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- Ursula von der Leyen re-elected to a second 5-year term
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- Telangana govt to launch farm loan waiver scheme
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Oppn asks CM to make source of data public

Govt claim about 40% Muslim population in Assam creates storm

GUWAHATI, July 18: The opposition in Assam on Thursday accused chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma of diverting people's attention from "pressing problems" by making claims such as the Muslim population in the state has risen to 40 per cent.

Sarma had claimed in Ranchi on Wednesday that the Muslim population in Assam has increased to 40 per cent, contending that demographic change is a "big issue" in the northeastern state.

"I come from Assam and demographic change is a big issue for me. Muslim population in my state is 40 per cent now, which was 12 per cent in 1951. It is not a political issue for me, but a matter of life and death," Sarma, who is also the BJP's Jharkhand election co-in-charge, said on the sidelines of a party meeting.



Reacting to the remarks, Assam Congress president Bhupen Kumar Borah said the CM is making such statements to "hide his failures". The opposition also sought to

to hide his failures, be it in solving the flood and erosion problem, unemployment, daily wages of tea garden workers or granting Scheduled Tribe status to six communities," Borah said.

Trinamool Congress national spokesperson Sushmita Dev, in a video message posted on X, said: "Assam CM's statement in Jharkhand is incorrect. The data given by him is false. In 1952, Muslim population in Assam was not 12 per cent, it was 25 per cent. Assam is a border state with Bangladesh, many people had come here after Partition."

"I want to remind the CM that Government of India was to conduct the census in 2021, which it did not do on the pretext of COVID. So, from where did this 40 per cent figure come?" the former Lok Sabha MP added.

Crackdown on child marriage in every six months: CM

GUWAHATI, July 18: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said his government would continue its crackdown on child marriages and a special drive against the social evil would be conducted every six months.

He said the director general of police (DGP) has been instructed to conduct a preliminary survey for the next round of crackdown on child marriages towards the year-end.

Sarma's comments come after an NGO report on Wednesday maintained that the state government's action against child marriage has led to a decline in the number of such cases. "Our campaign and tough action against child marriage will continue. Every six months a special drive will be conducted, and the DGP has been instructed to conduct a preliminary survey for the next crackdown on child marriages in November-December this year," the CM said in a video message on Wednesday evening.

Initially, some people were "not happy with the crackdown against child marriages, but now people are preventing the social evil, even in minority areas," he said.



Sarma said the data of the India Child Protection (ICP) report is a "testament to our sustained efforts in empowering Nari Shakti (women power)". As per data from the National Crime Record Bureau and also from a survey covering 1,132 villages in 20 districts of the state, 30 per cent of these areas have reported "complete eradication" of child marriage, while 40 per cent have seen a "significant decline" in the once-rampant practice of the social evil, the report said.

The villages surveyed have a total population of 21 lakh, with a child

HT BRIEFS

Mechanical transplanting
DIPHU: A demonstration on mechanical transplanting of paddy under the Promotion of Double Cropping programme was organised by Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK), Karbi Anglong on July 16 last at Kothalguri village of Dhanisiri under Lumbajong Block through the Mechanical Paddy Transplanter. A medium duration (130-135 days) variety of paddy, Numoli was transplanted. Dr Subal Maibangsa, head, KVK, Karbi Anglong and Prakshipta Boruah, Subject Matter Specialist (Agronomy) were present in the demonstration programme. Dr Maibangsa addressed the farmers and highlighted the importance of double cropping. The programme aims to increase the crop intensity of the state where cultivation of medium duration Sali paddy will be followed by Toria or Lentil in the Rabi season, which will enhance the productivity and thereby boost the farmers' income. 17 of farmers were present in the programme.

Emergency meeting
BOKAJAN: The Greater Lahorijan Bazar Committee (GLBC) called an emergency meeting with the traders of the area at PWD IB. In the meeting, the traders were urged to keep the market area clean and to shut down on Monday per week till 2 pm. The traders were warned that petty traders would be fined ₹ 5,000/- and others would be fined ₹ 10,000/- in case they did not close on Monday. The OC of Khakhathi police station, Nitul Saikia, who attended the meeting, said it is for the greater good of all. In case there is any law and order problem the police and he is there to help them. Inspector of Taxes, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, Taxation Department, Sarpanji Ronghang asked the traders and businessmen to keep their Professional Tax and Trade Licenses current. The meeting was attended by GLBC president, Bipul Tisso; secretary, Sarsing Teron and others.

Commercial vehicles
BOKAJAN: Operators of commercial vehicles alleged that the entry tax gates at NH 39 and on Lahorijan-Burma Camp, Nagaland are charging up and above the rate that is printed on the slip of the entry tax gates. Both gates are under Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and both roads enter and exit from Karbi Anglong.

SC directs NTA to declare centre-wise results of NEET-UG while masking identity of candidates

NEW DELHI, July 18: The Supreme Court on Thursday directed the National Testing Agency (NTA) to declare by 12 noon of July 20 the centre and city-wise results of NEET-UG 2024 while masking the identities of aspirants.

As it strove to address the allegations of malpractices in the conduct of the examination, a bench headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud said any order for conducting it afresh has to be on concrete conclusion that the sanctity of the entire process was affected.

The top court will resume hearing the arguments on July 22 on a batch of pleas seeking cancellation, re-test and a court-monitored probe into the allegations of large-scale malpractices in the prestigious test held on May 5.

During the day-long hearing, the bench asked the counsel for the aspirants to establish their claim about extensive irregularities in holding the examination, including leak of question paper, warranting cancellation and a re-test.

The court said it prima facie appeared that the question paper leak was limited to Patna and Hazaribagh, and nothing of this sort can be said to have happened in Godhra in Gujarat.

In Patna and Hazaribagh, the question papers allegedly got leaked, while in Godhra there were claims that a person involved in holding the test took money for filling up the OMR sheets of certain candidates.



Questioning the claims about leak of question paper on social media platform "Telegram", the bench said, "You have to bear in mind that the idea of somebody doing this was not to make a national charade. People did it for money. So, it was not to bring disrepute to the exam and somebody was doing it to make money which is evident. Mass leakage requires contacts also at that level so that you connect to all such key contacts in different cities."

The bench, also comprising Justices JB Pardiwala and Manoj Misra, which commenced the crucial hearing on a batch of petitions related to the controversy-ridden medical entrance exam, said it has "social ramifications". (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

No casualties from Assam so far in UP train accident: CM

GUWAHATI, July 18: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday said no casualties from his state have so far been reported in the Chandigarh-Dibrugarh Express derailment in Uttar Pradesh.

Four people were killed and 20 injured when eight coaches of the Assam-bound 15904 Chandigarh-Dibrugarh Express derailed near Gonda in Uttar Pradesh around 2:35 pm, officials said.

Sarma said teams are on standby for support, and he is closely monitoring the situation.

A Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) bulletin said a special train

has been arranged to bring the stranded passengers to Dibrugarh, while helpline numbers have been opened to assist with any information on the accident.

"Shocked to learn about the Chandigarh-Dibrugarh train accident in UP today, I am monitoring the situation closely," Sarma wrote on X. "We will do our best to ensure the safety and well-being of everyone," he said. The NFR bulletin said the stranded passengers of the derailed train are being brought by bus to Mankapur station near Gonda. "A special train has been arranged for them from (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Indians, Nepalese among 300 who entered M'laya from violence-hit B'desh: Official

SHILLONG/GUWAHATI, July 18: Over 300 Indians, Nepalese and Bhutanese, mostly students, who were stranded in neighbouring Bangladesh due to the ongoing violence there, have crossed over to Meghalaya, officials said on Thursday.

