbans expanded from 31,794 hectares (78,564 acres or 3.59% of the entire Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve) in 1999 to 51,587 hectares (127,474 acres or 5.82% of the entire Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve) in 2019.

The paper also notes a significant transition from agriculture to aquaculture, with 10,536 hectares (3.71% of Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve's farmland) repurposed between 1999 and 2009 and an additional 13,471 hectares (6.02% of Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve's farmland) repurposed between 2009 and 2019.

This repurposing does not include mudflats and some mangrove forest areas, which

totaled around 3,320 hectares (8,203 acres) between 1999 and 2019.

"Increasing salt incrustations of soil and groundwater have made agriculture unviable in the Sundarbans, in both India and Bangladesh," said Abhra Chanda, co-author of the 2021 paper and an assistant professor at the School of Oceanographic Studies in Kolkata-based Jadavpur University.

"Continuous changes in freshwater discharge patterns, climate change, rising sea levels and frequent tropical cyclones have altered the socioecological landscape of the Sundarbans," he said. "Soil characteristics have changed, affecting crop production and cropping patterns."

The agricultural system in the Sundarbans was severely disrupted following the 2009 Aila cyclone, according to a 2023 paper in the International Journal of Bioresource Science. The 2020 super cyclone Amphan is also believed to have rendered nearly 17,800 hectares of agricultural land uncultivable for several years.

Today, brackish water polyculture of shrimp combined with finfish is the most prevalent aquaculture practice in the Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve. However, despite the natural forces, this transition to brackish water aquaculture was not entirely autonomous for the local people in the Sundarbans.

Dark side of shrimp farming The land Roshanara, her husband and their neighbors used to till is under government ownership and leased to residents.

"The so-called owner of that land was allowed to cultivate it with the blessings of local leaders from the ruling political party," said Apurba Das, a local environmental activist. He was talking about the previous regime.

"After a change in government in 2011 and with the increasing trend of aquaculture, local leaders from the ruling party turned this land into a wetland for shrimp cultivation. Since existing agricultural laborers like Roshanara and her husband were not skilled in aquaculture, shrimp cultivators brought in workers from outside," Das added.

Similar stories echo across the Sundarbans, where many people complain they have lost control over their traditional sources of livelihood. Numerous individuals report that their land has been taken for shrimp farming through various means.

Recently, the arrest of two aides of a local leader of the ruling Trinamool Congress highlighted the system in the Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve, where powerful land mafias have used every method at their disposal to gain control of shrimp cultivation.

Mongabay spoke with many farmers who claimed local land mafias grabbed their land. For example, Jagannath Singh, a 56-year-old owner of 0.2 hectares in Boyermari village, used to cultivate paddy. He and his neighbors pooled their small parcels and leased a total of 0.9 hectares to a person who wanted to invest in shrimp cultivation. They received the money at the rate of \$905 (at the current conversion rate of 83.08 rupees per dollar) per hectare for the first two years.

"But after two years, the investor informed us that the ownership of that 0.9 hectares of land had changed. He was right, as records at the government office showed that a local ruling party leader had become the owner of our land. Despite repeated appeals, I am yet to access my land or receive rent for the last two years," he alleged.

When asked why he did not

opt for shrimp cultivation himself, he said, "Shrimp cultivation requires a large investment. Being a small farmer, I did not have that much capital."

Singh's neighbor Amar Singh has also suffered a similar fate. Amar is a sharecropper, which gives him hereditary rights over a piece of land originally owned by someone else due to local land reform. He has the right to work on the land and receive a share of the produce. But now, he gets nothing, as one day, he discovered that the land ownership had changed.

Some farmers who ventured into shrimp farming after seeing the potential for good profits and receiving assurances from local dealers said they now regret their decisions. Kolpona Mal and her husband, Noni Gopal Mal, own around 2 hectares of land.

"We converted 1.46 hectares [3.6 acres] of land for shrimp cultivation under a five-year contract. We signed a contract with a local dealer from a company that sells shrimp larvae, food and medicines. He secured several pieces of land adjacent to ours and started a huge fishery," 36-year-old Kolpona said.

"The dealer brought his employees and machinery. He gave us money at the rate of \$1,216 [at the current conversion rate] per hectare. It was supposed to continue for five years, and then the company dealer assured us he would restore our land for agriculture."

It seemed like a shortcut to good money for the Mals and their land-owning neighbors until a virus struck in the third year, killing all aquacultural produce. "They stopped paying us and deserted our land in 2022 without restoring it. We later found out they were not following proper scientific guidelines. After they left, we



tried to regrow paddy, but the yields were poor," Kolpona added.

On enquiring about the dealer's whereabouts, the local village panchayat (village council) acknowledged that the aquaculture racket was rampant until a few years ago. "But now we don't have any complaints from villagers. It is sad that those who lost money have still been unable to recover it," said Alokesh Purkait, deputy chief of the village panchayat.

Economic drive, ecological impact

A professor and director of the Jadavpur University's School of Oceanographic Studies, Tuhin Das highlighted a major drawback in aquaculture practices in Sundarbans: the lack of technical knowledge and proper scientific training.

"For example, the cultivators often lack technical know-how regarding soil and water quality, as well as the usage of chemicals. They rely on traditional knowledge passed down through generations, often without utilising measuring equipment. Sometimes, they suffer losses due to virus infections, rendering the soil and water uncultivable for years," Das explained.

Furthermore, Das noted that heavy global demands have led many companies in India to venture into the business of selling shrimp larvae, foods and medicines. This pressure, combined with the eagerness of local individuals to seize opportunities for quick profits, has given rise to unchecked and unscientific forms of brackish water aquaculture.

Beyond salinity, economic factors primarily drive this rapid conversion to aquaculture. In 2022, a collaborative study by researchers from Jadavpur University, Sweden and the United Kingdom found that the primary motivation for the swift increase in aquaculture is economic gain, ranging from approximately \$2,023-\$6,540 per hectare annually.

Das warned that the consequences of this unscientific aquaculture in Sundarbans will be felt in the long term.

"Heavy salinisation resulting from lateral seepage from the aqua ponds will diminish soil fertility on agricultural lands and may disrupt the lives and livelihoods of the common people by reducing vegetation," he cautioned. "This will inevitably alter the local microclimate and the region itself, with lasting impacts."

The study says that uncontrolled aquaculture land use may significantly derail key United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly goals 15.3 and 15.1, which focus on combating desertification and preserving land and water ecosystems.

Given the heavy global demand for shrimp and Sundarbans' vast potential for cultivation, unscientific and exploitative activity is poised to escalate.

While individuals like Kolpona Mal and Jagannath Singh, who own land, aspire to revert to agriculture, Roshanara and her husband, Saidulla, hope to acquire the necessary skills for working on a brackish water pond. *(Courtesy: Scroll.in)*

The importance of planting trees



By: Dipak Kurmi

This year's World Environment Day on June 5th carried a vital message under the theme "Our Land. Our Future." Hosted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the 2024 celebration shines a spotlight on the pressing issues of land restoration, desertification, and drought resilience.

As a nation grappling with degradation, desertification, and drought, Saudi Arabia is deeply invested in delivering solutions through initiatives like the Saudi Green Initiative, the Middle East Green Initiative, and the Global Land Restoration Initiative spearheaded by its G20 presidency. This leadership is crucial as we face a triple planetary crisis: climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste.

The crisis is taking a heavy toll on our ecosystems. Billions of hectares of land are degraded, affecting almost half of the world's population and threatening half of global GDP. Rural communities, smallholder farmers, and the extremely poor bear the brunt of this impact. However, land restoration can reverse this creeping tide of degradation, drought, and desertification.

Every dollar invested in restoration can generate up to \$30 in ecosystem services. Restoration boosts livelihoods, reduces poverty, and builds resilience against extreme weather events.

It also increases carbon storage, slowing climate change, and can avoid up to 60% of expected species extinctions if just 15% of land is restored and further conversion is halted.

But tackling land degradation alone is not enough. We must also address the drivers of this crisis, such as climate change. Last year, temperatures soared to unprecedented levels, with global impacts felt through heatwaves, storms, floods, and droughts. Restoring land without combating climate change would be counterproductive, underscoring the need for comprehensive action from nations like Saudi Arabia.

There is hope, however. Countries have pledged to restore one billion hectares, an area larger than China. If these promises are fulfilled, the impact will be monumental. Through World Environment Day and hosting the UN Convention to Combat Desertification's conference in December, Saudi Arabia can build momentum and drive action towards these restoration goals, slowing climate change, protecting nature, and boosting the livelihoods and food security of billions worldwide.

The importance of trees in this effort cannot be overstated. They clean the air we breathe, filter the water we drink, and provide habitat for over 80% of the world's terrestrial biodiversity. Forests provide jobs for over 1.6 billion people, absorb harmful carbon from the atmosphere, and are a key ingredient in 25% of all medicines.

Trees play a vital role in air purification, absorbing harmful pollutants like nitrogen oxides, ozone, and carbon monoxide, and sweeping up particles like dust and smoke. They act as carbon sinks, offsetting carbon emissions and reducing the effects of climate change.

Biodiversity thrives in the presence of trees. A single tree can be home to hundreds of species of insects, fungi, mosses, mammals, and plants. Different forest habitats, from young open forests to middle-aged and older forests, support a diverse array of wildlife, including bears, birds, salamanders, elk, and tree frogs.

Trees also help cool the planet by absorbing and storing harmful greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide in their trunks, branches, and leaves, while releasing oxygen back into the atmosphere. In cities, where more than 50% of the world's population resides, trees can reduce ambient temperatures by up to 8°C, mitigating pollution and overheating.

Beyond their environmental benefits, trees contribute to human health and well-being. Studies show that hospital patients with views of trees recover faster, and spending time in nature reduces stress and anxiety. Tree shade also protects us from harmful sun exposure.

Number of warm nights in Indian cities leapfrogged 32% during last decade due to climate change: Global report

By: Javanta Basu

The number of warm nights with minimum temperature — equivalent to night-time temperature — has increased critically throughout India over the last decade due to rising climatic impacts, a global study released on June 21 showed.

Jalpaiguri in the Doars of northern West Bengal tops the list of most impacted cities, along with cities in Assam. The study covered around 300 Indian cities with populations of over 100,000. It found that, on average, the number of hot nights has increased around 32 per cent due to climatic impacts.

Indian cities, on average, had 718 nights during 2014-2023 when the minimum temperature reached 25 degree Celsius (°C), according to the analysis carried out by non-profit Climate Central and consulting initiative Climate Trends. The figure is a benchmark for an unusually heated night, as sleep gets disturbed above that limit. According to the study, which considered 24 global climate assessment models, the average number of nights with 25°C or above comes down to 543-175 days and a whopping 32 per cent less if climate impact is taken out of the equation.

"Climate change has had a major influence on night-time temperatures above 25°C in India ... West Bengal and Assam are the regions that have been most impacted, with cities like Jalpaiguri, Guwahati, Silchar, Dibrugarh and Siliguri experiencing between 80 and 86 additional days each year above the 25°C threshold due to climate change, on average," reads the report, a copy of which is with this reporter.

"The urban heat island effect is most visible in the night-time temperatures. The high-rise buildings and concrete setup in the cities do not let the excess heat escape during the night," pointed out Roxy Mathew Koll, a climate scientist with Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, Pune.

"The trend, which you mention, is hundred per cent correct. The cities in eastern and Northeast India are most affected by climate change as expressed through heightened night-time temperature. The latest IPCC AR 6 reports also subscribe to the trend," said K J Ramesh,

former director general of the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

An alarming trend "Several studies have already established that by the turn of the century, without very large reductions in fossil fuel burning, night-time temperatures will not fall below 25°C in some places during hot weather ... If we do not act now, nights would continue to be hotter, longer and sleepless, especially for the vulnerable," observed Aarti Khosla, director of Climate Trends.

Climate change has had a major influence on night-time temperatures above 25°C in India, pointed out the new analysis. It added that approximately 50 to 80 days were added above this threshold by climate change each year between 2018 and 2023 in cities across Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, and Andhra Pradesh, apart from West Bengal and Assam.

The study shows that Jalpaiguri had the greatest number of unusually heated nights in India during the last decade due to the direct impact of climate change. The north Bengal city experienced 919 night-time temperatures exceeding 25°C on 868 days during 2014-2023 due to climate change.

Guwahati, Silchar and Dibrugarh in Assam occupied the second to fourth positions in terms of unusually hot nights in India in the last 10 years. Siliguri, Jalpaiguri's twin city in north Bengal, came fifth with 810 nights crossing 25°C attributable to climate change.

Overall, 16 cities crossed 25°C for 920 days during the period and 11 other cities during 919 days. The list includes metros like Chennai and Kolkata as well as cities like Port Blair, Puducherry, Puri, Surat, Visakhapatnam and Patna among others.

Several Bengal cities also are part of the list namely Haldia, Howrah, Medinipur and Uluberia. Among metro cities, Mumbai saw the highest changes in night-time temperatures. The city experienced an additional 65 days of warmer nights per year due to global warming.

IMD sources point out that the minimum temperature in Jalpaiguri shows a slightly increasing curve since the early twentieth century. However, they ob-

served that data of a longer duration is required to establish the climate connection categorically.

However, locals vindicate the finding. "The finding is consistent with our ground level experience in north Bengal with heat and humidity combining to push up the real feel of the heat," said Animesh Bose, a Siliguri-based environmentalist.

The report also shows that if the benchmark of 20°C of minimum temperature is considered as indicator of a warm night, then Gangtok and Darjeeling enter the list too. They had 54 and 31 additional days added every year on average over the last decade due to climatic impacts respectively.

These findings have come up during a week that saw new records for night-time heat in several Indian cities including Delhi where, on June 19, the all-time high minimum temperature record got shattered with the mercury reaching 35.2°C overnight.

On June 18, Alwar in Rajasthan had a minimum temperature of 37°C, the highest ever night-time temperature since records began in 1969.

The heatwave spell in India this year has been made hotter, frequent, and more likely by climate change, scientists found earlier.

Poor most vulnerable Anjal Prakash, a professor at the Indian School of Business and a former author with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the UN scientific body working on climate change, observed:

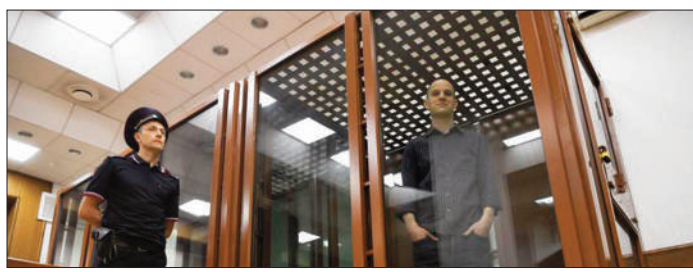
"As global warming adds an additional 50 to 80 warm nights annually in states such as West Bengal, Assam, Kerala and others, the impact on the poor and vulnerable sections of society, without access to proper cooling mechanisms, is profound."