The government of another northeastern state Assam said it is in touch with the Ministry of External Affairs to ensure the safety of its people staying in the neighbouring country.

At least 11 more people were killed in Bangladesh on Thursday as violence escalated in the capital Dhaka and elsewhere over student protests demanding reforms of the quota system for government jobs, taking the toll to 18 since the protests erupted.

"Till this evening, 310 Indians, Nepalese and Bhutanese stranded due to violence in Bangladesh have crossed over to India through the Dawki Integrated Check Post here," a senior home department official told PTI.

Of the 310 people, 202 are Indians, 101 are from Nepal and seven Bhutanese, he said, adding that

most of them are students.

The Meghalaya government has kept constant touch with the Bangladesh High Commission and the Land Port Authority to facilitate safe returns of Indians.

A helpline number, 1800 345 3644, has also been introduced to help the Meghalaya people in distress in Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) in Assam also came up with a helpline number +880-1937400591 for those who want to return to the state from the neighbouring nation.

"The State Government is in constant touch with the Ministry of External Affairs to coordinate plans to help citizens return in light of the situation in Bangladesh," the CMO posted on X.

It did not share any estimate of people from Assam residing or visiting the neighbouring country, or whether people have contacted the government for safe evacuation.

Fresh violence erupted in Bangladesh on Thursday after an overnight lull as thousands of students attempted to enforce a nationwide shutdown. (PTI)

2026 polls: Cong to be part of united oppn

High-level Cong meeting agrees to decentralisation of power

GUWAHATI, July 18: Assam Congress president Bhupen Kumar Borah on Thursday said that his party will contest the 2026 assembly poll as part of the 16-party united opposition forum.

Borah said his party as well as other members of the forum will continue to work to strengthen their base across all districts.

"It is certain that we will fight the 2026 state elections together with the united opposition forum. But that does not mean that the parties will sit idle. All parties will keep on working to expand their organisational base, and there is no harm in it," he told reporters here.

Borah also asserted that being part of a forum does not imply equal distribution of seats in any election.

Members of the grouping are given seats as per their strength, background and history of the constituencies, he said.

Activating the party's discipli-

ary committee and ensuring that it operates as per the party constitution were also discussed, Borah said.

He also said six committees, headed by top state leaders, were formed to look into different aspects like organisational changes, training of new members and election management.

"A digital taskforce is being set up, too, so that we have means to ensure that our messages reach each and every party worker and leader," he added. (PTI)

Financial aid distributed to 235 beneficiaries in Diphu

HT Bureau
DIPHU, July 18: MLA of Diphu LAC, Bidiyasing Englung, distributed cheques on Thursday to 235 beneficiaries under the Chief Minister's Relief Fund as financial assistance for medical treatment and students, at Diphu Club.

Chief Executive Member (CEM) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Tuliram Ronghang, attended the cheque distribution function as the Chief Guest.

He praised MLA Englung's proactive approach in distributing financial assistance from the Chief Minister's Relief Fund to students for their education and those undergoing medical treatment.

Regarding the education initiatives, CEM Ronghang mentioned that the government has ensured free college admission to alleviate concerns of (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Meghalaya govt not to ban Assam taxis entering Meghalaya tourist spots

SHILLONG, July 18: Meghalaya government has no plans to ban tourist vehicles from Assam from entering Meghalaya, said state tourism minister Paul Lyngdoh on Thursday.

"There are visitors from Meghalaya touring Assam and the government wants to keep a balance as far as the entry of the tourist vehicles entering Meghalaya is concerned," said the minister while speaking to reporters.

The minister held a meeting with the transport department regarding the demand by the tourist taxi drivers association to ban tourist vehicles from Assam ferrying tourists to tourist spots in Meghalaya.

He further said a meeting will be called with all the stakeholders to discuss the issue further.

Last week, All Khasi Meghalaya Tourist Taxi Association submitted a memorandum to Meghalaya gov-

ernment seeking ban on the tourist vehicles from Assam.

However, this evoked criticism among various Tourist Cab Operators' Unions of Assam.

The tourism minister admitted that Meghalaya is considering Assam as the entry point due to its airport and railway station, as Meghalaya is unable to risk the services provided by vehicles traveling to Assam and Meghalayans visiting Assam for tourism, health, or education purposes. All of these factors have significant implications.

Lyngdoh informed that there are legal issues to ban any tourist vehicle from ferrying tourists anywhere, since they have tourist permits for their vehicles. Lyngdoh said that in the next 10-12 days he will invite all the tourists Taxi Associations in the state for a general meeting to discuss the demands of the All Khasi Meghalaya Tourist Taxi Association.

30% of Assam's surveyed villages, child marriage has been eradicated

Conviction rate under Child Marriage Act just 11 pc: Report

NEW DELHI, July 18: The conviction rate under the Prevention of Child Marriage Act stands at 11 per cent while for all other crimes against children it is 34 per cent, according to a new report.

In 2022, out of the total 3,563 child marriage cases listed for trial in courts under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, a mere 181 cases were successfully concluded in terms of trial completion.

Despite the fact that there are 3,365 cases pending, with the current rate of disposal, the country may take 19 years to clear the backlogs as of 2022, according to a report by the India Child Protection (ICP) research team which was released by child rights body the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR).



The total number of child marriage cases registered during the last five years was less than the number of girl child marriages taking place in a single day in the

country, according to a new study.

On an average, only one case of child marriage per district was registered for prosecution in 2022.

The report said the official data

has showed that out of 63,513 children of kidnapping and abduction who were recovered in 2022, 15,748 (25%) were kidnapped and abducted for the purpose of either 'marriage' or 'illicit intercourse'.

Of this, 15,142 children recovered in 2022 were kidnapped solely for the purpose of marriage.

This report used a multi-faceted approach, combining primary data gathered at the village level through engagement with key stakeholders, including Panchayati Raj Institution functionaries and NGO activists involved in child protection initiatives. Secondary data from the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) and the Crime in India Reports published by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Sensex breaches 81,000 level, Nifty closes at record 24,800 as IT shares shine

MUMBAI, July 18: Stock markets remained on record-smashing course for the fourth straight day on Thursday with benchmark Sensex breaching the 81,000 mark for the first time and Nifty scaling the record 24,800 level driven by buying in IT, oil&gas and FMCG shares.

Rebounding from its early lows, the 30-share BSE Sensex rose by 626.91 points or 0.78 per cent to settle at a fresh closing high of 81,343.46. The index opened on a weak note and hit a low of 80,390.37 points in early trade.

However buying in IT shares TCS, Infosys and Tech Mahindra and index heavyweight Reliance Industries helped the index pare losses in the afternoon session. The barometer surged 806 points or 0.99 per cent to hit a new record intra-day peak of 81,522.55.

The broader Nifty also pared early losses and climbed 187.85 points or 0.76 per cent to settle at an all-time closing high of 24,800.85. During the day, it zoomed 224.75 points or 0.91 per cent to hit a fresh lifetime high of 24,837.75.

"The frontline indices firmed up in the second half, reaching fresh highs driven by renewed buying in IT stocks. Investor optimism for the sector grew after strong per-



formance reports from the country's leading IT firms in the June quarter, coupled with a weakening rupee," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

Softening US bond yields on growing hopes of a US Fed rate cut by September also boosted FII flows into Indian equities, analysts said.