"Hot nights make it harder for people to recover from the heat of the day, with wide-reaching and severe consequences. There is growing evidence that as night-time temperatures rise, human sleep is being eroded around the world (with a range of associated impacts)," states the report.

Physician Arup Halder, a sleep expert, pointed out that "when the environment or room temperature is warmer than usual, it's more difficult for the body to decrease its temperature for sleep onset ... that's why it is harder to fall and stay asleep in warmer temperatures."

Air pollution also plays a role in the trend, indicates the report. "A clear sky paves way for cooling during night time, but with an increase in pollution or cloudy sky, energy emitted by earth in the form of longwave radiation is trapped between the base of cloud and earth surface, leading to further rise in temperature," the report reads. *(Courtesy: Down To Earth)*

US journalist goes on trial in Russia on espionage charges that he and his employer deny



YEKATERINBURG (RUSSIA), June 26: Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich went on trial behind closed doors in Yekaterinburg on Wednesday, 15 months after his arrest in the Russian city on espionage charges that he, his employer and the US government vehemently deny.

The 32-year-old journalist appeared in the court in a glass defendants' cage, his head shaved and wearing a black-and-blue plaid shirt. A yellow padlock was attached to the cage.

Journalists were allowed into the courtroom for a few minutes before the proceedings were closed. Also briefly permitted in court were two consular officers from the US Embassy in Moscow, according to the embassy.

The next hearing for Gershkovich was set for August 13, court officials said.

Jay Conti, executive vice president and general counsel for Dow Jones, publisher of the Journal, described the trial as a sham in an interview with The Associated Press.

"He was an accredited journalist doing journalism, and this is a sham trial, bogus charges that are completely trumped up," Conti said.

The American-born son of immigrants from the USSR, Gershkovich is the first Western journalist arrested on espionage charges in post-Soviet Russia. Authorities arrested Gershkovich when he was on a reporting trip to Yekaterinburg, in the Ural Mountains, and claimed he was gathering secret information for the US. The State Department has declared him "wrongfully detained," thereby committing the government to assertively seek his release.

The Journal has worked diligently to keep the case in the public eye and it has become an issue in the combative months leading up to the US presidential election.

After his arrest on March 29, 2023, Gershkovich was held in Moscow's notoriously dismal Lefortovo Prison. He has appeared healthily during court hearings in which his appeals for release have been rejected.

"Evan has displayed remarkable resilience and strength in the face of this grim situation," US Ambassador Lynne Tracy said on the first anniversary of his arrest.

Gershkovich faces up to 20 years

in prison if the court finds him guilty, which is almost certain. Russian courts convict more than 99 per cent of the defendants who come before them, and prosecutors can appeal sentences that they regard as too lenient, and they even can appeal acquittals.

In addition, Russia's interpretation of what constitutes high crimes like espionage and treason is broad, with authorities often going after people who share publicly available information with foreigners and accusing them of divulging state secrets.

Paul Whelan, an American corporate security executive, was arrested in Moscow for espionage in 2018 and is serving a 16-year sentence.

Gershkovich's arrest came about a year after President Vladimir Putin pushed through laws that chilled journalists, criminalising criticism of what the Kremlin calls a "special military operation" in Ukraine and statements seen as discrediting the military.

Foreign journalists largely left the country after the laws' passage; many trickled back in subsequent months, but there were concerns about whether Russian authorities would act against them.

After he was detained, fears rose that Russia was targeting Americans as animosity between Moscow and Washington grew. Last year, Alsu Kurmasheva, a reporter with dual American-Russian citizenship for the US government-funded Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe was arrested for alleged violation of the law requiring so-called "foreign agents" to register.

Another dual national, Los Angeles resident Ksenia Karelina, is on trial, also in Yekaterinburg, on treason charges for allegedly raising money for a Ukrainian organisation that supplied arms and ammunition to Kyiv. Several Western reporters have been forced to leave after Gershkovich's arrest because Russia refused to renew their visas.

With Gershkovich's trial being closed, few details of his case may become public. But the Russian Prosecutor General's office said this month that he is accused of "gathering secret information" on orders from the CIA about Uralvagonzavod, a plant about 150 kilometres north of Yekaterinburg that produces and repairs tanks and other military equipment. (AP)

Assange's long battle with US prosecutors came to an unexpected end where a judge accepted his guilty plea on a single count of conspiracy

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange returns to Australia a free man after US legal battle ends

CANBERRA, June 26: WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange returned to his homeland Australia aboard a charter jet on Wednesday, hours after pleading guilty to obtaining and publishing US military secrets in a deal with Justice Department prosecutors that concludes a drawn-out legal saga.

The criminal case of international intrigue, which had played out for years, came to a surprise end in a most unusual setting with Assange, 52, entering his plea in a US district court in Saipan, the capital of the Northern Mariana Islands.

The American commonwealth in the Pacific is relatively close to Assange's native Australia and accommodated his desire to avoid entering the continental United States.

Assange raised his right fist as he emerged from the plane and his supporters at the Canberra airport cheered from a distance. Dressed in the same suit and tie he wore during his earlier court appearance, he embraced his wife Stella Assange and father John Shipton who were waiting on the tarmac.

He described it as a surreal and happy moment, his landing here in our national capital, Canberra," Prime Minister Anthony Albanese told reporters in Parliament House. "I had a very warm discussion with him this evening. He was very generous in his praise of the Australian government's efforts."

Assange was accompanied on the flights by Australian Ambassador to the United States Kevin Rudd and High Commissioner to the United Kingdom Stephen Smith, both of whom played key



roles in negotiating his freedom with London and Washington.

The flights were paid for by the "Assange team," Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles said, adding his government played a role in facilitating the transport.

Albanese told Parliament that Assange's freedom, after he spent five years in a British prison fighting extradition to the US, was the result of his government's "careful, patient and determined work."

Assange's lawyer Jennifer Robinson, speaking outside the Saipan court, thanked Albanese "for his statesmanship, his principled leadership and his diplomacy, which made this outcome possible."

It is unclear where Assange will go from Canberra and what his future plans are. His South African lawyer wife and mother of his two children, Stella Assange, has been in Australia for days awaiting her husband's release.

Another of Julian Assange's lawyers, Barry Pollack, expected his client would continue vocal campaigning.

"WikiLeaks's work will continue and Mr Assange, I have no doubt, will be a continuing force for freedom of speech and transparency in government," Pollack told reporters outside the Saipan court.

Assange's father John Shipton said ahead of his son's arrival that he hoped the iconoclastic internet publisher was coming home to the "great beauty of ordinary life."

"He will be able to spend quality time with his wife, Stella, and his two children, be able to walk up and down the beach and feel the sand through his toes in winter, that lovely chill," Shipton told Australian Broadcasting Corp.

The plea deal required Assange to admit guilt to a single felony count but also permitted him to return to Australia without any time in an American prison. The judge sentenced him to the five years he'd already spent behind bars in the UK fighting extradition to the US on an Espionage Act indictment that could have carried a lengthy prison sentence in the event of a conviction. He was held up for seven years before that in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London.

The conclusion enables both sides to claim a degree of satisfaction. The Justice Department, facing a defendant who had already served substantial jail time, was able to resolve — without trial — a case that raised thorny legal issues and that might never have reached a jury at all given the plodding pace of the extradition process. (AP)

The death toll rises to 22 a day after Kenyan protesters stormed parliament over plan to raise taxes



NAIROBI, June 26: Kenyans faced the lingering smell of tear gas and military in the streets on Wednesday, a day after protesters stormed parliament over a tax plan that would increase the cost of living — an act of defiance that President William Ruto called an "existential" threat. At least 22 people were killed, a human rights group said.

The capital, Nairobi, has seen protests in the past, but activists and others warned the stakes are more dangerous after the biggest assault on Kenya's government in decades. Ruto called the events "treasonous" and vowed to quash unrest "at whatever cost."

Soldiers patrolled alongside police, who have been accused of shooting several people dead on Tuesday.

More protests are expected as Kenyans unite beyond tribal and other divisions in a youth-led effort to keep the finance bill from becoming law. It would raise taxes and

fees on a range of daily items and services, from egg imports to bank transfers, increasing the pain of a majority of the country's people who struggle to get by. The government is intent on raising revenue to pay off debt in East Africa's economic hub.

"We are dealing with a new phenomenon and a group of people that is not predictable. If it would have been the normal demonstrations, I'd say it will fizzle out with time, but we don't know whether these people will fight the army," said Herman Manyora, an analyst and professor at the University of Nairobi. He said Kenya's president missed an opportunity in his national address Tuesday night speech to calm tensions and adopt a more conciliatory approach.

"We expected him to appreciate the gravity of the issue and empathize with the young people," Manyora said. "Instead, people saw an angry president who is reading a riot act to the nation."

Many young people who helped vote Ruto into power with cheers for his promises of economic relief now object to the pain of reforms. Thousands stormed parliament on Tuesday, and part of the building burned. Clashes occurred in several communities beyond the capital.

At least 22 people were killed, the Kenya National Human Rights Commission said. Commission chairperson Roseline Odede told journalists that 300 others were injured

and 50 people were arrested.

The mother of a teenager who was killed, Edith Wanjiku, told journalists at a morgue that the police who shot her son should be arrested and charged with murder because her 19-year-old son had been unarmed.

"He had just completed school and was peacefully protesting," she said. Parliament, city hall and the supreme court were cordoned off Wednesday with tape reading "Crime Scene Do Not Enter." Authorities said police fired over 700 blanks to disperse protesters in the Nairobi suburb of Githurai overnight. Videos of the gunfire were shared online. Opposition leader Raila Odinga condemned the killing of protesters and "brute force" of authorities and called for dialogue, asserting that Kenya's constitution had been suspended.

"Kenya cannot afford to kill its children just because the children are asking for food, jobs and a listening ear," Odinga said in a statement. In Nairobi, a regional hub for expatriates and home to a United Nations complex, inequality among Kenyans has sharpened along with long-held frustrations over state corruption. A booming young population is also frustrated by the lavish lifestyles of politicians including the president. Some who had passionately supported Ruto, who won the presidency by portraying himself as a "hustler" of humble background, feel betrayed. (AP)

'Let's sit down and talk': Pak PM extends olive branch to Imran Khan

ISLAMABAD, June 26: Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Wednesday extended an olive branch to his predecessor and political rival Imran Khan, offering to hold talks with him if was facing "troubles" in jail.

Khan, the founder of his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, has been in jail since August last year after being convicted in some of the nearly 200 cases slapped on the 71-year-old cricketer-turned-politician since his ouster from power in April 2022.

"If their [PTI] founder is facing troubles [in jail], then I reiterate: come, let's sit down and talk," Sharif said while addressing the National Assembly.

"Let us sit together to take the country ahead. Let us talk for the betterment of the country. There is no other way forward," he said.

The Nawaz Sharif-led Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) have been at loggerheads for years, particularly after the February 8 elections, which Khan's party claims it had won. Commenting on the 2018 elections won by Khan's PTI, Sharif said: "We joined Parliament despite the [rigged] polls. The sort of slogans that were raised during my first speech will always be remembered as a dark chapter in the history books."

"If someone is facing any injustice, then I believe that the scales of justice should be in favour of those [being victimised], there is no difference over it — whether it be any politician or anyone from any walk of life," Geo News quoted Sharif as saying.

Sharif lamented that he had once again, while he was in the opposition, proposed to Khan to sit for a dialogue but such slogans were raised again. (PTI)

NATO appoints outgoing Dutch PM Mark Rutte as its next secretary-general

BRUSSELS, June 26: NATO appointed Mark Rutte as its next secretary-general on Wednesday, putting the outgoing Dutch prime minister in charge of the world's biggest security organisation at a critical time for European security as war rages in Ukraine.

Rutte's appointment was sealed by NATO ambassadors during a meeting at the 32-nation alliance's headquarters in Brussels. US President Joe Biden and his counterparts will formally welcome him to their table at a summit in Washington on July 9-11.

The outgoing Dutch premier will take over from the current secretary general, Norway's Jens Stoltenberg, on October 1. Stoltenberg spent more than a decade at the helm. His mandate was repeatedly extended, in part to provide continuity after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. (AP)

Zelenskyy scolds officials who shirk their duties in the country's war effort

KYIV, June 26: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signaled on Wednesday that he is getting tough on officials he suspects are shirking their duties in the war with Russia that is now in its third year.



Zelenskyy and Commander in Chief Oleksandr Syrskyi visited troops in the eastern Donetsk region who have weathered fierce Russian ground and air assaults in recent months. They also discussed with local officials the drinking water supply, social issues, evacuation plans and the rebuilding of local homes, Zelenskyy said.

He added that back in Kyiv he would speak to "officials who must be here and in other areas near the front line — in difficult communities where people need immediate solutions."

"I was surprised to learn that some relevant officials have not been here for six months or more," Zelenskyy said. "There will be a serious conversation, and I will draw appropriate conclusions regarding

them."

Zelenskyy has frequently visited front-line areas during the war.

His said his trip to the Donetsk region was to introduce the new commander of the Joint Forces Command, Andrii Hnatov.

Hnatov replaced Yuriy Sodoi, who had held the position since February 2023.

Zelenskyy didn't give a reason for the change, but it came after the widely admired

chief of staff of the Azov regiment, Bohdan Krotevych, released a statement rebuking an unnamed general for having "killed more Ukrainian soldiers than any Russian general," in what was seen as a reference to incompetent management of troops.

Several Ukrainian media outlets, quoting unidentified sources in the armed forces, said he was referring to Sodoi.

Ahead of Zelenskyy's visit, Russian forces dropped a powerful glide bomb on the Donetsk city of Selydove, causing extensive damage to 37 homes, six multi-story buildings and administrative infrastructure, regional authorities said Wednesday. They reported no injuries.

Over the previous 24 hours, the Russian military shelled 20 Donetsk region settlements, killing one person and injuring at least nine, regional head Vadym Filashkin said. About 250 people have been evacuated from their homes in the Donetsk region since Tuesday, officials said. (AP)

Paris court upholds validity of France's arrest warrant for Syrian President Bashar Assad

PARIS, June 26: The Paris appeals court ruled on Wednesday that an international arrest warrant for Syrian President Bashar Assad issued by France for alleged complicity in war crimes during Syria's civil war is valid and remains in place. Jeanne Sulzer and Clemence Witt, lawyers who represented the plaintiffs, and non-governmental organizations behind the complaint hailed the decision as a historic judgment.

In May, French anti-terrorism prosecutors asked the Paris appeals court to rule on lifting the arrest warrant for Assad, saying he has absolute immunity as a serving

head of state.

"It's the first time that a national court has recognized that the personal immunity of a serving head of state is not absolute," the lawyers said in a statement.

French judicial authorities issued international arrest warrants last November for Assad; his brother Maher Assad, the commander of the 4th Armored Division; and two Syrian generals, Ghassan Abbas and Bassam al-Hassan, for alleged complicity in war crimes and crimes against humanity. They include a 2013 chemical attack on then opposition-held Damascus suburbs. (AP)

ICC convicts al-Qaida-linked leader of atrocities in Mali

THE HAGUE, June 26: The International Criminal Court has convicted an al-Qaida-linked Islamic extremist leader of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Mali's Timbuktu.

Al Hassan Ag Abdul Aziz Ag Mohamed Ag Mahmoud was accused of playing a key role in a reign of terror unleashed by insurgents on the historic desert city in northern Mali in 2012.

He was accused of involvement in crimes including rape, torture, persecution, enforced marriages and sexual slavery. Prosecutors say he was a key member of Ansar Dine, an Islamic extremist group with links to al-Qaida that held power in northern Mali at the time.

Al Hassan faces up to life imprisonment when a sentence is handed down at a later date.

Prosecutors say he was a key member of Ansar Dine, an Islamic extremist group with links to al-Qaida that held power in northern Mali at the time.

Women and girls suffered in particular under Ansar Dine's repressive regime, facing corporal punishment and imprisonment, the court's then-chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said at the start of Al Hassan's trial nearly four years ago.

"Many were forced into marriage,"

Bensouda said. "Confined against their will and repeatedly raped by members of the armed group," Al Hassan was involved in organizing such marriages, the prosecutor told judges.

"She cited one rape victim as saying, 'All that was left of me was a corpse.'" Defence lawyer Melinda Taylor told judges that Al Hassan was a member of the Islamic police force who was "obliged to respect and execute the decisions of the Islamic tribunal. This is what the police around the world do."

In Timbuktu, victims of Ansar Dine crimes were awaiting the verdicts and possible compensation.

"We are waiting and hoping for a judgment that will give us justice," said Yehia Hama Cissé, president of a group of victims' associations in the Timbuktu region. "Members of our associations have been raped, had their hands cut off, been whipped, and we would like to be compensated," he said.

The court made a reparation order following the 2016 conviction of an Ansar Dine member, Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi. He was sentenced to nine years' imprisonment for attacking nine moslems and a mosque door in Timbuktu in 2012. (AP)

Suspected North Korean hypersonic missile exploded in flight, South Korea says

SEOUL, June 26: A suspected hypersonic missile launched by North Korea exploded in flight on Wednesday, South Korea's military said, as North Korea protests the regional deployment of a US aircraft carrier for a military drill with South Korea and Japan.

Later Wednesday, South Korea conducted live-fire drills along its disputed western sea boundary with North Korea, its first since it suspended a 2018 agreement with the North aimed at reducing front-line military tensions in early June.

The North Korean missile was launched at about 5:30 am and was aimed toward the North's eastern waters before the failure, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said. Missile fragments were scattered in the water up to 250 kilometres from the launch site near North Korea's capital, it said. No damage was immediately reported.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff said it believes the weapon was a solid-fuelled hypersonic missile. The launch generated more smoke than normal launches, possibly because of an engine fault, it told South Korean reporters at a background briefing. The contents of the briefing were shared with foreign media.

North Korea has performed a series of hypersonic missile tests since 2021 in an apparent effort

to acquire an ability to penetrate its rivals' missile defence shields. Foreign experts question whether the missiles have achieved their desired speed and maneuverability during the test flights.

In recent years, North Korea has also been developing more missiles that use solid propellant launchers. Launches of such missiles are harder to detect than liquid-propellant missiles, which must be fuelled before lift-off.

Wednesday's missile test came as the rival Koreas are engaged in Cold War-style psychological warfare using balloons and loudspeaker broadcasts.

South Korea said North Korea launched large balloons carrying trash across their border Tuesday

night for the sixth time since late May. About 100 balloons with bags of paper waste reportedly fell in South Korean territory.

The balloons resulted in the suspension of takeoffs and landings at South Korea's Incheon International Airport, about an hour's drive from the border, for three hours early Wednesday, in the second such disruption since the North's balloon launches began on May 28, according to South Korean aviation authorities.

South Korea says it is responding to balloons launched by South Korean activists that carried political leaflets into the North. On June 9, South Korea briefly conducted propaganda broadcasts from loudspeakers along the border for the first time in years in response to the North Korean balloons. South Korea's military said Monday it is ready to turn on its loudspeakers again.

On Wednesday, South Korean forces on front-line islands fired 290 artillery and missile rounds

into the waters near the Korean's western sea boundary, the site of several bloody naval skirmishes since 1999, the South Korean marine corps said. It said South Korea will regularly conduct firing drills there.

Such firing exercises were prohibited under the 2018 tension-easing deal with North Korea, which required both countries to cease all hostile acts along their land and sea borders.

The deal had already been in danger of collapsing in recent months, with the two Koreas firing artillery rounds near the sea boundary in January and taking other steps that violated it.

Also Wednesday, South Korea and the US flew 30 advanced fighter jets as part of joint drills this week. The aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt arrived in South Korea on Saturday, and North Korean Vice Defence Minister Kim Kang Il on Monday called its deployment "reckless" and "dangerous." (AP)

School principal assures of strict disciplinary action against accused

15 students beaten up by seniors in Arunachal school, five suspended

ITANAGAR, June 26: Altogether 15 students of class 8 in a government-run school were assaulted allegedly by their seniors in a hostel in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh, a police officer said on Wednesday.

The school authorities suspended five senior students allegedly involved in the incident that took place on Tuesday, Principal Rajeev Ranjan said.

A police complaint has also been lodged in connection with the incident.

The junior boys of the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya at Bordumsa were beaten up with sticks allegedly by several class 11 students in the hostel.

The injured students were taken to a hospital which discharged them after administering first aid.

Principal Rajeev Ranjan convened a disciplinary action committee meeting.



In the meeting, the members of the committee found five senior students of being guilty of inflicting physical harm and psychological trauma on class 8 students.

Changlang superintendent of police, Kirli Padu said the process of identifying the accused students is on and the police will talk with the victims.

He assured the injured students and their parents that action would be taken against the guilty.

"We have already suspended the students, who were involved in the incident. It is an isolated case. We will ascertain the reason behind it," the principal said.

Ranjan said the school authorities are in touch with the parents of the assaulted students.

"The injuries are not that serious. Medical tests have already been done by the parents of the students," he said adding that a parent-teacher meeting was convened and the matter will be discussed with the guardians of the class 11 students. The principal said strict action will be taken in this case and disciplinary measures will be implemented to ensure that such incidents do not recur.

The school has classes from 6 to 12 and has 530 student boarders including girls. (PTI)

BRO restores road connectivity in North Sikkim

GANGTOK, June 26: The Border Roads Organization (BRO) has successfully restored road connectivity from Rafangkhol to Lanthakhola on the Mangang-Chungthang road in North Sikkim, which have been affected by heavy rain and landslides leading to the death of six people earlier this month.

A BRO statement on Wednesday said this road has become traffic-worthy for heavy vehicles till Naga and works are in progress to restore connectivity up to Chungthang which is the main axis of the road network in North Sikkim.

"Despite heavy rains and inclement weather conditions, BRO has successfully restored road connectivity from Rafangkhol and Lanthakhola

on Mangang-Chungthang road," the statement said.

The BRO is also working simultaneously to restore connectivity to North Sikkim's Dzongu region via an alternate route - Dikchu-Sanklang-Toong.

The major challenge along this alternate route was a huge formation breach at Dett Khola bridge and to overcome this bottleneck, the BRO constructed massive abutments and later, in coordination with the Army rolled out a 70-foot Bailey bridge.

North Sikkim's Mangan district was lashed by torrential rains on June 13 snapping road links and communication infrastructure. As a result, around 1,500 tourists had been stranded for almost a week. (PTI)

New NEHUSU body takes charge

SHILLONG, June 26: The newly elected body of the North Eastern Hill University Students' Union NEHUSU took over charge on Wednesday for the term 2024-2025. Sandy Sohtun was elected as the new president of (NEHUSU) during the elections held on Tuesday. The other newly elected members include Riki Deiburom Rabon as vice president, Toniho S Kharsati as general secretary, Eva Kordor Kharshandi as assistant general secretary, Ymphaidien Sutong as finance secretary, Soki Syrti as games and sports secretary, Banskhemlang Marwein as academic secretary, Edna Callista Kharsyntiew as social and cultural secretary, Naphisabet Marwein as public relations secretary and Bashankur Buhroy as editor. (NNN)

Two arrested with heroin worth ₹ 2 crore in Tripura

AGARTALA, June 26: Two persons were arrested from North Tripura's Dharmanagar area with heroin worth around ₹ 2 crore, a senior police officer said on Wednesday.

Based on specific inputs, a police team intercepted a vehicle without a registration number at Dharmanagar area, he said.

"During search of the vehicle, more than 200 gm of heroin were recovered. Two persons have also been arrested," SP (North district) Bhanupada Chakraborty told reporters. He said the consignment was coming from Myanmar through the Mizoram border to Tripura's Sepahijala district. Further investigation is underway. (PTI)

3 held for cattle smuggling

SHILLONG, June 26: In a continuous effort to curb cattle smuggling along the Indo-Bangladesh international border, the vigilant troops of BSF Meghalaya rescued 132 cattle and apprehended three Indian nationals along the international border in South Garo Hills district of Meghalaya according to a source from the BSF. Acting on specific information, troops of the 100 battalion of BSF, Meghalaya in collaboration with the Meghalaya police conducted a joint operation on Tuesday and rescued 132 cattle from the jungle area near the bordering village of Chereangpara, which were meant to be smuggled to Bangladesh. (NNN)

Drug trafficking has declined in Manipur with people's support: CM

IMPHAL, June 26: Manipur chief minister N Biren Singh on Wednesday said drug trafficking cases have declined in the state to some extent as people from the hills and valley and security forces have supported the administration in its effort to address the issue. He also claimed that poppy plantations in the state have also decreased by 50-60 per cent as per satellite data mapping.

Singh called for the eradication of drug menace in the state.

"With the active support of the hill village chiefs, valley-based civil societies and security personnel, drug trafficking in the state has declined to some extent. Even poppy plantations have decreased by 50-60 per cent as per satellite data mapping," he said at an event organised here on the occasion of International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking.

Manipur in the 1990s was badly affected by the drug menace, and the rate of HIV-positive cases was then one of the highest in the country, he said.

Singh also said his government had launched a war against drug abuse, and many smugglers and individuals associated with international cartels were arrested.

The chief minister flagged off a bike rally to observe the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking from his secretariat.

"More than a hundred officers and security personnel, who are taking part in the rally, will carry the message of the importance of war against cross-border illegal trafficking in the state. With support from the masses, the government will remain committed to uproot the drug menace from the state," he added. (PTI)

Meeting on healthcare held in USTM

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, June 26: Eminent doctors and academicians on Wednesday participated in the opening session of a two-day long steering committee meeting on 'Roadmap of Healthcare: Role of USTM' at the University of Science and Technology Meghalaya (USTM) in Ri Bhoi district in Meghalaya.

The meeting was organised by the USTM for its upcoming PA Sangma International Medical College and Hospital (PIMCH) on Wednesday and Thursday. The meeting was graced by Ved Prakash, former chairman of UGC, R.C. Deka, former director of AIIMS, G.D. Sharma, vice chancellor of USTM, Padma Shri Sarbeswar Sahariah, pro vice-chancellor of USTM and R.K. Sharma, advisor of USTM.

Addressing the gathering, Ved Prakash highlighted the direction in which higher education is developing in the world. He said, "Each learner has unique learning skills. To meet the increasing expectations

of children of diverse backgrounds, there is a need for an interdisciplinary approach to education. Real-world problems can be solved only with such programmes."

He said that the most illustrious institutions in the world are the ones that created all domains of knowledge in the university.

"We need leaders who can anticipate the changes in society and come up with innovative programmes to serve the society. USTM chancellor Mahbubul Hoque is such a leader and we need more visionary leaders like him," he added.

Speaking on 'Clinical Quality and Delivery of Care in Health Care Management' R C Deka said, "Quality improvement is a tool to create a global standard. Quality improvement depends on six factors namely, safety of the patient, any intended care has to be effective, timely care, patient centred, efficiency and equitable services. Sustainable technology like blood transfusion, organ transplantation and imaging platform technology are a big boon for medical treatment."



In his address, Padma Shri Sarbeswar Sahariah said that the upcoming medical college at USTM would have a super speciality hospital and brain drain from the region would be checked to a large extent. He emphasized on interdisciplinary research approach in medical education.

"All organs are interconnected, therefore, different departments should work together," he added.

During the session on Thursday Deka will speak on 'Crisis of Healthcare Professional and Specially Trained Manpower in

Paramedical and Nursing'. While Sahariah will speak on 'Current Healthcare Initiatives and Impact Assessment', Ved Prakash will share his introductory remarks. On the other hand, Sanjay Deshmukh, former vice-chancellor of the University of Mumbai will speak on 'Opportunities under Act East Policy in Healthcare', M.U. Rabbani, professor of cardiology at AMU will address on 'Superspeciality in Healthcare Infrastructure' and D.P. Agarwal former chairman of UPSC will address on 'Strategic Planning and Goal Setting'.

610 drug peddlers apprehended in Meghalaya in past two years

SHILLONG, June 26: A total of 610 persons have been arrested for trafficking drugs worth over ₹ 300 crore in Meghalaya during the last two years. This was informed by state social welfare minister, Paul Lyngdoh after addressing a multi-stakeholder symposium organized under Drug Reduction Elimination and Action Mission (DREAM) in observance of the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking here on Wednesday. This year's theme is 'The evidence is clear: invest in prevention'.

Addressing the media, Lyngdoh said that more needs to be done and that is why the state government has decided to involve leaders of the community in assisting the police in enforcing laws against drugs.

"What was lacking all along was community participation. Community participation was there, but it was limited to efforts like de-addiction and counseling. For us to proactively engage the community it should be part of policing, which is why the very important missing link this government has finally been able to address is the need to have the leaders of the community to actually assist the police in enforcing laws against drugs," he said.

"For instance, PITNDPS, which is currently in effect cannot be effectively engaged with unless we have community participation, which is why today the dorbar shingongs have been requested to come up with any further suggestions on the framework of the village defence party (VDP)," he added. (NNN)

Tripura govt to set up integrated aqua park to boost fisheries, tourism

Centre sanctioned ₹ 42 crore of the ₹ 99.99 crore- project under Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana

AGARTALA, June 26: The Tripura government has decided to establish an integrated aqua park in Unakoti district to boost tourism and fisheries sectors in the state, an official said on Wednesday.

The Centre has already sanctioned Rs 42 crore of the Rs 99.99 crore- project under the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY) for the 2023-24 fiscal, he said.

State's social welfare minister Tinku Roy and SC welfare minister Sudhangshu Das on Sunday held a meeting with the officials at Chandipur where the park would be developed.

This project would cover 96.76 acres of land in Satero Miyan Haur area of the Kailashahar Sub-Division.

"Initially, the park will be set up in around 50 acres of area, which will be taken on lease from around 100 villagers. Each villager will get Rs 3,000 against a kani of land annually as lease money," Unakoti district magistrate Dilip Kumar Chakma said.

Under the project, the fisheries department will go for pisciculture and set up a tourist spot, boating facility, restaurant and a fish feeding factory.