Among Sensex shares, Tata Consultancy Services rose the most by 3.33 per cent.

Infosys gained 1.93 per cent ahead of the financial results for the June quarter. The IT major after market hours reported a 7 per cent rise in consolidated net profit

to ₹ 6368 crore for the April-June period and also raised its growth outlook for the current fiscal.

Bajaj Finserv, Mahindra & Mahindra, Tech Mahindra, Hindustan Unilever, State Bank of India and HCL Technologies were among the gainers.

On the contrary, Asian Paints, JSW Steel, NTPC and Adani Ports were among the laggards. In total, 22 Sensex shares advanced and eight declined.

The broader market lagged the major indices due to high valuations and sectoral rotation, which is influenced by anticipated improvement in private consumption, particularly in rural areas, Nair

said.

The BSE smallcap gauge dropped 1.15 per cent and the mid-cap index dipped 0.99 per cent.

Among the indices, capital goods dropped 2.03 per cent, industrials by 1.95 per cent, utilities by 1.08 per cent and services by 0.87 per cent.

Healthcare, IT, telecommunication, auto and tech were the gainers.

In Asian markets, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled higher, while Seoul and Tokyo ended lower. European markets were trading higher.

The US markets ended mostly lower on Wednesday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 0.14 per cent to USD 84.96 a barrel.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth ₹ 1,271.45 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data. Stock markets were closed on Wednesday on account of Muharram.

Benchmark Sensex and Nifty have been on a record-breaking run since Friday. The indices have traded at lifetime high levels in the four straight sessions. Nifty advanced nearly 485 points or 1.98 per cent while Sensex rose by 1446 points or 1.79 per cent since Friday. (PTI)

Markets turn negative after hitting fresh record-high levels

MUMBAI, July 18: Equity benchmark indices turned negative soon after hitting new record-high levels in a highly volatile trade on Thursday. The 30-share BSE Sensex opened on a weak note, but bounced back later and climbed 193.9 points to hit a new record peak of 80,910.45. However, the benchmark failed to hold on to the gains and traded 151.38 points lower at 80,550.97 at 11:22 hours. Similarly, the NSE Nifty after a weak beginning recovered the early lost ground and climbed 65.9 points to hit a fresh lifetime high of 24,678.90. The Nifty also gave up all the gains and quoted 66.35 points down at 24,546.65. Among the Sensex pack, Adani Ports, Asian Paints, Tata Steel, NTPC, Power Grid and UltraTech Cement were the biggest laggards. (PTI)

Airtel launches affordable booster packs for unlimited 5G data

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, July 18: Airtel has introduced new booster packs, allowing customers with 1GB/day and 1.5GB/day plans to upgrade to unlimited 5G data, ensuring seamless work, study, play, and entertainment experiences. These affordable upgrades can be activated on existing data packs, providing unlimited 5G data benefits. Additionally, customers can enjoy extra data of 3GB, 6GB, and 9GB at ₹ 51, ₹ 101, and ₹ 151, respectively, for the remaining validity of their current plans.

Byju's knocks at NCLAT door against NCLT's insolvency order; seeks urgent hearing

NEW DELHI, July 18: Crisis-ridden Byju's has moved the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) against the recent order of NCLT that allowed cricket board BCCI's petition for initiating insolvency proceedings against the once-famed edtech company, sources said.

Sources privy to the development said that the company is seeking an urgent hearing on the matter. Byju's did not comment on the issue.

According to sources, Byju's on Thursday moved the appellate tribunal, NCLAT, contesting the recent order of NCLT's Bengaluru bench that had admitted the cricket board's plea to start insolvency proceedings against the parent company Think and Learn, after the edtech firm failed to pay ₹ 158.9 crore dues.

Founder and CEO Byju Raveendran will report to the resolution professional. NCLT has appointed Pankaj Srivastava as the interim resolution professional.

Byju's had previously sponsored the Indian cricket team.

Earlier this week, Byju's had said it is hopeful of reaching "an amicable settlement" with the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI).

A Byju's spokesperson had said: "As we have always maintained, we wish to reach an amicable settlement with BCCI and we are confident that, despite this order, a

McDonald's celebrates opening of second restaurant in Guwahati

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, July 18: After a grand entry in Northeast India, McDonald's India - North and East celebrated the launch of recently opened second restaurant at GS Road, in Guwahati, said an official statement on Thursday.

The celebration took place in the august presence of Riniki Bhuyan Sarma, chairman and managing director, Pride East Entertainment Pvt. Ltd., and Anant Agrawal, vice chairman, McDonald's India - North and East, who graced the event and participated in the ceremonial lamp lighting.

The occasion was also marked by a captivating performance by local Bihu dancers, adding a cultural touch to the celebration.

"McDonald's second restaurant in Guwahati is committed to deliver world-class restaurant experience to the residents, further solidifying McDonald's position as one of the most loved brands in India," the statement added.

While celebrating opening of second restaurant in Guwahati, Rajeev Ranjan, managing director, McDonald's India - North and East, said, "We are delighted to celebrate our second restaurant in Guwahati after receiving an overwhelming response of our first restaurant. This showcases our commitment to cus-

tomers in Northeast India and we are thankful for their love for the brand".

"This new location is a step towards making the world-class McDonald's experience more accessible to residents of Guwahati and ensuring deeper penetration in the state of Assam. We aim to delight our customers with a diverse menu and exceptional restaurant experience. We extend a warm and hearty welcome to our customers and look forward to sharing delicious moments of happiness with every meal," he added.

On the other hand, Riniki Bhuyan expressing her happiness said, "It is a pleasure to be part of this momentous occasion. As a beloved brand, McDonald's brings not only delicious food but also a commitment to quality, local sourcing, benefiting farmers, suppliers, communities and employment generation".

"I am confident that this new restaurant will be a favourite spot for families and friends to gather and enjoy memorable moments together," she added.

McDonald's India North and East is dedicated to delivering an international experience with high-quality food and services at an affordable price. It features self-ordering digital kiosks for convenient ordering, table service to streamline the dining experience, and guest experience leaders to assist customers.

IIFL Foundation provides relief to flood-affected Dibrugarh

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, July 18: The IIFL Foundation, the CSR arm of the IIFL Group, has stepped up to provide vital relief to flood-affected regions in Assam, deploying local staff volunteers to support the community. Seasonal floods have wreaked havoc across Assam and many parts of eastern and north-eastern India, disrupting lives and infrastructure.

In Dibrugarh district, the Foundation has distributed essential

food and supplies to 1,800 individuals. The relief efforts were coordinated by Niloy Ghosh, Zonal Head, East India, IIFL Finance Gold Loan; Iqbal Hussain Tapadar, Regional Head; Ajay Das and Abhishek Dutta, Territory Managers; along with local staff including Mousuf Shah, Gaurav Baruah, Jayshree Rajkhowa, Sanghamitra Paul Choudhury, Mintu Dutta, Tribid Hazarika, Sajida Hussain, and Debarshree Saikia.

Madhu Jain, Director of IIFL

Foundation, stated, "Our Foundation has been actively contributing to community efforts during crises across India. We closely monitor the areas where we operate and strive to support local government and community initiatives."

Niloy Ghosh added, "This is a challenging time for the local community in Assam. We will continue our support and are grateful for the assistance from local authorities and our dedicated staff volunteers."

Gold zooms for sixth day in a row, rallies ₹ 700 on buying support

NEW DELHI, July 18: Gold price surged by ₹ 700 to ₹ 76,400 per 10 grams in the local market here on Thursday on fresh domestic demand as well as depreciation in rupee.

According to All India Sarafa Association, the yellow metal prices had closed at ₹ 75,700 per 10 grams in the previous session. Extending its gains for the sixth straight session, the precious metal jumped by ₹ 700 to ₹ 76,400 per 10 grams in the national capital. Meanwhile, gold of 99.5 per cent purity zoomed by ₹ 750 to ₹ 76,100 per 10 grams.

However, silver prices declined by ₹ 400 to ₹ 94,000 per kg from ₹ 94,400 per kg in the previous session. Gold prices rose on account of sustained buying by local jewellers, the association said, adding weakness in the rupee also aided the rally in the yellow metal. The rupee depreciated by 6 paise to settle at its all-time low of 83.64 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday. Commodity markets were closed on Wednesday on the occasion of Muharram.

In the overseas market, Comex gold was trading at USD 2,466.80 per ounce, up by USD 6.90 per ounce.

"Gold prices held steady after hitting a record peak earlier this week amid growing optimism for an interest-rate cut from the US Federal Reserve in September and a weaker dollar. However, this week market participants are expecting two rate cuts in 2024.

"Recent economic data points from the US, were

slightly mixed supporting the rate cut potential this year, bets for rate cut in September has now shifted to 95 per cent and same for November is at 50 per cent," Navneet Damani, Grp Sr. Vice President, Head Commodity & Currency Research at Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said. Silver was also marginally up at USD 30.66 per ounce in New York.

"Gold traded positively on Thursday. This movement is driven by expectations of a Fed rate cut in September and the weakness of the dollar index. Additionally, traders are focusing on the upcoming budget next week, monitoring potential regulatory changes from the government," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst - Commodity and Currency, LKP Securities, said.

According to Kaynat Chainwala, AVP-Commodity Research at Kotak Securities, Comex gold surged to an all-time high of USD 2,388.4 per ounce on Wednesday as recent statements from Fed Chair and Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) officials bolstered expectations of a rate cut in September while better-than-expected US retail sales figures, could not shift market expectations for a September rate cut. Although, Comex gold retreated sharply from record highs amid profit booking. The bullion prices traded above USD 2,470 per ounce, as markets assess Fed pivot bets due to increasing signs that inflation is cooling toward the central bank's target, Chainwala added. (PTI)

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SC directs NTA to declare

The top court adjourned the cases listed ahead of the NEET-UG pleas, saying "We will open the case today. Lacks of young students are waiting for this, let us hear and decide."

The bench asked the petitioners to show that the paper leak was "systemic" and affected the entire examination, warranting cancellation. "Re-examination has to be on concrete footing that the sanctity of the entire test was affected," the CJJ said. On the issue of the ongoing probe, the bench said, "The CBI probe is on. If what the CBI has told us is revealed, it will affect the investigation and people will become wise."

The bench is hearing more than 40 pleas, including those filed by the NTA, which conducts NEET-UG, seeking transfer of cases pending against it in various high courts over alleged irregularities to the Supreme Court to avoid multiple litigations.

On July 11, the top court had adjourned till July 18 the hearing of the pleas, including those seeking cancellation of NEET-UG 2024, re-test and a probe into alleged malpractices, as the responses of the Centre and the NTA were yet to be received by some parties. More than 23.33 lakh students had taken the test on May 5 at 4,750 centres in 571 cities, including 14 overseas.

In their affidavits filed earlier in the apex court, the Centre and the NTA had said that scrapping the exam would be "counterproductive" and "seriously jeopardise" lakhs of honest candidates in the absence of any proof of large-scale breach of confidentiality.

The National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test-Undergraduate (NEET-UG) is conducted by the NTA for admissions to MBBS, BDS, AYUSH and other related courses in government and private institutions across the country. (PTI)

Crackdown on child marriage

since 2021. We will not rest, till we eliminate this social evil." The report, 'Towards Justice: Ending Child Marriage', was released on World Day for International Justice on Wednesday in New Delhi. It stated that there has been an 81 per cent reduction in the instances of child marriage across 20 districts of Assam between 2021-22 and 2023-24, maintaining that the state government's emphasis on legal intervention in such cases is the reason for it.

The state government, led by Sarma, had launched an intensified crackdown against child marriages from February 2022 across the state through legal means as well as awareness campaigns. National Commission for Protection of Child Rights chairperson Priyank Kanoongo, who was present at the release of the report, said, "Prosecution is definitely the key to ending this crime against children, and the Assam model to end child marriages has shown the country the way forward."

The commission is extremely clear on its stand that no child can be married in the guise of religion. Both POCSO and PCMA laws are secular laws and supersede all personal laws, he added. Noted child rights activist and founder of Child Marriage Free India Bhuwan Ribhu said that Assam's emphasis on legal action is the best public awareness message to create the deterrence of child marriage.

"Most people in Assam today believe that prosecution is the key to ending child marriage. This message must go from Assam and spread across the country to create a child marriage-free India," Ribhu added.

Child Marriage Free India, of which ICP is a part, is a nationwide campaign started in 2022 and has almost 200 NGO partners working across the country. (PTI)

No casualties from Assam

Mankapur to Dibrugarh with stoppages en route," it said. The bulletin also said in the wake of the accident, three trains under the NFR are being run through a diverted route.

The diverted trains are 15707 Kathihar-Amritsar Amrapali Express, 15603 Guwahati-Jammu Tawi Amarnath Express and 15910 Lalgarh-Dibrugarh Avadh Assam Express. Helpline numbers have been activated at multiple railway stations to provide information to the public, it said. (PTI)

India won't allow even

(NCB). Information can also be submitted on ncbmanas.gov.in. "The entire drug business is now linked with narco-terror, and the money generated from the drug trade has become the most serious threat to the country's security. The goal of all agencies should not only be to nab drug users but also to bust the entire network," Shah said.

He added that his government "will not let even a gram of drugs come into India, nor will we allow India's borders to be used in any way for drug trafficking". "There should be a ruthless approach towards the drug supply chain, a strategic approach towards demand reduction and a human approach for harm reduction," he said during the meeting at the Vigyan Bhawan here.

The home minister stressed that agencies use both the "top to bottom and bottom to top approaches" to dismantle drug supply chains. Shah said if a drug comes into the country through a land, water or air port, it should be tracked and checked till the last point where it is trafficked to.

The minister said in the last five years, the Narendra Modi government has based its anti-drugs battle on the whole-of-government approach and structural, institutional and informational reforms.

Earlier, the mantra of the agencies was "need to know" but now they should move towards the functionality of "duty to share", and all agencies need to adopt this significant change, Shah said.

"The government will soon provide less costly kits for the preliminary testing of narcotics, which will make it much easier to register cases by all the agencies," he said.]

Shah said Prime Minister Modi has set the goal for India to be foremost in every field by 2047 and this can only be achieved by keeping the younger generation away from the scourge of drugs. He also released the NCB's 'Annual Report 2023' and a compendium on 'Drug-Free India' during the meeting. (PTI)

Financial aid distributed

students regarding expenses. Additionally, he highlighted that students are receiving financial assistance of ₹10,000/- upon passing matriculation, ₹ 12,500/- for degree courses, and ₹25,000/- for university studies. Ronghang also criticised certain political leaders for spreading misinformation for personal gain.