A carp hatchery will be set up for breeding and quality fingerling production of carps like catla, rohu, mrigal, silver carp, grass carp etc, he



said. A recirculatory aquaculture system (RAS), fish processing unit, restaurant, ornamental fish breeding and public aquarium will also be set up in the proposed integrated aqua park.

"All of these components are designed to promote and develop the fisheries sector and attract tourists, which will give a boost to the sectors," he said.

It appears that several villagers don't have land mutation, and a seven-member committee has been constituted to solve land-related problems at the earliest, the official said.

The project will bring a lot of change in the socio-economic condition of the people of Chandipur and its surroundings, he added. (PTI)

GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM
OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDING ENGINEER P.W.D. (B&NH)
DIPHU BUILDING CIRCLE, DIPHU

No.SE(B)/CS/01/2024-25/04 Dated Diphu the 26th June 2024.

PRESS NOTICE

The Superintending Engineer, P.W.D. (B&NH) Diphu, on behalf of the Governor of Assam, invites Bids from Govt registered eligible Contractors having experience in similar nature of works for the following works. Details of bids may be seen at e-procurement portal www.assamtenders.gov.in. The bidders must be enrolled in www.assamtenders.gov.in

Sl. No	Name of Work	District	Bid Security drawn in favour of	Approx value of work (Bid value in Rupees)	Completion Period	Bid Security	Cost of Bid (in Rs.)
1	Construction of brick boundary wall with security grill around Labour Inspector Office along with construction of Inspector Quarter, 2nos. of Staff Quarters, Motor Garage, ring well, earthwork in filling for raising low level land, double leaf heavy duty iron gate and fitting and fixing double leaf iron gate with necessary RCC post and tie beams (size- 0.45 x 0.45) at the Office of the Labour Officer, Hamren.	Karbi Anglong	Executive Engineer, Baithalangso Territorial Building Division, Hamren	97,73,955.00/-	12 (Twelve) Months	2 % of Bid value for General category, and 1% of Bid value for Reserved category	Rs.1000.00 +-

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'Emergency resolution in LS exposes anti-democratic thinking of Congress,' says Amit Shah

NEW DELHI, June 26: Union home minister Amit Shah on Wednesday hailed Speaker Om Birla for moving a resolution in Lok Sabha condemning the imposition of Emergency in 1975 by former prime minister Indira Gandhi and said it has exposed the "anti-democratic" thinking of the Congress which harmed the major pillars of democracy like "judiciary, bureaucracy and media".

Shah also said that Lok Sabha remembered the Emergency, which was an "Era of Injustice" and expressed its sympathy to the poor, Dalits and backward people, who had to suffer the exploitation and atrocities of the then Indira Gandhi government, when the rights of the citizens of the country were destroyed and their freedom was snatched away.

The home minister said many sensitive amendments made in the Constitution during the dark period of Emergency expose the dictatorial mentality of the Congress which centralised all powers in one person.

"It (resolution) has exposed the anti-democratic thinking of the Congress which has harmed the



major pillars like judiciary, bureaucracy and media, has condemned the cruelty of Congress in imprisoning lakhs of opposition leaders for more than one and a half year without any reason," Shah wrote in a post on X in Hindi with hashtag #EmergencyHorrors.

He said a message has also been given to spread awareness so that the Congress thinking that ended parliamentary democracy is never repeated.

The home minister said the Lok Sabha also expressed regret at how the entire country was turned into

a prison during the Emergency and how the Indira Gandhi government worked to crush the spirit of the country's Constitution.

"Today, by moving a resolution in the Lok Sabha against the Emergency of 1975, Speaker Shri Om Birla has honoured the struggle of the Satyagrahis who raised their voices against the repression and exploitation of the Congress government that insulted Babasaheb Ambedkar's Constitution. I wholeheartedly support the resolution," he said.

Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla

read out the resolution condemning the imposition of Emergency and termed the decision by Indira Gandhi an attack on the Constitution, triggering a wave of protests by the opposition in the House.

Birla's reference to the Emergency, shortly after his election as Lok Sabha speaker, also saw a face-off between the treasury benches and the opposition in the first session of the lower house.

"This House strongly condemns the decision to impose Emergency in 1975. We appreciate the determination of all those people who opposed the Emergency, fought and fulfilled the responsibility of protecting India's democracy," Birla said amid shouts of protests by the opposition parties.

Opposition MPs, including those from the Congress, were on their feet, raising slogans against the reference to the Emergency.

"June 25, 1975 will always be known as a black chapter in the history of India. On this day, then prime minister Indira Gandhi imposed Emergency in the country and attacked the Constitution made by Babasaheb Ambedkar," the speaker said. (PTI)

Congress did not seek division of votes in Speaker's election in spirit of cooperation: Ramesh

NEW DELHI, June 26: The Congress on Wednesday said the INDIA constituents did not seek a division of votes in the Speaker's election as they wanted to maintain a spirit of consensus and cooperation.

"INDIA parties exercised their democratic right and moved motions in support of Kodikunnil Suresh as Lok Sabha Speaker. Voice Vote was taken. Thereafter, INDIA parties could have insisted on division," AICC general secretary Jairam Ramesh said in a post on X.

"They did not do so. This is because they wanted a spirit of consensus and cooperation to prevail, a spirit singularly lacking in the actions of the PM and the NDA," he added.

The Opposition had put up K Suresh as a joint candidate against NDA's choice Om Birla, who was eventually elected as Speaker for the third time in a row. (PTI)



In the House he had left, the Chair was very high, Yadav said. The stone behind the Speaker's Chair have been set well but some gaps are still visible where cement has been filled, he said.

Yadav-led SP has 37 members in the new Lok Sabha and is the second largest opposition party after the Congress. (PTI)

House should function on your directions, not otherwise: Akhilesh to Speaker Birla

NEW DELHI, June 26: Samajwadi Party (SP) chief Akhilesh Yadav on Wednesday described Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla as the "chief justice" of democratic justice, saying the House should function on his directions and not otherwise.

Congratulations Birla on being re-elected Speaker of Lok Sabha, Yadav said in the House that all members believe that as the presiding officer, he will give equal opportunities and respect to every party.

"Impartiality is the great responsibility of the high office," he said.

The SP leader hoped that actions like suspension of MPs would not be taken as they hurt the dignity of the House.

We will stand by all your just decisions and expect that it will not just be the opposition under restraint.

Yadav said he has come to the new House for the first time. He said he was under the impression that the Speaker's chair is very high.

NIA searches multiple locations in Chhattisgarh

NEW DELHI, June 26: The NIA conducted extensive searches in a dozen locations in Chhattisgarh's Naxal-hit region as part of its probe into the murder of BJP leader Ratan Dubey by suspected CPI(Maoist) cadre.

Dubey was axed to death on November 4 during the 2023 assembly election campaign at the

Kaushalnagar weekly market in Chhattisgarh's Narayanpur district. He was slaughtered by armed assailants belonging to the proscribed CPI(Maoist), according to the National Investigation Agency's (NIA) investigations so far.

"Cracking down on premises linked with various suspects and

overground workers (OWGs)/supporters of the Bayanar Area Committee under East Bastar division of CPI(Maoist), the NIA today conducted elaborate searches at 12 locations in Toynar, Kaushalnagar, Badenod, Dhaudai and Kongera villages," the probe agency said in a statement. (PTI)

LAND-FOR-JOBS 'SCAM' Delhi HC grants 6-week interim bail to Lalu's aide Amit Katyal



NEW DELHI, June 26: The Delhi High Court on Wednesday granted six-week interim bail on medical grounds to RJD chief Lalu Prasad's close aide Amit Katyal in a money laundering case linked to the alleged land-for-jobs scam in the Indian Railways.

Katyal, who was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on November 11, 2023 under various provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), argued that after undergoing bariatric surgery, he required further treatment and care which was not available in Tihar jail.

While allowing his interim bail, a vacation bench of Justice Dharmesh Sharma observed that the dietary requirements of Katyal are such that they cannot be provided in the jail premises, and post bariatric surgery, he needs proper diet in order to attain adequate physical, mental and psychological well-being.

"The level of care, attention, minute-to-minute monitoring and emergency response which the applicant requires, cannot be provided at the jail presently. There is no gaining that providing home cooked food on an every day basis for a long duration is fraught with several technical hurdles at the jail premises," said the court.

"This court is inclined to

allow the application for interim bail on medical grounds for a period of six weeks from the date of his release from jail," the court ordered as it asked Katyal to furnish a personal bond along with a surety of ₹ 2.5 lakh each.

The court further observed that a charge sheet has been filed against the accused who was released on interim bail for about 84 days earlier as well but no allegation of influencing the probe was attributed to him.

The ED argued that the petitioner was earlier granted interim bail on medical grounds for almost 84 days and he cannot seek enlargement on bail on medical grounds all the time.

If there was any requirement of a special diet, it can be brought to the jail premises by way of home-cooked food for him, the agency said.

The probe agency has alleged that Katyal had acquired land from several railway job aspirants on behalf of the RJD chief and former railway minister Lalu Prasad.

The ED has claimed that Katyal was the director of a company named AK Infosystems Private Limited, which acquired land from candidates "on behalf" of Lalu Prasad. Some other members of the RJD supremo's family are also accused in the case. (PTI)

Hope voice of opposition will be allowed in Lok Sabha: Rahul Gandhi



NEW DELHI, June 26: Congratulating Om Birla for being elected Speaker of the Lok Sabha for a second term, leader of opposition Rahul Gandhi and other opposition MPs on Wednesday hoped they would be allowed to raise the voice of people in the House and incidents like the suspension of MPs will not be repeated.

While the opposition pushed a contest for the post of Speaker by pitching K Suresh against Birla, who was announced elected by a voice vote, Gandhi went and congratulated Birla on the floor of the House. He also accompanied the new Speaker to the Chair along with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and parliamentary affairs minister Kiren Rijju.

Gandhi said the opposition wanted the House to function "often and well" and added that it was very important that cooperation happened with trust.

Countering the government's claim that the previous Lok Sabha clocked high productivity, the Congress leader also said running the House by silencing the opposition is an undemocratic idea.

"I'd like to congratulate you for your successful election... I congratulate you on behalf of the en-

tire INDIA alliance.

"This House represents the voice of people of India... Of course, the government has political power, but the opposition also represents the voice of India's people," Gandhi said. He said the opposition would like to assist the Speaker in his work.

"I am confident you will allow us to speak in House," he said.

Pointing out that this time the opposition represents significantly more voices of the Indian people than last time, Gandhi stressed that it is very important that the voice of opposition is allowed to be represented in the House.

"I am confident that you will allow us to represent our voice, allow us to speak, to represent voice of people of India," the leader of opposition said.

The question, he said, is not how efficiently the House is run, but the question is how much of India's voice is allowed to be heard in the House.

"The idea that you can run the House efficiently by silencing the voice of opposition is a non-democratic idea.

"This election has shown that the people of India expect the opposition to defend the Constitution

of this country and we are confident that by allowing opposition to speak, you will do your duty of defending the Constitution of India," the Congress MP said.

Akhilesh Yadav, the leader of Samajwadi Party (SP), the third largest party in the House, hoped that actions like suspension of MPs would not be taken as they hurt the dignity of the House.

"We believe you will move forward without discrimination and as the Speaker, you will give equal opportunity and respect to every party. Impartiality is a great responsibility of this great post," Yadav said.

"We expect that the voice of no public representative will be suppressed and actions like suspensions which hurt the dignity of the House will not be taken," he said.

On similar lines, TMC leader Sudip Bandyopadhyay said the suspension of MPs in the 17th Lok Sabha was "not desired".

"It is my firm belief and so far as parliamentary democratic practice is concerned, the House belongs to the opposition. This attitude needs to be adopted by the ruling party," he said.

DMK's T R Balu also reminded the Speaker that he should treat the opposition and the ruling party in the same manner.

AIMIM MP Asaduddin Owaisi meanwhile said, "The character of the House has changed and BJP won't be able to steamroll... I hope that the government will lessen your burden by electing a Deputy speaker."

Similar concerns were expressed by Communist Party of India (Marxist) MP Amraam, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Arvind Sawant, Nationalist Congress Party (SP) MP Supriya Sule, RSP MP N K Premchandran. All of them hoped that the opposition's voice will not be crushed. (PTI)

Day after revolt, SAD's working committee reposes faith in Badal

CHANDIGARH, June 26: A day after a section of Shiromani Akali Dal leaders revolted against its chief Sukhbir Singh Badal, the party on Wednesday said its working committee reposed faith in the leadership of Badal.

The committee also asked "detractors" not to play into the hands of enemies of "panth".

On Tuesday, some senior SAD leaders demanded that Badal should step down as party chief following its debacle in the recently held Lok Sabha elections in Punjab.

"Shiromani Akali Dal Working Committee reposes complete faith in the leadership of party president Sukhbir Singh Badal and urges detractors not to play into the hands of Panth's enemies. The committee asks the president to lead the efforts to expose conspiracies against the party, "panth" and Punjab," said the party in a post on X.

Besides Badal, the meeting of the working committee here was attended by party leaders including Balwinder Singh Bhundar, Daljit Singh Cheema, Mahesh Inder Singh Grewal, Hira Singh Gabria and Paramjit Singh Sarna.

Meanwhile, questioning Badal's capability to lead the 103-year-old outfit, rebel party leader and former minister Sikandar Singh Maluka on Wednesday said the SAD faced drubbing in four elections in a row under the leadership of Badal.

Disgruntled party leaders on Tuesday had announced that a "SAD bachao" movement would be launched next month.

Apart from Maluka, other prominent leaders who raised a banner of revolt included former MP Prem Singh Chandumajra, former SGPC chief Bibi Jagir Kaur, ex-MLA Gurpartap Singh Wadala, former ministers Parminder Singh Dhindsa, Sarwan Singh Phillaur, and Surjit Singh Rakhra, and party leader Sucha Singh Chhotepur.

The SAD had called the rebel leaders "frustrated elements sponsored by the BJP" to weaken it.

Maluka said generally a party president quits his po-



sition when the party loses an election.

"The SAD faced debacle in four elections consecutively under his (Badal) leadership," he told PTI, while pointing towards 2017 and 2022 assembly elections and 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

"The party's graph is going downwards. One should give a chance to some other person," said Maluka, whose daughter-in-law Parampal Kaur Sidhu unsuccessfully fought from the Bathinda seat on a BJP ticket.

The SAD could win only 15 out of the 117 assembly segments in 2017 and three in the 2022 assembly polls. In 2019, the party could win only two of 13 Lok Sabha constituencies.

The party faced a drubbing in the 2024 general elections as it could manage to win only one seat in Punjab. Badal's wife and former Union minister Harsimrat Kaur Badal retained the Bathinda seat.

SAD's 10 candidates lost security deposits in the polls while its vote share dropped to 13.42 per cent from 27.45 per cent in 2019.