"During elections, some political leaders mislead people for their own benefit by providing incomplete information about the Indian Constitution and the Sixth Schedule. 'Team Karbi Anglong' is committed to truth and transparency. Misleading statements suggesting shifting of the Revenue office, inability of KAAC to issue land pattas, or provide appointments should not be trusted," Ronghang emphasised.

MLA Englung highlighted that financial assistance is being provided under the Chief Minister's Relief Fund not only for medical treatments but also for scholarships to students, including Rs 1 lakh for those studying abroad.

He cited the example of Angana Rongpipi from Diphu, who is pursuing MSc at a university in London and has received ₹ 1 lakh in financial assistance. The event was attended by executive members (EMs) of KAAC and local Member of Autonomous Council (MAC), Johnny Timung.

Conviction rate under Child

from 2018 to 2022 were analysed, along with an extensive literature review to enhance understanding of the barriers to child marriage elimination efforts and their impact on children, particularly girls.

The primary data was collected from a sample of 1,132 random villages across 20 districts of Assam, encompassing a total population of 21 lakhs and a child population of 8 lakhs. The report said 81 per cent reduction in the instances of child marriage between 2021-22 and 2023-24 in the state. In absolute numbers, the incidence of child marriages in the study villages has declined from 3,225 cases in 2021-22 to 627 cases in 2023-24.

In 30 per cent of the villages surveyed in Assam, child marriage has been completely eradicated. Additionally, 40 per cent of villages reported a significant decline in the occurrence of child marriage.

The study said 98 per cent of the respondents believed that the Assam government's strict law enforcement initiatives in 2023 had a substantial and striking influence on the reduction of child marriages within their communities. The overwhelming majority of respondents acknowledged the effectiveness of stringent enforcement measures in curbing child marriage.

In 12 districts, out of 20, over 90 per cent of respondents believe that taking legal action such as arresting individuals and filing FIRs in cases related to child marriage can effectively address the occurrence of such cases. Overall, the same percentage for all 20 districts stands at 72 per cent. (PTI)

Two-day tour focuses on improving tribal welfare, sustainable agriculture & enhancing local infrastructure and health services NCST member Nirupam Chakma visits Dima Hasao



HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, July 18: Member of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, Nirupam Chakma, along with Alka Tiwari, IAS secretary to the government of India, National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST), and their distinguished team of NCST visited Dima Hasao for a two-day tour.

On Wednesday, they visited several villages such as Michidui, Sampardisa, Jatinga, and the Archaeological site of Chaikhram. The members were accompanied by the executive member of Dima Hasao Autonomous Council (DHAC), Samuel Changsan, MACs of DHAC, Rupali Langthasa, Ramgalunge Jeme, Flaming Rupshi, John Phoithong, DHAC secretary Partha Jahari, ACS, and other departmental officials.

As part of the tour, the members of the commission held an interaction with the villagers to understand them better and to note and address the problems, issues, and lifestyle of the villagers. Nirupam Chakma, member of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, informed about various provisions and rights that safeguard the tribal communities in the villages, which are present under the Constitution or Government. He suggested protecting forests and reducing jhum cultivation. He also sug-

gested that the practice of shifting cultivation should gradually be eliminated and that permanent settlement cultivation should be adopted.

On Thursday, the member of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes held a review cum discussion meeting along with all the HoDs of line departments such as PHE, PWD, Agriculture, Health, DRDA, Social Welfare, Tourism, and Food, Public Distribution & Consumer Affairs at the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council CEM's conference hall, Haflong. During the meeting, various key points were reviewed and discussed, such as access to quality education, scholarships, initiatives to improve literacy rates among STs, drinking water facilities, etc.

In the meeting, the commission asked the Health Department regarding the requirement of equipment and specialisations needed to enhance medical facilities and health services. Additionally, the Commission discussed that the practice of shifting cultivation should gradually be eliminated and that permanent settlement cultivation with modern methods of agricultural techniques, which will be more sustainable, should be adopted. The commission instructed that the proper implementation of all government schemes in the district should be ensured.

MP Rwngrwa Narzary invites President Murmu to Durand Cup closing ceremony



HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, July 18: Rajya Sabha Member of Parliament (MP) Rwngrwa Narzary called on President of India, Draupadi Murmu, on Thursday to invite Her Excellency to grace the closing ceremony of the Kokrajhar leg of the 133rd edition of the Durand Cup 2024.

MP Narzary reached Rashtrapati Bhawan in New Delhi on Thursday morning and extended the invitation on behalf of the chief executive member (CEM) of Bodoland Territorial Region, Pramod Boro. The closing ceremony is scheduled to be held on August 21 at SAI Stadium in Kokrajhar.

Notably, Asia's oldest and most prestigious football tournament, the Durand Cup, is set to be held once again in Kokrajhar, the 'City of Peace', from July 30 to August 21, 2024.

During the meeting, MP Narzary discussed various issues and handed over the invitation letter to President Murmu on behalf of Pramod Boro, CEM of BTR, inviting her to grace the closing ceremony of the Durand Cup's Kokrajhar leg.

Drug bust in Jagiroad

HT Correspondent
JAGIROAD, July 18: Jagiroad police arrested a man with 31 containers of illegal heroin in Jagiroad on Thursday morning based on a tip-off. The arrested youth was identified as Zamir Ali, 23, of Shilbhanga under Jagiroad PS.

In connection with this case, the police also arrested a woman from Nagaon based on the confession of the arrested youth. Police are investigating the incident.

Morigaon Homeopathic physician awarded in Dubai

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, July 18: Dr. Ranjit Kumar Nath, a homeopathic physician from Morigaon has been awarded 'Best Homeopathic Gastroenterologist Award' on July 14.

The award was presented to Nath at the Burj Al Arab in Dubai, Saudi Arabia. Awards were presented to about 20 people from around the world who have excelled in different fields. Locals of Morigaon who have benefited from Nath's service said that the award has been presented to the doctor at the first stage of his golden journey. Locals also feel that the doctor's tireless efforts, experience and eloquence are expected to inspire the younger generation and wished Nath's good health.

Life Line Physiotherapy Clinic marks 14th foundation day

HT Correspondent
MORIGAON, July 18: The renowned Life Line Physiotherapy Clinic in Morigaon celebrated its 14th foundation day with pomp and gaiety on Wednesday evening. Established in 2010 along the Morigaon town-Morakalong road by Dr Gopal Borah, the clinic has successfully treated many patients

suffering from ailments such as back and neck pain, muscular dystrophy, ROM, osteoporosis, vertigo, and headaches. The celebration took place in the meeting hall of the clinic, attended by doctors, staff, patients, and members. The event commenced with a Borgeet performance by local teenage boys Miduplabon Bora, in the presence

of distinguished guests. A felicitation program followed, conducted by social worker Khagen Mahanta. A meeting was held in honor of the foundation day celebration, where various dignitaries, including additional SP Samiran Baisya, president of MDJA Birinchi Kumar Sarma, secretary of AUS Atanu Sarma, president of Guwahati Rotary

Club Sasangka Dutta, senior doctor Dr Bhabesh Bhagawati, and senior reporter Jagadish Nath, praised Dr Gopal Borah for his dedicated contribution and 14 years of experience in treating patients in the district. Earlier, Dr Gopal Borah shared his 14 years of experience running the Life Line Physiotherapy Clinic in his native district, Morigaon.