Asked that SAD had called the disgruntled leaders "frustrated elements sponsored by the BJP", Maluka trashed the charge, asking, "what connection we have (with BJP)". (PTI)

Character of House has changed, BJP won't be able to steam roll: Owaisi in Lok Sabha

NEW DELHI, June 26: AIMIM MP Asaduddin Owaisi said on Wednesday that the ruling BJP will not be able to "steam roll" the opposition as the character of the House has changed in new Lok Sabha.

Congratulations Om Birla on being elected Speaker for the second term, he said the smaller parties should be heard in the House as they too represent the people. "You are the custodian of the House. The reality is that the majority enjoys the numerical strength but it does not have the strength per se.

"Here the opposition also has the support of the people. I urge you to give chance to smaller parties also... The character of this House has changed. The BJP will not be able to steam roll," Owaisi said.

Speaking on the occasion, National Conference member Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi said today onwards Birla does not belong to any party and his only party is the Constitution of India. "It is a request to you that from today you are neither the BJP, Congress nor Samajwadi. From today your party is just one -- the Constitution of India -- and you will be its custodian," he said. Mehdi said Birla will be remembered whether he allows only the treasury benches to put across their views or lets the opposition also to have a say.

"This House which is known as the biggest institution of democracy... you will be remembered for how you forced the treasury benches to listen to the opposition or you silenced the opposition. You will not be remembered for P-20 (Parliament 20 Summit, part of the larger G20 event)," he said. (PTI)

SSLV's first dedicated commercial launch to put Australia-built satellite into orbit in 2026

'This will be the first dedicated commercial launch for Small Satellite Launch Vehicle'

NEW DELHI, June 26: ISRO's commercial arm NSIL said on Wednesday that its newest rocket the SSLV will have its first dedicated commercial launch when it puts into orbit the Optimus -- a satellite built by Australia-based Space Machines Company.

The announcement was made jointly by NewSpace India Limited (NSIL) and Space Machines Company at the India Space Congress, organised by the Satcom Industry Association-India. This pioneering collaboration sets the stage for the launch of Space Machines Company's second Optimus spacecraft, weighing 450 kilogrammes, the largest Australian-designed and built spacecraft so far, a statement from NSIL said.

"This will be the first dedicated commercial launch for SSLV (Small Satellite Launch Vehicle). The first commercial launch was



Janus, a 10-kilogramme nanosatellite on board the SSLV-D2 mission," NSIL chairman and managing director Radhakrishnan Durairaj told PTI.

The satellite is slated for a dedicated launch in 2026 onboard the

Innovation), marks a significant milestone in the strategic partnership between Australia and India in the space domain, fostering closer ties between commercial, institutional and government space organisations from both nations, the NSIL said.

"By combining our innovative spacecraft capabilities with India's proven launch expertise, we are not only strengthening the ties between our nations' space sectors but also demonstrating our shared commitment to sustainable space operations," said Rajat Kulshrestha, CEO and co-founder of Space Machines Company.

By focusing on debris management and sustainability, the mission aligns with the core values and objectives of both countries, promoting responsible space operations and mitigating the growing threat of space debris. (PTI)

SSLV, a mission that will mark a defining moment for India and Australia in the area of space collaboration.

This mission, named Space MAITRI (Mission for Australia-India's Technology, Research and

Woman partially blinded by chemical splash

AMBALA (HARYANA), June 26: A woman lost partial vision in her eyes after an unknown bike-borne man allegedly threw some chemical on her here while she was returning home with her family at night, police said on Wednesday.

A case has been registered against the accused and efforts are on to nab him, they added.

The incident took place on the night of June 22, following which the victim complained of blurred vision, the police said.

When her vision showed no improvement in two-three days, the woman along with her husband reached the Ambala city police station on Wednesday and lodged a complaint against the unknown accused, they said.

Meanwhile, the victim, a resident of Ambala City, consulted a private doctor who advised surgery, they added.

Describing the incident in the police complaint, the victim said she was returning home from Gurudwara Manji Sahib with her husband and children at around 11 pm on June 22 on a motorcycle. (PTI)

Child trafficking racket busted in K'taka; five children rescued

Accused created fake birth certificates for children they sold



TUMAKURU (KARNATAKA), June 26: The Karnataka police busted a child trafficking racket, arresting seven persons and rescuing five children who were allegedly sold by the accused to childless couples, officials said on Wednesday.

The matter came to light after a complaint was filed by a couple on June 9 alleging that their 11-month-old infant was allegedly kidnapped by some miscreants at night while they were asleep at their home in Gubbi taluk here, they said.

A special team was constituted to rescue the kidnapped child and, acting on a tip off, accused Ramakrishna (53) and his accomplice Hanamantha Raju (45) who allegedly kidnapped the infant were ar-

rested. Based on information provided by them, a third accused Mahesh UD (39) who was previously working as a staff nurse at a government hospital in Kunigal was arrested. The accused allegedly sold the kidnapped infant to another accused, Mubarak, for ₹ 1.75 lakh, a senior police officer said.

Subsequently, 44-year-old Mubarak was also arrested and the kidnapped 11-month-old infant was rescued by the police, he said.

Investigation has revealed that Mahesh used to find women who got pregnant out of wedlock and illicit relationships. He then got the children from such women and sold them to childless couples for a price of ₹ two-three lakh per

child, he added.

Another accused Mehboob Sharif (52) who was also involved in the racket used to run a medical facility in the name of his wife at Hulyiar and worked as a pharmacist at a Primary Health Centre, the police official said. "Out of the nine children sold by the accused, five children have been rescued and one was found dead. Out of the rescued, one of them has been reunited with his family while the remaining four rescued children are currently at an adoption centre on the orders of the Child Welfare Committee," Ashok K V, Superintendent of Police (Tumakuru), told PTI.

Another accused, Poornima (39), who was a contract worker at a Primary Health Centre, and Soujanya (48), who was a staff nurse at a hospital, allegedly cooperated in selling the infants. They have also been arrested in the case, police said. A used car, ₹ 50,000 cash and four mobile phones have been seized from the accused, they said.

The accused created fake birth certificates for the children they sold, police said, adding that further investigation is underway. (PTI)

Not enough internal demand for satellite launch market in India: ISRO chairman

NEW DELHI, June 26: ISRO chairman S Somanath on Wednesday said there is not enough internal demand for the satellite launch market in India but it can be created through more work on the application of satellite technology.

Addressing the India Space Congress 2024, he said big companies are willing to enter the space sector, but they are concerned about the timeline for breaking even and securing orders.

"When I talk to many of those industries who are willing to come and set up facilities, they are all very ready to do it. But they are asking when they are going to break even and where the orders are so that they can safely invest in this. I think this is a big question.

"It is the bigger challenge of convincing investors to come in a big way in big state projects," the leading space scientist said.

At a press conference on the sidelines of the Space Congress, he said, "We need to create more internal demand. That implies internal demand is not enough. All of us are working towards that. The demand will come from the user side, from the communication segment, which, of course, includes big satellite builders."

"We would like to find orbital slots and frequencies which can be given to industry to build satellites and launchers. This is the first step towards creating internal demand. InSpace has already announced a funding plan to create a new earth observation constellation. That's again another step towards creating internal demand."

Somanath also said although the cost of accessing space has decreased significantly glob-

ally, largely due to SpaceX, India's rocket costs have not seen similar reductions.

Reducing costs could boost small satellite launches and attract new participants in the space sector, he said.

Somanath mentioned that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision for Amrit Kaal includes extending human space activity beyond the Gaganyaan mission, with the goal of landing on the moon by 2040.

However, he said India's current rockets are not sufficient for round trips to the moon. Developing rockets with higher payload capacity is essential for both bringing back samples and future human missions, the ISRO chairman said.

"Though GSLV MKIII (LV-M3) is the biggest rocket that we have, it is not big enough. It has just enough capability to go up to the moon, but it cannot even come back. We need to develop the capability to bring samples back and then send humans to the moon and bring them back," he said.

Somanath said the development of such capabilities must also consider commercial sustainability. Space activities should support a broader ecosystem and not just focus on lunar missions, he said. The scientist said India's industrial capacity to produce launchers needs significant enhancement and more companies must enter this field to increase production capabilities.

Somanath told reporters that GSAT-20 is set to launch in mid-August onboard Falcon 9 and it has received clearance to be moved to the United States for launch. (PTI)

Climate change-fuelled heat pushes poor Indian women to limits of endurance

NEW DELHI, June 26: "It's all about survival," says Majida Begum, her face wreathed in sweat as she sifts through waste in Delhi's Seemapuri area, echoing as it were the everyday struggles of millions of women in India facing the brunt of the twin crises of heat and humidity.

As climate change tightens its grip over the globe, a study by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization shows that on average, female-headed households in rural areas lose 8 per cent more of their income due to heat stress compared to male-headed households.

While men have moved on to secondary and tertiary sectors due to improved skills, women remain in unorganised sectors characterised by repetitive and labour-intensive tasks, explained Seema Bhaskaran, gender lead at the NGO Transform Rural India.

And Majida is living testament of it all. Spending hours beneath a makeshift shelter of four slender sticks and a torn bedsheet, the asphalt radiating heat from the sharp sun and high humidity, as she does her day's job, the 65-year-old ragpicker is weather-beaten and old beyond her years.

With beads of sweat tracing paths down her lined face, she walks to a community water tank located around a hundred metres away. She ducks her head beneath the tap, letting the water cascade over her. Refreshed, for the moment, she returns to her sorting in the oppressive heat.

"It's about survival," she ex-

plained between tasks. "We drench ourselves with water every hour just to keep going."

This ritual is a necessity for Majida and others like her amid the unbearable conditions of their work — the absence of sufficient drinking water, toilets, sunshades and prolonged exposure to the elements.

Majida's husband, aged 70 and immobile, relies entirely on her earnings. Their estranged son offers no support. On good days, she earns ₹ 250 for separating recyclables from the waste stream, but when illness strikes and she cannot work, they are left with virtually nothing.

"Whether we eat at night depends on whether I work during the day," Majida said.

"This is the hottest summer I have experienced in many years. The heat made me unwell, and I could not work for 15 days. I am a heart patient, but I cannot afford to stay at home," she said.

In urban agglomerations and in rural India, climate change-fuelled extreme heat is making women from marginalized communities and poor households more vulnerable to economic and health losses.

Women already earn 20 per cent less than men on average, according to the International Labour Organization, and this gap is further widened due to heat waves.

In an unprecedented summer, where the heat index has crossed 50 degrees Celsius in many places, the stories are many.

Basanti Nag, 28, from Kokawada village in Chhattis-

garh's Sukma district, said the summer this year caused nausea and lethargy never experienced before, and the problem was amplified for women who had to travel longer distances to fetch water.

In Dantewada district, Mangaldai's family of three depends on the labour-intensive task of collecting and selling mahua flowers in the peak summer months.

"This year, there has been less mahua work than ever before, with almost half the amount compared to previous years. As a result, my income will also be halved," Mangaldai said.

Mahua is a major non-timber forest produce and a primary source of income for many in the country's tribal areas.

"In agriculture, women perform back-breaking operations like sowing, transplanting, and harvesting without any mechanization. Excessive heat leads to exhaustion, dehydration, and an increased risk of urinary infections. Women workers in tea estates, street vendors, and safai sathis are exposed to direct sunlight, affecting their productivity and health. Home-based workers also see their income impacted as they juggle household tasks and work, leading to a loss of income," Bhaskaran told PTI.

For women, sustenance tasks like fetching water, fuelwood, and fodder take longer in extreme heat. Pregnant women face risks of stillbirth. Care work increases with rising illnesses, leading to further loss of employment and economic participation, she added. (PTI)

GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM

OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDING ENGINEER, PWD (R&M)

DIPHU BUILDING CIRCLE

No.SE(B)/CS/01/2024-25/05

Dated Diphu the 26th June 2024.

Detail Notice Inviting Bid

The Superintending Engineer, P.W.D, (B&NH) Diphu, on behalf of the Governor of Assam, invites Bids for the following work having experience of similar nature of work from APWD registered Contractors. Details of the bids may be seen at e-procurement portal website www.assamtenders.gov.in also in the office of the undersigned during office hours. The bidders must be enrolled in www.assamtenders.gov.in for participating in the bidding process.

Sl. No	Name of Work	District	Bid Security drawn in favour of	Approx value of work (Bid value in Rupees)	Completion Period	Bid Security	Cost of Bid (in Rs.)
1	Construction of brick boundary wall with security grill around Labour Inspector Office along with construction of Inspector Quarter, 2nos. of Staff Quarters, Motor Garage, ring well, earthwork in filling for raising low level land, double leaf heavy duty iron gate and fitting and fixing double leaf iron gate with necessary RCC post and tie beams (size- 0.45 x 0.45) at the Office of the Labour Officer, Hamren.	Karbi Anglong	Executive Engineer, Baithalangso Territorial Building Division, Hamren	97,73,955.00/-	12 (Twelve) Months	2 % of Bid value for General category, and 1% of Bid value for Reserved category	Rs.1000.00

The Bidders may submit bid for the work as follows:

- The Contractors / Bidders must be registered with the E-tendering system provider for participating in the bidding process. The Bidding document may be downloaded through the P.W.D portal assamtenders.gov.in by using own user ID.
- Online submission of Technical & Financial Bid is mandatory. Manual submission of Technical Bid (without online submission) of bid will be considered as non-responsive. Bidders are to submit the required papers for technical bid by scanning and uploading the same before the expiry of the sequence-'Bid submission' in the activity schedule mentioned below at S1-4.
- The bidder shall submit the Cost of the bid document and Bid Security/EMD by online method through net banking or RTOS/NEFT as per office memorandum no. FEB269/2017/27 dtd: August'2019 (copy enclosed).
- The activity schedule for tendering process of the above-mentioned packages shall be as per the schedule shown below.

Stage No	APWD Stage	Start		End	
		Date	Time	Date	Time
1	Publishing Date	26.06.2024	2:00 P.M.	18.07.2024	12:00 P.M.
2	Download of Tender	26.06.2024	3:00 P.M.	18.07.2024	12:00 P.M.
3	Bid Submission (online)				12:00 P.M.
4	Technical Bid Opening				
5	Financial Bid Opening	TO BE NOTIFIED LATER			

Pre bid Meeting will be held as per following time & venue.

Starting Date & Time

02/07/2024 12:00 Hrs.

Closing Time

15.00 hrs

Venue

O/O the Superintending Engineer, PWD (B&NH), Diphu Building Circle, Diphu

- In the event of any holiday in the sequence of the Activity Schedule, the activities will take place on the next working day.
- Original Copy of the following documents must be submitted within 48 hours after the last date and time of online submission at the office chamber of the undersigned along with the hard copy of the technical bid.
 - Original Power of Attorney for signing the BID.
 - Scan copy of online payment receipt of Cost of bid & BID Securities.
 - Original copy of banker certificate for Credit facility.
- A hard copy of the technical bid submitted online is to be submitted up to 19.07.2024 up to 2:00 PM. For any discrepancy between the online bid and the hard copy of the bid, the online bid will govern and will be considered for evaluation.
- Bidders are advised to scan their Technical Papers at 100 dpi (In Black & White mode) in pdf format for multiple pages with maximum file size of 5MB. If numbers of pages exceed, the bidders are advised to create multiple files and upload the same in e-procurement website www.assamtenders.gov.in only. For any assistance for Online Bidding, Bidders may write to assamtenders.gov.in
- The Detail Notice Inviting bid will be a part of the bidding Documents.
- The bidder shall submit the Trading License/ Temporary Trading permit issued by the Department of Taxation, KAAC, Diphu vide KAAC Notification No. KAAC/Tax/Miscellaneous/2022-23/24/86 Dated. 20.11.2023 which will be part of bidding Documents
- Join survey report of Work location, geotagged photographs duly signed by the EE, BTBD, Hamren. Building Division to be submitted along with the tender documents.

Sd/-

Superintending Engineer,
P.W.D. (B&NH) Diphu Building Circle, Diphu
Dated Diphu the 26th June' 2024

Memo No.SE(B)/CS/01/2024 - 25/05-A

Shabana Azmi, SS Rajamouli, Ritesh Sidhwani, Ravi Varman among 487 new Academy members

NEW DELHI, June 26: Veteran actor Shabana Azmi, "RRR" director SS Rajamouli, producer Ritesh Sidhwani, and noted cinematographer Ravi Varman are among the new 487 members invited this year by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

In a statement shared on its website, the Academy on late Tuesday night said the list includes artists and executives who have distinguished themselves by their contributions to theatrical motion pictures.

Membership selection is based on professional qualifications, with an ongoing commitment to representation, inclusion and equity, according to the Los-Angeles based institution.

Azmi, a stalwart in both Indian and international cinema, has been invited to join the Actors branch. The news comes as Azmi completes 50 years in the industry; she made her groundbreaking debut in Shyam Benegal's "Ankur" (1974).

Known for films such as "Godmother", "Arth", "The Reluctant Fundamentalist", "In Custody" and most recently "Rocky Aur

Rani Kii Prem Kahaani", the multiple award winning actor has starred in over 140 Hindi films and 12 international productions.

Rajamouli, the man behind the epic period spectacle "RRR" which became the first Indian feature production to win an Academy Award in 2023, has been included in the Director's branch.

Independent filmmaker Rima Das, known for acclaimed and awarded titles such as "Tora's Husband" and "Village Rockstars", is also joining Rajamouli in the segment.

Renowned producer Sidhwani, who has backed celebrated movies such as "Gully Boy" and "Dil Chahta Hai", will be part of the Producers branch.

Director of photography Varman has been invited to join the Cinematographers branch. His credits include "Japan", "Ponniyin Selvan: Part Two", "Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela", and Shankar's upcoming "Indian 2".

Rama Rajamouli, "RRR" costume designer and wife of Rajamouli, has been invited to the Costume Designers branch. Part of the Production and Technology branch is

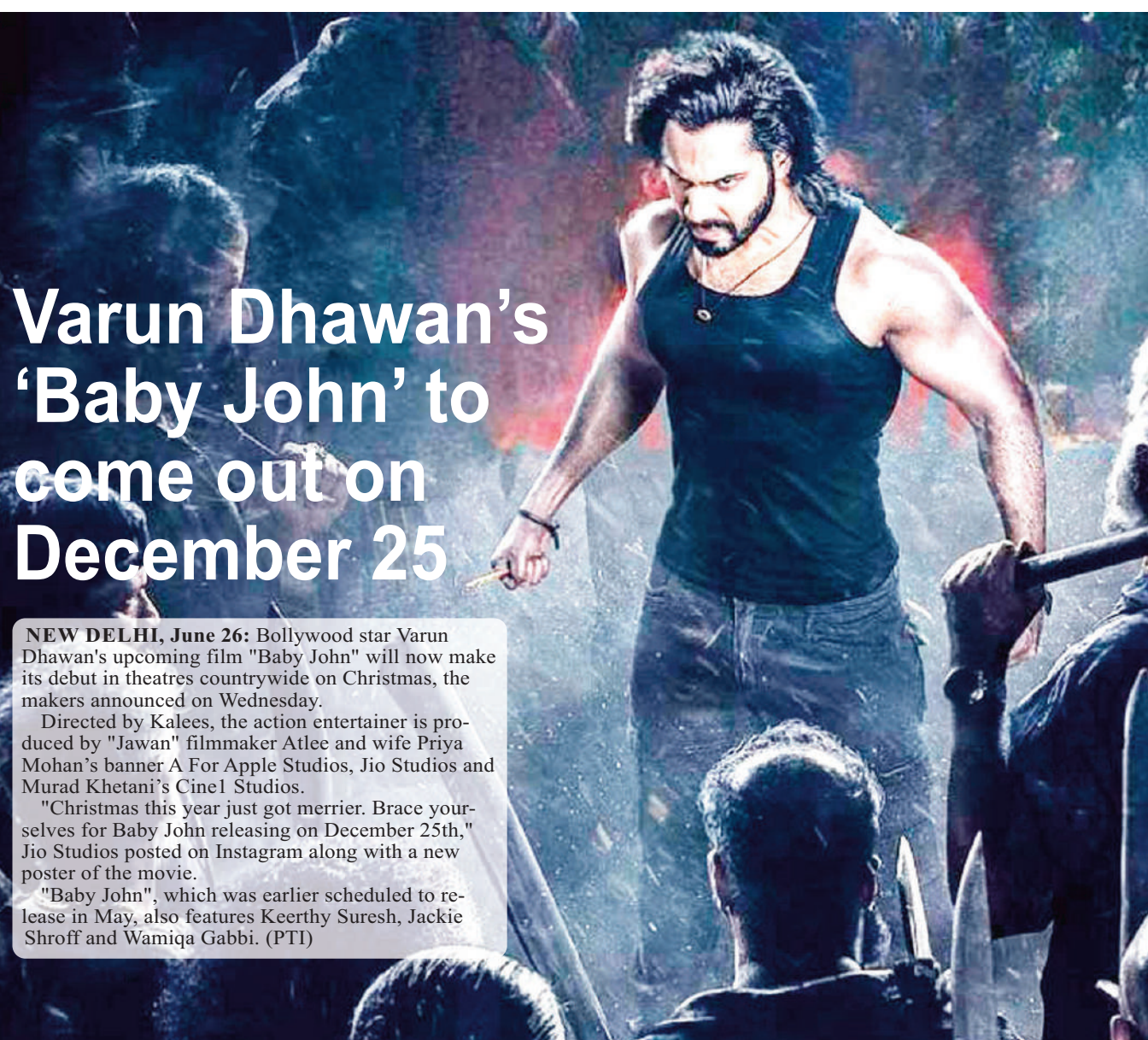
choreographer Prem Rakshith, who created the complex but perfectly synthesised moves in the best original song Oscar winner "Naatu Naatu" from "RRR".

Sheetal Sharma, known for her work on movies such as "Gangubai Kathiawadi" and "Kesari", will join Rama Rajamouli in the section.

Documentary filmmaker Hemal Trivedi ("Among the Believers," "Saving Face") is part of the Documentary branch.

"We are thrilled to welcome this year's class of new members to the Academy. These remarkably talented artists and professionals from around the world have made a significant impact on our filmmaking community," Academy CEO Bill Kramer and Academy President Janet Yang said in a joint statement.

From the Indian film industry, A R Rahman, Amitabh Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan, Kajol, Suriya, Vidya Balan, Aamir Khan, Salman Khan, Ali Fazal, Aditya Chopra, Guneet Monga, Reema Kagti, Ekta Kapoor, and Shobha Kapoor are already members of the Academy. (PTI)



Varun Dhawan's 'Baby John' to come out on December 25

NEW DELHI, June 26: Bollywood star Varun Dhawan's upcoming film "Baby John" will now make its debut in theatres countrywide on Christmas, the makers announced on Wednesday.

Directed by Kalees, the action entertainer is produced by "Jawan" filmmaker Atlee and wife Priya Mohan's banner A For Apple Studios, Jio Studios and Murad Khetani's CineL Studios.

"Christmas this year just got merrier. Brace yourselves for Baby John releasing on December 25th," Jio Studios posted on Instagram along with a new poster of the movie.

"Baby John", which was earlier scheduled to release in May, also features Keerthy Suresh, Jackie Shroff and Wamiqa Gabbi. (PTI)

Kamal Haasan says SRK worked in 'Hey Ram' for free: I'm ever thankful to him

MUMBAI, June 26: Shah Rukh Khan is "a connoisseur of art and a good actor," said veteran star Kamal Haasan and revealed the superstar didn't charge a single penny for his 2000 bilingual film Hey Ram. Hey Ram is a period drama written, directed, and produced by Kamal, which also starred him and Shah Rukh in the lead.

In the Tamil-Hindi movie, Kamal and Shah Rukh played friends Saket Ram and Amjad Ali Khan, respectively.

At the trailer launch of his upcoming movie Hindustani 2 or Indian 2, the multi-hyphenate said titles like 'star' or 'superstar' don't matter while working on a film. "When we work together, we are all just people. I don't see a superstar. He doesn't see a super director. We are friends. Shah Rukh sahib made that film for free... That cannot be done by a superstar. That can be done only by a fan. A connoisseur of art and a good actor. I'm ever thankful to him. Later on, you give us those titles and we very shyly accept it," Kamal told reporters in Mumbai on Tuesday night.

The 69-year-old also spoke about how he wanted screen icon Dilip Kumar to star in the Hindi remake of the 1992 Tamil film Thevar Magan. Directed by Bharathan, Thevar Magan was written and produced by Haasan. It starred Sivaji Ganesan and Kamal as a father-son duo.

Unfortunately, Dilip Kumar had decided to retire from cinema by the time he reached out to him. "I wanted to do it only with Yusuf sahib. When he said I'm not going to do any more films. Then, I sold the rights to somebody because I didn't want to and I couldn't think of anybody else. And so that was a dream that didn't come through," Kamal recalled.

Eventually, Amrith Puri played the father to Anil Kapoor in Virasat, the 1997 Hindi remake of Thevar Magan.

Kamal said he used to come to Mumbai to wish the late star on his birthday on December 11. "I'm a great fan and a student of Yusuf saab. I don't know how many people know because it was a secret fact. I used to come here whenever I could on December 11 on his birthday and kneel before him to kiss his hand," he added.

"Indian 2 is a sequel to Kamal's hit 1996 film Indian, which featured him in a dual role and also starred Manisha Koirala, Urmila Matondkar and Kasthuri Shankar. The movie was directed by S. Shankar, who is returning for the sequel, slated to be released on July 12. Besides Kamal, the sequel stars Kajal Aggarwal, Siddharth, and Rakul Preet Singh in key roles. It is produced by Subaskaran Allirajah's Lyca Productions and Udhayanidhi Stalin's Red Giant Movies. (PTI)

'Kota Factory' puts youth and their stories in the centre: Tillotama Shome



NEW DELHI, June 26: It is rare for artists to get an opportunity to speak through their work, says actor Tillotama Shome, who boarded "Kota Factory" as it is one of the few shows which deals with the aspirations and worries of the young generation.

The Netflix series from The Viral Fever (TVF) is set in Rajasthan's Kota, considered the coaching hub for students aspiring to get into an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) by cracking the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE).

The actor, 45, said she liked the subject matter they were tackling season after season and how they had built a strong foundation.

"We worry so much about the future as human beings but we don't invest in the future? The youth of our country, they are the future. And this was a show that really walks the talk and it was a show that finally puts the youth, their stories, aspirations, dreams and worries in the centre.

"We have so many expectations and criticism about them. But as adults, what do we do to enable the youth or to give them some space in our storytelling and cinema? This was rare for many reasons and when I got out of

that call (with TVF), my news feed had the unfortunate and tragic news of students of Kota having ended their life," Shome told PTI in an interview.

The city in Rajasthan is frequently in the headlines for aspirants taking their own lives and it is an issue that even the show tackles in its latest season.

"Often as artists, we feel very handcuffed because we have chosen to speak through our work. So it's rare when you get an opportunity to actually speak to something that matters," the actor said.

"We live in a time when everything is successful.... But it has to move me. It has to move the needle in some way. And it's very hard to interpret it immediately because like good teachers and most things in life, you see the impact of a good teacher or a show, many years down the line."

Shome, the versatile actor known for her roles in films such as "Monsoon Wedding", "Shanghai", "Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost", "A Death in the Gunj" and "Sir", features in the role of chemistry teacher Pooja Agarwal in the show's third season, which recently dropped on the streaming platform.

The cast of the show is led by Jitendra Kumar who plays the fan favourite character of Jeetu Bhैया.

"I was so moved when I got to know that there are teachers in Kota, who felt after watching Jeetendra's performance as Jeetu bhैया and they felt that they needed to pull up their socks. So that's an impact for you, right? It doesn't always happen," the actor said, praising her co-star's performance.

The new season of "Kota Factory", shot in black-and-white, will see the students inch toward adulthood as final exams loom.

In the third season's trailer, Jitendra's Jeetu Bhैया delivers a key dialogue that puts emphasis on celebrating the hard work put in by students, rather than regaling in the victorious outcome.

The reality, however, is starkly different as exams topers are celebrated with front page advertisements by their coaching institutes, while others continue to wait and toil hard to make the next opportunity count.

Shome said she does not believe in the mentality of only celebrating winners and it is all thanks to her parents who never put any pressure on her.

"They just said that you

have to be independent. And for tasting that independence or being able to enjoy freedom, you decide what you need. And that was it.

Whether you want to study or play, they gave me freedom. I don't remember, even once, that there was any kind of expectation that I have to excel.

"As an adult and as a professional also, I don't feel I have to be at the top of anything. I just want to play. I want to be in this world that I've chosen and that I love."

It is reductive to measure success by highlighting the achievements of only those who end up in the top three of anything, she added.

"It feels like you are reducing something so insanely amazing, whether it's education, acting or any career. I don't believe in that kind of corruption, this top three mentality and front page visibility."

"I don't think you really love the subject. You just love power. What are you going to do with it? Even if you come fourth, you can still work," Shome said.

Directed by Pratish Mehta and shownrun by Raghav Subbu, "Kota Factory" also features Mayur More, Ranjan Raj, Alam Khan, Revathi Pillai, Ahsaas Channa, and Rajesh Kumar. (PTI)

Nagarjuna meets specially-abled fan who was pushed by his bodyguard

NEW DELHI, June 26: Nagarjuna on Wednesday met the differently-abled fan, two days after he was criticised for the way the man was mishandled by the Telugu superstar's bodyguard.

In a new video, shared by the official X page of celebrity photographer Viral Bhayani, Nagarjuna is seen making his way to the Mumbai airport when the fan, a cafe staff, approaches him once again.

Nagarjuna is seen hugging the man, who apologises to him but the actor says, "It's not your fault. Hamara galti hai (It is my fault)."

Bhayani had also posted the original video that saw the fan being shoved aside by Nagarjuna's bodyguard as the actor walked on.

It showed the actor walking out of an airport accompanied by his security detail and his "Kubera" co-star Dhanush. The fan tried to come close to Nagarjuna but was pushed by his bodyguard, making him stumble and almost fall. The bodyguard, however, helped him up. After a social media furore, Nagarjuna apologised for the incident and said he was unaware about what had happened.