AJYCP protests against CAA



HT Correspondent
SIVASAGAR, July 18: The AJYCP Sivasagar district unit carried out a 2-hour sit-in demonstration at Doulmukh Chariali on Thursday, demanding the scrapping of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The activists raised slogans against the govern-

ment, asserting that Assam has never accepted the CAA. Our Nagaon correspondent adds: Along with the rest of the state, the district unit of Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) staged a sit-in protest against the implementation of the CAA in the state near the Office of the District Commissioner, Nagaon on Thursday. Over a hundred agitators from the district unit of the youth and students' organisation participated in the stir, filling the air of the small town with anti-CAA slogans and criticising the BJP-led NDA government at the center as well as the BJP-led state alliance government. During the stir, the protesters demanded the act be declared null and void, asserting that its implementation would threaten the identity of the greater Assamese nation in the state in the coming days. They warned that if the government implements the act, the organisation will not remain silent and will initiate a massive democratic movement in the state against the CAA. Prabal Sarma, the in-charge district president of the organisation, Debasis Das, district general secretary, Deep Moni Bora, central organising secretary, and Diganta Das, central publicity secretary, led the agitation on Thursday.

Protests at Tikak Colliery over dilapidated road conditions



HT Correspondent
MARGHERITA, July 18: Members of the Akhil Bharatiya Khadan Mazdoor Sangha affiliated with Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) on Thursday staged a dharna at the Tikak colliery mining area office of NEC CIL Margherita over the pathetic condition of the road, which has become a major problem for commuters and local residents. The organisation protested that steps were not taken for development even though the road from National Highway 153 to the Tikak colliery area has been in a dilapidated condition for many years. Shival Shrestha, the president of Akhil Bharatiya Khadan Mazdoor Sangha, said, "No leaders from other unions have visited this area to seek a solution for the people living here. Others just prom-

ised that committees will be made and various steps will be taken, but nothing happened." Along with members of the organisation, Shrestha raised slogans against the government, seeking a solution to the problem. "Humari maangein poori karo," the members voiced their demands in unison. He addressed the people regarding the same. It is worth mentioning that minor accidents have often taken place on the said route. On the other hand, there is also a risk of fatal accidents occurring, with many patients dying on the way to the hospital. The protestors demanded that arrangements be made for the development of roads at the earliest, otherwise, they shall intensify their strong agitational program in the coming days.

Chief minister's aid provides lifeline to ailing Tezpur family

HT Correspondent
TEZPUR, July 18: District commissioner Deba Kumar Mishra, along with principal press secretary to the chief minister Dhruba Mahanta, presented a cheque of ₹ 5 lakhs on behalf of chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma to the family of Pankej Mech of Tal Gereki, Tezpur. The family is struggling with financial issues as both their 6-year-old son and 14-year-old daughter are suffering from cardiac conditions and cancer, respectively, and are undergoing treatment. The cheque was handed over to Mulan Chandra Mech and Nirmla Mech, the grandparents of the ailing children, at their residence. Pankej Mech's wife, Mrigakhi Mech, had approached the chief minister in June 2024 with a plea for financial assistance to cover their medical expenses. Their son, Vaibhah Mech, underwent heart surgery at the age of

4 in 2022 and is still receiving post-operative treatment, while their daughter, Hiyasvi Mech, has been diagnosed with Burkitt Lymphoma (a type of cancer) and is undergoing treatment in Mumbai. The family had already spent approximately ₹ 20 lakhs and appealed to the chief minister for help as the children are scheduled for advanced treatment. Following the chief minister's directions, district commissioner of Sonitpur Deba Kumar Mishra, along with the joint director of Health Services and circle officer of Tezpur Revenue Circle, conducted an enquiry and submitted a report to the Chief Minister's Office, Assam. Convinced by the report and acknowledging the family's genuine need, the chief minister sanctioned the money from the Chief Minister's Fund for Public Emergency, which was presented to the family on Wednesday.



Workshop on modern dance and art concludes

HT Correspondent
BISWANATH CHARIALI, July 18: A five-day workshop on modern dance and art, organised by Aparajita Gogoi Sangeet Kala Kendra under Buniyad—an organisation promoting art, culture, and environmental awareness in the greater Itakhola area—concluded on Thursday at the Aparajita Gogoi Memorial Auditorium, Itakhola. Over a hundred students from the area participated in the workshop, which featured training imparted by experts Prakash Bora and Shikhamani Sarma.

The closing ceremony of the workshop took place on Thursday at Srimanta Sankardev Bhawan, Itakhola, chaired by Gajilal Tossa. The event was attended by dignitaries including Rajendra Kalita, Hemanta Nath, Aji Saikia, Goutam Saikia, and Anil Bora. All participants were awarded certificates of participation at the conclusion of the program.

NTPC Bongaigaon employees lead flood relief efforts in Kokrajhar

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, July 18: In a heartwarming display of solidarity and compassion, NTPC Bongaigaon employees have come together to support families devastated by floods in Kokrajhar's Eastern Range, Athibari, Dotma Revenue Circle. Spanning the forest villages of Nijwmguri, Gwjwmpuri, Aajarguri, Alajihar, and Dwimuguri, a relief cum distribution camp was set up in nearby LP schools and bazaar areas to reach those in need. The dedicated efforts benefited 170 families, totaling 706 individuals, including children and the elderly. The relief operation, meticulously executed with the assistance of the CISF unit, ensured that every affected household received vital supplies. The philanthropic spirit of NTPC employees was evident as they collectively donated around Rs 85,000. Akhilesh Singh, head of project, NTPC Bongaigaon, lauded the dedication of the NTPC Bongaigaon engineers and officially flagged off the relief convoy in the presence of G M Thangzom, commandant, CISF, Onkar Nath, AGM (HR), and MS

Kandari, assistant commandant, CISF. What began as a simple WhatsApp message quickly evolved into a powerful crowd-



funding movement, uniting NTPC Bongaigaon employees and their colleagues from across various NTPC stations. Jawaid

Hassan Malik, senior manager (MTP), Paramdeep Singh, senior manager (Mechanical Maintenance), Umang Kumar Sarawagi, manager (Fuel Management), T T Krishnakumar, senior assistant engineer (Ash Handling), and Pranjit Talukder, technician (Fuel Management), on behalf of NTPC Bongaigaon and CISF jawans, went to the camps to distribute the packets. The endeavor was further strengthened by the invaluable support of K Kaushik, AFS, range forest officer, and the district administration, who played a crucial role in coordinating the relief efforts. The distributed relief materials, based on the data given by district administration, Kokrajhar, encompassed essential food items such as rice, lentils, soya nuggets, cooking oil, salt, turmeric, and biscuits, providing much-needed sustenance to the affected families. This initiative highlights NTPC Bongaigaon's commitment to community welfare and its proactive role in disaster response. It stands as a powerful example of the impact of collective action and compassionate leadership.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Nothing great in the world has ever been accomplished without passion -Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Imperative: Tax the Super-Rich to Fuel Job Creation

As the Narendra Modi 3.0 government gears up to present its first budget on July 23, it faces a crucial moment. India's economy, while fundamentally robust, is marred by severe unemployment, especially among educated youth and women. Despite economic growth under the decade-long NDA rule, social justice remains elusive, and inequalities have widened. The first budget post-election offers a vital chance for the government to realign its focus towards improving the living standards of the underprivileged. Two major challenges loom: creating jobs on a large scale and enhancing incomes for lower-income groups. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's pre-budget consultations highlighted the need for additional resources, yet there was scant discussion on imposing greater tax burdens on the super-rich to address economic disparities. Globally, the concept of taxing the super-rich is gaining traction. The upcoming G-20 summit in Brazil will discuss this, with Brazil and South Africa already endorsing the idea. However, Prime Minister Modi has remained silent on this issue, despite the pressing need to address growing inequality in India.