"This just came to my notice... this shouldn't have happened!! I apologise to the gentleman and will take necessary precautions that it will not happen in the future!!" Nagarjuna wrote on Sunday as he shared the video on his X account. (PTI)

Argentina advance to Copa America quarters, beat Chile 1-0 on Martínez 88th-minute goal



EAST RUTHERFORD (USA), June 26: After nearly 90 minutes of total domination, Lionel Messi and defending champion Argentina advanced to the Copa America quarterfinals after the ball ricocheted in front of the net during a frantic scramble that led to the breakthrough.

Lautaro Martínez scored off the last in a series of rebounds in the 88th minute, lifting the Albiceleste over Chile 1-0 on Tuesday night and into the quarterfinals with a game to spare.

"The ball ended up right at me and I was able to convert it," said Martínez, who scored the second goal in last week's opening 2-0 win over Canada.

Messi started the leadup to the goal with a corner kick that was sent toward goal with a glancing header by defender Lisandro Martínez. The ball landed in front of goalkeeper Claudio Bravo, where Argentina's Giovanni Lo Celso and Chile's Nicolás Fernández were wrestling. Lo Celso kicked the

ball off Bravo and it rebounded to Chile's Igor Lichnovsky, who tried to poke it wide.

Lautaro Martínez, who entered in the 73rd, calmly one-timed that rebound into the roof of the net on Argentina's 21st shot. Players stood and waited for three minutes while the goal, Martínez's 26th for the national team, was confirmed in a video review.

"We deserved the win. It was not an easy match," Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni said. "We managed to win at the moment

least expected."

Argentina leads Group A with six points, followed by Canada with three, and Chile and Peru with one each. The Albiceleste finish the first round against Peru at Miami Gardens, Florida, on Saturday, when Canada meets Chile in Orlando, Florida.

Playing a day after his 37th birthday, Messi frequently flaunted his talent to spin around and slalom through defenders before an adoring sellout crowd of 81,106 at MetLife Stadium, site of

the 2026 World Cup final. Argentina dominated 22-3 in shots and 11-0 in corner kicks. Chile didn't take its first attempt until the 72nd minute.

Messi came the closest to scoring before Martínez with a 30-yard shot that glanced off the post to Bravo's left in the 36th minute. Messi had received treatment on the thigh area of his right leg for nearly two minutes after getting kicked by Gabriel Suazo in the 24th. Nicolás González's shot from another Messi pass in the 62nd was parried off the crossbar by Bravo.

Argentina outshot Chile 17-0 before Rodrigo Echeverría's 72nd-minute effort following a turnover was saved by Emiliano Martínez, who blocked the ball while falling after it deflected off Alexis Mac Allister. The goalkeeper then used his right hand to bat another Echeverría shot in the 76th that deflected off a toe of defender Cristian Romero.

"I always have to save one or two every match. And I'm lucky to keep doing it," Martínez said.

On the 46th anniversary of Argentina's first World Cup title, the teams returned to the stadium where Chile beat Argentina on penalty kicks in the 2016 Copa America final. That defeat prompted Messi to announce his international retirement only to reverse his decision seven weeks later. At least 90% of the fans wore Argentina jerseys, most with Messi's name and No. 10. (AP)

Harmanpreet named captain as Hockey India announces 16-member squad for Paris Olympics



NEW DELHI, June 26: Harmanpreet Singh was on Wednesday named captain and Hardik Singh his deputy as Hockey India announced a 16-member squad for next month's Paris Olympics, featuring five Games debutants and a handful of seniors from the previous edition. India, who won a bronze medal in the Tokyo Olympics 2020, are placed in Pool B alongside defending champions Belgium, Australia, Argentina, New Zealand and Ireland. Teams finishing in the top four in the pool's points table will advance to the quarter-finals.

The Indian players are currently busy preparing for the Olympics in their national camp at the SAI Centre in Bengaluru.

The venerable goalkeeper PR Sreejesh and midfielder Manpreet Singh are set for their fourth Olympic appearance while skipper Harmanpreet is bracing up for his third Games.

The five players who will make their Olympics debut for India in Paris are Jarmanpreet Singh, Sanjay, Raj Kumar Pal, Abhishek and Sukhjeet Singh.

Since their historic show in Tokyo, where the team won an Olympic medal after a gap of 41 years, Indian defenders Rupinderpal Singh and Birendra Lakra have retired whereas Surender Kumar has been out of favour.

Nilkanta Sharma, who was part of the main squad in Tokyo has been kept among the alterna-

tive players but Dilpreet Singh missed out.

Goalkeeper Krishan Pathak will continue to be an alternate player in second successive Olympics. The defence includes Harmanpreet Singh, Jarmanpreet, Amit Rohidas, Sumit and Sanjay, while the midfield will have Pal, Shamsher Singh, Manpreet Singh, Hardik Singh, and Vivek Sagar Prasad.

Abhishek, Sukhjeet, Lalit Kumar Upadhyay, Mandeep Singh and Gurjant Singh will be among India's forwards.

Defender Jugraj Singh is India's third alternative player apart from Pathak and Nilkanta.

Head coach Craig Fulton was quoted as saying, "The selection process for the Paris Olympics' squad was incredibly competitive due to the depth of talent within our ranks, however, I am confident that every player chosen will bring their best to Paris."

"Each player selected has demonstrated exceptional skill, dedication, and resilience throughout our rigorous preparation phase," Fulton continued, "Our focus has been on building a cohesive team that can adapt to different playing styles and situations, and I believe we have achieved that." "As we head to Paris, our goal is clear - to play with heart, skill, and determination. We are prepared to face the world's best teams and strive for the highest podium." (PTI)

Lost faith in WADA: Olympic gold winners tell US Congress

WASHINGTON, June 26: The USA Olympic athletes have lost faith in the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) to rid their sports of cheaters ahead of next month's Paris Olympics, two former gold medalists told a House subcommittee.

The testimony by Michael Phelps and Allison Schmitt followed revelations this spring that 23 Chinese swimmers had tested positive for a banned heart medication ahead of the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 but were allowed by WADA to compete. Five of those swimmers went

on to win medals, including three golds.

Phelps is the most decorated swimmer in history and a 23-time Olympic gold medalist. Schmitt, a four-time gold medalist, was part of the US 800-meter freestyle relay team that finished a close second to China at the Tokyo Games.

"We raced hard. We trained hard. We followed every protocol. We accepted our defeat with grace," Schmitt said. "Many of us will be haunted by this podium fin-

ish that may have been impacted by doping."

Eleven of the Chinese swimmers who tested positive ahead of Tokyo are set to compete again in Paris.

Phelps, wearing a dark suit, was joined by his wife, Nicole, and youngest son, Nico, who was born in January. He nodded in agreement multiple times as members of Congress criticized WADA and said Americans should be able to watch the Olympics without wondering if the competition is rigged.

Phelps expressed frustration that nothing had changed since he testified before the same subcommittee seven years ago about WADA's handling of Russian state-sponsored doping.

"Sitting here once again, it is clear to me that any attempts of reform at WADA have fallen short, and there are still deeply rooted, systemic problems that prove detrimental to the integrity of international sports and athletes' right to fair competition, time and time again," Phelps said. (AP)

We still haven't played our best game yet: SA coach Rob Walter

TAROUBA (TRINIDAD), June 26: Asserting that their best is yet to come, South Africa coach Rob Walter said the team is not bogged down by near misses of the past and will "take confidence" from its performance in crunch moments on way to the ongoing T20 World Cup semifinals. In the first semifinal of the tournament here on Thursday, perennial dark horses South Africa will take on an Afghanistan team that has caused a flutter with its heroics in the tournament, the highlight of which has been the sensational win over heavyweights Australia.

In the press-match press conference, Walter was asked if this could be South Africa's time after having battled their way past tricky opponents in testing conditions over the last few weeks.

"Definitely it's always great to dream and I think everyone in South Africa dreams of the time when a trophy gets lifted. No doubt that will happen. Whether it's going to be this week, that remains to be seen.

"We're just going to try and play the best game of cricket that we can. And we still haven't played our best game yet," Walter told reporters.

South Africa's success in prevailing in tricky situations, their Achilles Heel in the past, bodes well for the side chasing a maiden World Cup title triumph.

"From the closeness point of view, yeah, we've managed to get over the line in quite a number of close games in the lead up to the semifinal, which for a team has been great for us.

"We've potentially missed out on a few of those moments in the past, and this time around we managed to get over the line. So, we certainly take confidence out of that. "We still want to play our best cricket in the key moments of

the game tomorrow."

Right from the 1992 World Cup, their first since readmission into international cricket after the apartheid ban, South Africa have either choked in those big semifinals of ICC tournaments or luck deserted them.

Needless to say, the subject was broached during the interaction.

"Look, I said, the near misses in the past, they belong to the people who missed them. To be honest, this team is a different team. We own whatever is ours to own. And so, our nearest reflection point is this tournament where we've managed to get over the line. So that's what we think about."

Walter made no effort to play down the pressure and excitement of playing in a World Cup semifinal. "It's never just another game. I think that sort of rhetoric around semifinals is always untrue, or people trying to downplay the occasion. Certainly, we don't do that. It is a semifinal of a World Cup, and we appreciate that and we're looking forward to it."

Instead, he played down the luck factor.

"I don't think you can win a cricket game because of luck. I think potentially a few things can go your way but there's a few things that might not. So, skill will always trump luck, that's for sure. So, I'd like to think that."

He lavished praise on Afghanistan's incredible run to the semifinals, the war-ravaged nation's first in a World Cup.

"We're seeing Afghanistan in a T20 semifinal. It's awesome for the game of cricket. I love the way they play the game and the way they support it."

How well does he know the Afghanistan team?

Walter said, it's not difficult to study teams in modern cricket, with plenty of technology at its disposal. (PTI)

NRAI begins process to hire coaches, experts for next Olympic cycle

NEW DELHI, June 26: The National Rifle Association of India has initiated the process of hiring high-performance managers and coaches for the next Olympic cycle as the tenure of the current set of experts will end after the Paris Games in August.

A record number of 21 shooters have qualified for the Paris Games, raising hopes that India will break the jinx of returning home without a medal in the two previous Olympics -- 2016 Rio and 2021 Tokyo.

All the experts in the current setup will be eligible to apply for the posts of High-Performance Director, foreign and national coaches and the NRAI will keep

them till the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

The Indian shooting team is currently having the services of HPD Pierre Beauchamp, while two-time Olympic medalist Munkhbayar Dorjsuren is the team's foreign coach for pistol events. Austria's Thomas Farnik is the foreign coach for rifle shooters.

The last date for receipt of applications for the post of HPD, foreign and national coaches is July 31. "The Sports Authority of India always follow the Olympic cycle in terms of hiring coaches and based on that we have advertised for the posts. Anybody who wants to render their services

again will have to apply. The NRAI will discuss each and every case and based on the merit they will be selected," NRAI secretary Rajiv Bhatia said.

On whether the performance in the Paris Olympics will count towards the appointment or rejection of current set of coaches in the next Olympic cycle, Bhatia said, "Naturally appointment will be valid from after the Paris Olympics. The contracts of the current set of coaches are till August 31."

"Shooting sport at the Olympics will be over on August 6, so we will have 25-26 days after that to (consider the next set of coaches)."

India's top athletics stars vie for Olympics berths at National Inter-State C'ships

PANCHKULA (HARYANA), June 26: The absence of Olympic javelin throw champion Neeraj Chopra notwithstanding, there will be no lack of star power as the country's remaining top track and field athletes vie for Paris Olympics berths during the National Inter-State Championships beginning here Thursday.

The championships will serve as the final qualifying event for the upcoming Paris Games where the athletics events begin on August 1. Incidentally, the final day of the four-day championships -- June 30 -- also coincides with the Olympics qualifying window deadline.

Chopra will skip the championships as there is only a few days gap before the Paris Diamond League on July 7, in which he is set to compete. He competed in the Federation Cup in Bhubaneswar last month, winning a gold.

Last month, Athletics Federation of India (AFI) president Adil Sumariwalla had made it

clear that except for Chopra, it will be mandatory for all the other athletes to participate in the National Inter-State Championships to get selected for the Paris Olympics.

AFI rules state that all the athletes will have to participate in the National Inter-State Championships if they have to get selected for major multi-sport events like the Olympics, Asian Games or the Commonwealth Games, unless the federation gives exemption on the request of particular athletes or their coaches.

In the absence of Chopra, the likes of Avinash Sable (men's 3000m steeplechase), Kishore Jena (men's javelin throw), Ram Baboo (men's 20km race walk) and Parul Chaudhary (women's 3000m steeplechase) -- all of whom have booked Paris Games berths by breaching the qualifying standards -- will headline the championships.

Other athletes who can book Paris ticket through world rank-



ing quota like Jyothi Yarraji (women's 100m hurdles), Annu Rani (women's javelin throw), DP Manu (men's javelin throw), Tajinderpal Singh Toor (men's shot put), Jeswin Aldrin (men's long jump), Praveen Chitravel and Abdulla Aboobacker (both men's triple jump) have also entered their names.

Toor, an Asian record holder till a few days back, told PTI on Tuesday that he is dealing with a

slight ankle pain and his doctor told him not to throw for three-four weeks. But his name figured in Wednesday's updated entry list of the AFI.

Some of rising stars like sprinter Animesh Kujur, 110m hurdler Tejas Shire -- who recently set the national record -- and long jumper Shaili Singh are also set to be seen in action.

National record holder Manikanta Hoblidhar is also set

ing under foreign coach. They will say 'we train with personal coaches. I have got nothing to do with foreign coach'.

"When you are not training with foreign coach, they why you need foreign coach. Whether he comes or not, what difference does it make," added Bhatia.

"There is a fixed line for every shooter that we don't train with foreign coach. This is the hypocrisy of athletes."

Interestingly, SAI and NRAI spend crores of rupees on foreign experts.

"As far as foreign coaches are concerned, they complete their camp period and only then they leave," he added. (PTI)

to be back in action after missing the Federation Cup and his 100m dash duel with Kujur, Amlan Borgohain and Gurindervir Singh for the tag of the country's fastest man will be interesting to watch though none of them are likely to make it to Paris.

Federation Cup 200m gold medalist Kujur will also be up against national record holder Borgohain in another duel.

Almost all the members of the Indian men's and women's 4x400m relay teams that had booked Paris berths will feature in the individual quarter-mile events. National record holder 20km race walker Akshdeep Singh, who has also breached the Paris Games qualifying mark, is missing from the entry list. Women's 20km race walk national record holder Priyanka Goswami, who has also qualified for Paris Olympics, is not in the list. The opening day will see just three finals -- women's hammer throw, men's and women's 500m races. (PTI)

India look to beat knockout stage nerves, eye revenge against England in T20WC semis



GEORGETOWN (GUYANA), June 26: With a refreshingly aggressive batting approach, India would look to avoid the knockout stage jitters plaguing them for over a decade when they take on defending champions England in the semifinals of the T20 World Cup here on Thursday.

The last time these two teams met at this stage, it turned out to be a no contest as England outplayed an outdated India in the 2022 edition's semifinal.

However, India have finally been able to shed their conservative approach at the top of the order since that 10-wicket hammering in Adelaide and have become the team to beat in this competition.

On paper, Rohit Sharma and his men look the stronger bunch for the conditions expected at the Providence Stadium and look primed for revenge.

The spinners have enjoyed bowling here since the opening game and the likes of India's Kuldeep Yadav and England's Adil Rashid would be itching to flout their skills in the knock-out fixture.

Spinners are not the only ones who will come into play, the pacers too have got success at the venue

with Afghanistan speedster Fazal-haq Farooqi producing a match-winning spell against New Zealand at the start of the competition.

Interestingly, no match has been staged here since June 8 when the West Indies breezed past Uganda in a day game, giving the curators extra time to prepare a suitable pitch for the high-profile game.

India were clinical in the Super 8 stage but the extreme pressure of a semi-final tends to produce unforced errors.

At the top of the order, India will be hoping for runs from the bat of Virat Kohli, who has had an underwhelming tournament by his high standards.

On the contrary, his opening partner and skipper Rohit has set the benchmark for other batters when it comes to fearless cricket.

His blazing 41-ball 92 against Australia is the sort of knock that won't be easily forgotten for some time to come.

For both Rohit and Kohli, it is probably their last shot at the T20 world title in India colours and the two would be desperate to leave a mark.

Rohit has already made it clear that he intends to go ballistic in the powerplays without a care for per-

sonal milestones, which was evident in the game against Australia.

Shivam Dube has not batted as per expectations in the middle-order and it will be interesting to see how he fares against wily leg-spinner Rashid.

India are likely to go unchanged into the game even though they have Yuzvendra Chahal in the squad who can come in handy against England's right-handers including Phil Salt, Jos Buttler, Harry Brook and Jonny Bairstow.

Chahal is yet to get a game in this competition and it is set to remain that way with India expected to continue the trio of Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel and Kuldeep, who was the team's trump card in Super 8s.

Jasprit Bumrah is in a league of his own and England will need to do something special to score off him.

Hardik Pandya's all-round show has helped India immensely thus far and the management will be hoping it stays that way.

England, on the other hand, have not had the smoothest of campaigns. They stuttered into Super 8s where they lost to South Africa before turning things around.

Skipper Buttler was back among

the runs against USA in England's final Super 8 game and considering the familiarity with the Indian attack, he is well-placed to come up with a game-changing knock.

His opening partner Phil Salt can take the game away from opposition very quickly and India will need to dismiss him in the powerplay.

More runs are expected from Bairstow and Moeen Ali, whose off-spin could be useful against India's left-handers.

Liam Livingstone, who bowls both leg and off spin, too can bowl his full quota of overs like he did against USA the other night.

Rashid's four overs can also prove decisive in the all-important fixture.

In his first high-profile event since returning from injury, pacer Jofra Archer has done well in the seven games so far and would be backing himself to trouble Rohit and Kohli with the new ball.

Having taken a hat-trick in the last game, the confidence of Chris Jordan too will be sky high.

"Obviously, when we left England a few weeks ago, we left to come and obviously try and defend the title. There's been a few bumps in the road along the way, but I think you kind of described them as good bumps because they've really narrowed down our focus and really made our direction really clear," said Jordan after the win over USA.

There is also a likelihood of rain impacting the game with chances of showers in the lead up to the semi-final and also on match day.

Squads: **India:** Rohit Sharma (c), Hardik Pandya, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Virat Kohli, Suryakumar Yadav, Rishabh Pant, Sanju Samson, Shivam Dube, Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, Yuzvendra Chahal, Arshdeep Singh, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj.

England: Jos Buttler (c), Moeen Ali, Jofra Archer, Jonathan Bairstow, Harry Brook, Sam Curran, Ben Duckett, Tom Hartley, Will Jacks, Chris Jordan, Liam Livingstone, Adil Rashid, Phil Salt, Reece Topley, Mark Wood.

Match starts 8pm IST. (PTI)

SA, Afghanistan look to rise above deep scars to seal T20 WC final berth

TAROUBA (TRINIDAD), June 26: Tournament story-makers Afghanistan will be up against perennial dark horses South Africa in the first semifinal of the T20 World Cup here, a much-anticipated showdown that will be historic irrespective of the outcome.

Without belittling the poised run of the Proteas, Afghanistan have been the revelation of this ICC showpiece.

They found life and fighting spirit to rise above the ravages of war back in their country, best exemplified by an astounding win over 2021 winners Australia, whom they had never beaten before.

There were multiple heroes -- skipper Rashid Khan has been immense throughout, pacers Fazal-haq Farooqi and Naveen-ul-Haq have given early breakthroughs, Gulbadin Naib conjured a miraculous spell against the Aussies while Mohammad Nabi remained perseverant.

Opener Rahmanullah Gurbaz leads the batting chart with 281 runs, while Farooqi is on top of the bowling list with 16 scalps.

It is a story in itself as how two Afghanistan players have raced past some marquee names to the top of the stats table.

But all of it can come to nothing if they falter at the Brian Lara Academy, a venue named after the West Indian legend who has supported Afghanistan to the hilt.

The Afghans are a skilled set of cricketers, on whose back the team rose brilliantly from the low-tier obscurity of the early 2000s.

So, they are not unfamiliar to intense competition and T20, more than any other format, offers them the chance to challenge the big brothers.

But they have never competed in the semifinal of a World Cup, and the Afghans now need to control their nerves to overcome a fancied opponent.

Head coach Jonathan Trott affirmed his side was not perturbed by the big occasion.

"We go into the semifinal with no scarring or no history. This is uncharted territory for us. But, by no means, do we feel like we're going into the semifinal just to compete.



"We're there to win the semifinal. We've beaten some major teams," Trott said after the win over Bangladesh.

South Africa's scars also run deep but they are purely of cricketing nature.

In the past, the Proteas have assembled some high-velocity squads but never managed to enter the title round of a T20 or 50-over World Cup after their re-admission into world cricket in 1991.

To change that long-running show of misfortune, South Africa need to tame not just Afghanistan but also the demons in their own minds.

The signs have so far given hope.

In this event, they have shown a propensity to win the clutch moments, their Achilles Heel in previous global tournaments, that often prop up without any warning.

But here, they have notched up victories as close as one-run (vs Nepal), four-run (vs Bangladesh) and three wickets (vs West Indies).

South Africa of old could have bungled in those situations, but Aiden Markram's side has displayed remarkable fortitude. They seem to have escaped the hackedneyed C-Word.

Experienced left-arm spinner Keshav Maharaj explained his team's run in this World Cup.

"If you look at previous World Cups, the small moments, we haven't really won. It's good to see that all the games have come really close and we've found a way, so it's building the character within the team."

"It prepares us for certain oppor-

unities that we could get and cross over the line in those small moments. These are things that we've never done before. So, it's good to see us getting into that," said Maharaj.

His words offer a true reflection of the collective effort South Africa have made here.

There is only one South African player in top-10 batters' list. Quinton de Kock is placed sixth with 199 runs from seven matches, while none of their bowlers feature inside the first 10.

But here they are, playing in the semifinal and they will have to negate those small, key moments against Afghanistan, perhaps in the next match too.

For once, South Africa might not feel overwhelmed by that thought.

If Afghanistan too can keep their heartsbeats in check, a classic for the ages seems well on the cards.

Squads:

Afghanistan: Rashid Khan (c), Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Ibrahim Zadrar, Azmatullah Omarzai, Najibullah Zadrar, Mohammad Ishaq, Mohammad Nabi, Gulbadin Naib, Karim Janat, Nangyal Kharoti, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, Noor Ahmad, Naveen-ul-Haq, Fazal-haq Farooqi, Fared Ahmad Malik. Reserves: Sediq Atal, Hazratullah Zazai, Saleem Safi.

South Africa: Aiden Markram (c), Ottienel Baartman, Gerald Coetzee, Quinton de Kock, Bjorn Fortuin, Reeza Hendricks, Marco Jansen, Heinrich Klaasen, Keshav Maharaj, David Miller, Anrich Nortje, Kagiso Rabada, Ryan Rickelton, Tabraiz Shamsi, Tristan Stubbs.

Match starts at 6am IST. (PTI)

'India House in Paris will be home away from home for Indian athletes'



MUMBAI, June 26: The first ever India House at the Paris Olympics will be a "home away from home" for the travelling national contingent and will also provide a glimpse into the country's "rich cultural and sporting heritage", IOA President PT Usha and IOC member Nita Ambani have stated.

The India House will commemorate the completion of 100 years of country's Olympic participation.

The India House will be located at the Parc de la Villette in Paris, which has been designated as the 'Park of Nations' during the Games and will be surrounded by 14 other hospitality houses including those from Netherlands, Canada, Brazil and France.

The India House has been established by the Reliance Foundation in partnership with the IOA (Indian Olympic Association) and will showcase "India's storied past, vibrant present, and exciting future alongside advances in technology and digitalisation", a press release said.

"India has proven its mettle as a host of major events and India House will reflect the strides we have made as a sporting nation as well as in the Olympic movement," Usha said in a statement.

IOC (International Olympic Committee) member Nita Ambani added, "The IOC session in India last year, the first in 40 years, was a key milestone in our Olympic journey and we are delighted to continue this momentum with the launch of India House -- a space where we will honour our athletes, celebrate our wins and share our stories."

The India House would also provide a platform for visitors to interact with sports legends. (PTI)

Inaugural U23 Basketball Championship from Feb 3 next year



GUWAHATI, June 26: The Assam Basketball Association convened a meeting at Hotel Oranate, Guwahati on Tuesday, to commemorate its 50th Anniversary.

During the event, they announced the inaugural Under 23 Men's and Women's Basketball Championship scheduled to take place from February 3 to February 9, 2025, marking a historic occasion.

The ceremony was graced by the esteemed presence of Nandita Ghorlosa, minister of Assam; Rinihi Bhuyan Sarma, chief patron of the Assam Basketball Association and CMD of Pride East Entertainment; Pallab Lochan Das, president of ABA and Ex-MP; Jamil Hilaly, IAS, secretary to the Government of Assam; Pradip Timung, ACS, director of Sports and Youth Welfare; and sports organiser Dr. Bishnuram Nunisa, among other dignitaries.

Players are used to playing with red ball, thanks to Inter-zonal tourney: Muzumdar

CHENNAI, June 26: Competing in five-day format is special, Indian women cricket team's head coach Amol Muzumdar said on Wednesday, asserting his side is well-prepared for the one-off Test against South Africa, thanks to the multi-day inter-zonal tournament at home.

The Indian women team last played the Test format in December 2023 against England and Australia and emerged victorious in both matches.

"We enjoy playing all three formats, but Tests are always special. After back-to-back Tests against England and Australia in December, it was great on BCCI's part to include the inter-zonal in the multi-day format, and they are all so used to playing red-ball cricket," Muzumdar said during a press meet.

Deepti Sharma had led the East Zone to title triumph when they eked out a narrow one-wicket win over South Zone in the final in April this year. The 2023-24 domestic season for Indian women had concluded with that match.

"We are aware that red-ball cricket will

be a part (of calendar), going forward. Hence, the inter-zonal was critical so that the players get the message."

Muzumdar said having women's Test championship will be great for the game.

"It's not a bad idea to have a (Women's) Test Championship, something we can look forward to. But that is for the Board to decide. If it happens, it's indeed better for the game," he said.

The India coach admitted that his team needs to improve in all departments but insisted that the players are ready for the challenges.

"There's scope for improvement in all three departments; there always is, along with fitness. We do have the momentum, but we are trying to focus on every game as it comes. Being a different format, the demands are different, and the team is up for it."

"We try to cater to all the demands since those are the demands of modern-day cricket; you cannot escape that. There have been a few changes in the squad (from the ODIs), but the core remains the

Naib was trying to win a World Cup match for his team: Ashwin backs Afghan all-rounder

CHENNAI, June 26: Veteran off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin felt the on-field histrionics of Afghanistan's Gulbadin Naib against Bangladesh were justified because it happened in a must-win Super Eight match for his side in the ongoing T20 World Cup.

Naib, who was fielding in the slip cordon, fell on his back while clutching his thighs during the 12th over, just after coach Jonathan Trott signalled to slow down the proceedings as rain was imminent with Afghanistan ahead in the game.

"Jonathan Trott was telling from the dressing room to slow it down and after that Naib fell on the ground like a broken tree branch. Everyone is saying he will be penalised for it. But what's the problem? The guy is playing for his country, trying to win a World Cup qualifier (must-win match)," Ashwin said in his YouTube channel.

The ICC's playing conditions stipulate that a player can get up to a two-match ban for "deliberate or repetitive" time-wasting tactics, but Naib might just escape with a first and final warning by the match referee in this instance.

Earlier, Ashwin had remarked in jest on his X account: "Red card for Gulbadin Naib."

Naib replied to the India off-spinner through his social media handle. "Kabi khushi kabi gham main huta hai (It happens sometimes when you are happy or when you are sad. Hamstring."



Touching back on a cricketing topic, Ashwin made a tactical observation and said the Afghans should look to survive the early phase of their semifinal against South Africa on Thursday before asserting themselves.

"The Tarouba pitch is two-paced. I have played there. One ball will suddenly take-off, so SA have bowlers to trouble Afghan batters. But SA have to reserve Anrich Nortje for middle overs to give some depth. Rabada should also be used in that phase.

"If not, the Afghans will see through the pacers and then will dominate the spinners which they did very well in the earlier matches. But South Africa is South Africa, I will give them a grand 51-49 odds," he added. (PTI)



same. It's not easy, but it's a challenge that we accept to adapt to different formats."

Indian women have played just one Test in Chennai, way back in 1976 against the West Indies. The game had ended in a draw.

"It's an iconic ground; we are aware of

the history it carries. Even though a lot of cricket has not been played here, we are aware of what the demands are -- the pitch and the ground. We will try to cater to that," he said.

The Test could see the debut of players such as Shubha Sathesh, Sneha Rana, Ra-

Five Olympic bound Indian boxers to train in Germany ahead of Paris Olympics

NEW DELHI, June 26: Olympic-bound Indian boxers, sans CWG gold medallist Amit Panghal, will travel to Germany for a month-long training camp, starting June 28, ahead of the Paris Games.

The boxers, including world champion Nikhat Zareen (50kg) and Tokyo Olympics bronze medallist Lovlina Borgohain (75kg), will train alongside the national squads of Ireland, USA, Mongolia, Germany and Denmark among others at the Olympic Centre in Saarbrücken, Germany.

The other boxers are 2023 World Championships bronze medallist Nishant Dev (71kg), Preeti Pawar (54kg) and Jaismine Lamboria (57kg).

Panghal (51kg), however, will continue to train at Sports Authority of India's Shilaroo centre with his coaches and support staff from the national camp and will join the rest of the team in France. (PTI)