The "billionaire tax," as the Congress dubs it, is critical. The extravagant spending by India's elite, exemplified by the recent Ambani wedding, underscores the potential for taxing excess. India boasts 167 dollar billionaires, and a mere 2% tax on them could yield Rs. 1.5 lakh crore. This revenue could fund job-creating development programs, especially in labor-intensive sectors. Economist Dr. Pranab Bardhan suggests further revenue generation by reducing government subsidies that benefit the wealthy. India's tax system disproportionately favors the rich, with zero inheritance and wealth tax and lower capital gains taxes compared to the U.S. The pandemic exacerbated this disparity, as corporate tax cuts enriched industrialists while workers suffered job losses and poverty. Bardhan estimates that one trillion rupees could create 20 million jobs. Sitharaman must also address tax evasion. A 2023 study by the Tax Justice Network revealed that tax havens could cost countries \$4.8 trillion in lost revenue over the next decade. Indian billionaires often exploit these havens, contributing to the effective tax rate for the wealthiest being as low as 0-0.5% of their wealth.

A special tax on the super-rich is long overdue in India. Reports, including the latest from Oxfam, indicate that inequality has steadily risen, with the pandemic worsening conditions for the poor while enriching the upper classes. Unlike other nations with robust social security systems, India's lack of such measures leaves its most vulnerable citizens exposed. Oxfam's report highlights industrial concentration in a few hands, driving unprecedented inequality and poverty. Dalits and other marginalized groups face systemic discrimination and financial exclusion, particularly in healthcare. The private healthcare sector, valued at \$236 billion, sees significant investments from the World Bank's IFC, yet regulatory oversight and equitable service provision remain lacking. Globally, the richest have doubled their fortunes since 2020, while nearly five billion people have become poorer. The contrast is stark: the potential for the world's first trillionaire within a decade, versus centuries needed to eradicate poverty at the current pace. India stands at a crossroads. The Modi government's Hindutva-corporate nexus underpins its power, but recent election results show a clear mandate for economic change. The upcoming budget is an opportunity for course correction. Will the Prime Minister seize this moment to address inequality and foster inclusive growth, or will he continue on the path of widening disparities? The nation watches closely.

Budgeting for ambition: Fostering growth and empowering Bharat

By: Dipak Kurmi

India's rapid economic growth is propelled by favorable policies and forward-thinking governance. A comprehensive roadmap is being charted to elevate India to the ranks of developed nations by 2047. Forecasts indicate that India will soon surpass Japan and Germany to become the world's third-largest economy. Projections suggest reaching a \$5 trillion economy by 2026 and targeting \$10 trillion by 2030, underscoring India's ambitious trajectory towards economic prominence on the global stage.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is set to unveil the inaugural budget of Modi Government 3.0 on July 23rd. The anticipation among youth, farmers, businessmen, industrialists, and the middle class is palpable as they await the government's plans with hopeful expectation. Balancing the aspirations of all these sectors through substantial allocations for economic development, welfare schemes, and subsidies presents a formidable challenge. Yet, the government is committed to navigating these complexities to meet the diverse needs and hopes of the nation.

With upcoming assembly elections in states like Maharashtra and Haryana, the budget scheduled for July 23rd is expected to blend developmental priorities with populist measures. Speculations suggest the budget could exceed ₹ 50 lakh crores, underscoring the government's ambitious agenda.

Maintaining GDP growth between 8-9% remains a key objective, with particular emphasis on bolstering the rural economy, empowering women, and supporting farmers. The budget's overarching aim is to accelerate India's path towards achieving a \$5 trillion economy at the earliest opportunity.

The upcoming budget will include targeted measures to boost international trade to \$1 trillion and lay the groundwork for a Developed India by 2047. Possible announcements may include enhancements to MNREGA, increases in Kisan Samman Nidhi and Atal Pension schemes.

The government aims to manage the fiscal deficit around

5.2%, aligning fiscal prudence with ambitious developmental goals.

There are proposals to raise the income tax exemption limit to ₹ 5 lakhs and introduce new tax slabs tailored for individuals earning up to ₹ 25 lakhs annually. Additionally, there is speculation about increasing the standard deduction from ₹ 50,000 to ₹ 1 lakh.

The upcoming budget may include new populist measures targeting rural communities and women. Anticipated priorities also include a significant boost in capital expenditure, with a particular emphasis on the service sector. The government aims to curb inflation to below 4% through strategic economic measures outlined in the budget.

Ensuring inclusive and comprehensive development demands the government's keen attention to poverty alleviation alongside accelerating economic growth. Over the past three years, the GDP growth rate has consistently ranged between 7% to 8.5%, marking a significant achievement. Notably, the GDP growth rate for the fiscal year 2023-24 stood at 8.2%, underscoring continued economic momentum.

The progress of our nation hinges on the well-being of its 1.4 billion citizens. Presently, a budget that fosters inclusivity, balance, and development is crucial. While boosting national income is essential, controlling expenditures is equally imperative. Nirmala Sitharaman's tenure as Finance Minister during Modi Government 2.0 was marked by commendable achievements. Anticipation is high for her continued excellence in steering economic policy during Modi Government 3.0.

The interim budget for 2024-25 amounted to ₹ 47.66 lakh crore, with projections indicating total income of ₹ 31 lakh crore and total expenditure reaching ₹ 48 lakh crore, including an estimated tax revenue of about ₹ 26 lakh crore. The full budget, set for presentation on July 23, is anticipated to exceed ₹ 50 lakh crore. It is expected to align with the aspirations of the underprivileged while propelling economic growth forward. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmipltd@gmail.com)

Modi government's new telecommunications law is anti-people, unconstitutional

The Telecommunications Act, 2023, enacted by the Parliament without public scrutiny, debates and discussions amidst suspension of about 150 Members of Parliament, is anti-people, undemocratic and unconstitutional. It assaults the Constitution in so many ways. It attacks fundamental rights of the people in terms of their right to privacy, freedom of expression and press freedom by the British and early independent India by subsuming and repealing them. The three old laws repealed are, the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885, the Wireless Telegraph Act, 1933, and the Telegraph Wires (Unlawful Possession) Act, 1950. The new telecommunications law has been enforced with effect from June 26, 2024.

The Act intends to implement several fundamental changes to the telecom industry's current regulatory protocols including the implementation of strict requirements for user authentication, clarification of spectrum allocation and streamlining of the licensing process. It infringes user's rights and infringes them. The law does not provide for restructuring of the telecom industry.

To the dismay of the people, the Act increases the government's unbridled power to order Internet shut downs, imperils encryption, a crucial barrier to privacy and freedom of speech and strengthens monitoring without external review. The Act therefore needs to be repealed and revised to address these shortcomings as it poses a serious threat to democracy, individual liberty and the integrity of the Internet as such.

The law is authoritarian in line with the ruler's whims and fancies. It gives the authority to the government to intercept messages and reveal them in a intelligent format without giving the encrypted messaging services any leeway. The inalienable feature of end-to-end encrypted platforms with an assurance that messages in any format be only

seen by the sender and intended recipient(s), including the service providers, is seriously threatened by this law.

The requirements of the law may cause secure services to decide not to operate in India, which would undermine people's freedom of speech, privacy and press freedom in light of the growing cyber attacks and surveillance. Any alteration made to the design of encrypted platforms just to provide access may result in security holes that might be used by a variety of entities to carry out indiscriminate spying. This will help compromise Internet safety to weaken online safety and cyber resilience for individuals, businesses and governments.

India has witnessed the highest number of

Internet shut-downs for five years in a row under the Narendra Modi government. In place of restructuring the system to avert disconnection to avoid the consequential impairment of rights and liberties, the Act solidifies existing authorities to halt telecommunication services devoid of oversight. The government cements the Internet suspension power with the Department concerned under Clause 20(2)(b) of the Telecom Act, 2023. In the process it misses majorly missing the procedural safeguards as directed by the Supreme Court of India in Anuradha Bhasin Vs Union of India and the Standing Committee of Parliament on Information Technology in its report.

However, Internet shutdowns are inherently disproportionate and must not be perpetuated. A former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights aptly stated that when a state shuts down the Internet, both people and economies suffer.

The country's telecom laws have been abused historically to spy on gadgets of the people and to block the Internet access. The democratization of Internet



communication services and the extension of monitoring and suspension of powers from traditional broadcasting services would destroy user rights and democratic liberties beyond repair. People therefore are concerned and perplexed about the

Telecom Act 2023 and its applicability to Internet services because of its definitional un-

certainty. In K.S. Puttaswamy Vs Union of India, the Supreme Court affirmed that the right to privacy is an inherent part of the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21 of the Constitution of India. The implementation of Section 200f of the Act, if not done proportionately, will amount to infringe the right to privacy of the individuals as guaranteed under the Constitution of India.

The citizens' fundamental rights are seriously threatened by these arbitrary powers of the Union and state governments. The passage of the proposed Broadcasting Bill, Post Offices Bill, Digital Personal Data Protection Act, Criminal Procedure Identification Act, IT Rules 2021, and Telecommunications Act have jeopardized the digital space of the people with unbridled draconian power conferred on the Union and states.

The Act has sparked heated debates over its likely impact on privacy, civil liberties and democratic values, its compliance with constitutional provisions and global human rights stan-

dards, its impact on individuals, businesses and agencies.

The Act militates against the constitutional frame violating fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution under Articles 21, 19, and 14 respectively, right to privacy, freedom of speech and expression and protection against arbitrary conduct. In addition, the Act gives the government the power to enforce encryption standards and data processing without clear restrictions, leaving ambiguity and confusion among service providers.

The Act also fails to comply with international human rights standards, set by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which India is a signatory, with a commitment to uphold rights to privacy, freedom of expression and access to information. Besides, the Act's guarantee of verifiable biometric based identification has raised public concerns over the mandatory Aadhaar-to-mobile linking, already ruled by the Supreme Court of India as illegal. This clause is devoid of protection in many ways for our country still fundamentally digitally poor.

The Act imposes severe penalties for breaching the regulations. First penalty is rupees 25,000 followed by rupees 50,000 for each subsequent violation of the law. This will hamper the growth of digital literacy, which is very low at present, in the country. Another danger lurking is authorities may force consumers while imposing

penalties to use Aadhaar without their consent, a naked assault on their privacy.

The Act also provides for spectrum allocations between the requirement for auctions and administrative allocation in certain cases, a window for corruption. The Supreme Court's decision on spectrum distribution would be examined. It is noteworthy that the sole use of administrative approvals for spectrum allocation may result in illicit allocations and fraudulent schemes that lack due process.

The country's telecom regulations have historically been used to limit Internet access and conduct gadget surveillance. These rules reflect evolving new and emerging technologies. The democratization of Internet communication platforms together with the widening of surveillance and censorship capabilities from conventional broadcasting services, threatens to damage irreparably human rights and democratic freedoms.

The Telecommunications Act 2023, in view of the changed scenario of a coalition NDA union government, needs to be relooked and amended based on consultations with the stakeholders to include inclusivity and to restore democratic rights of the people in keeping with the letter and spirit of the Constitution of India, to uphold fundamental rights, to safeguard encryption, to ensure privacy and security as also unobstructed access to a free and secure Internet.

Without substantial revision in the law, India risks losing democracy and rule of law based constitutional democratic governance. Besides, a substantive amendment in the law would go a long way in restoring the faith of Indians in democracy and people's sovereignty from the existing electoral autocracy where the ruler is treating the people as subject for repressions and oppression, witnessed during the last decade! (IPA Service)

Expansion of war in Gaza and Ukraine have dangerous humanitarian consequences

By: Dr Arun Mitra

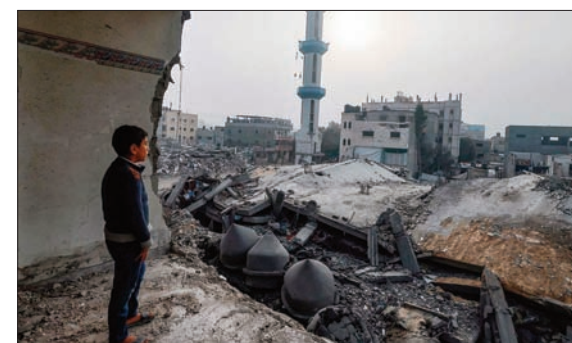
The missile attack on Okhmatdyt children's hospital in central Kyiv, Ukraine on July 8, 2024 by the Russian forces is very disturbing. Since the start of the conflict in Gaza 31 out of 36 hospitals have been damaged or destroyed and over 500 healthcare workers killed according to the UN Human Rights Office. Article 18 of the Geneva Convention stipulates that a building designated as a civilian hospital cannot be the target of attack. But this has been ignored despite several appeals including by the UNO.

During the war time it is the vulnerable sections of the society, the children, women and the elderly who suffer the most. It is always heart breaking to see the children crying for help, weeping, sitting by the dead bodies of their kith and kin not really understanding what has happened and what is in store for them in future. Massacre of nearly 15000 children in Gaza as a result of Israeli aggression is the most heinous crime of the on-going times.

Number of non-combatants killed during the modern warfare is much more than the combatants. During the wars during 1990's, more than 90% killed have been the civilians; in fact more children died than soldiers. As a result of changes in warfare strategies over the last decades, civilians have become more vulnerable in the conflicts.

The war causes extreme misery. There is uncertainty of life at any moment of time. Fear of displacement, injury and death always looms large. Normal life pattern comes to a halt. Schools are closed; tourism ends; economy slows down and there is manifold increase in wasteful expenditure on arms. This adds to hunger, deprivation, destruction and cries everywhere in the war zone. Any war in the present day times has serious global impact. Many a time wars lead to destruction of cultures even civilisations. Environment is a big causal-ity in the war. The combined militaries of the world contribute to 6% of the global carbon footprint.

Empathy, love and affection which is a natural behaviour of a person becomes perverted. No empathy is left towards, even children and women. In fact in many war situations children and women are abused; even used as weapons of war.



It is very unfortunate that whereas every incident of war today is easily visible on our home screens, we have failed to stop them. There is no serious collective effort to stop the wars through dialogue. Rather in the last few decades we have witnessed blatant intervention by the big powers in other countries on the pretext of establishing democracy or fighting terrorism. Aggression on Iraq by the US and its allies, armed intervention in Afghanistan in the name of terrorism and aggression on Libya are the examples of these. Their role in armed conflict in Syria and some African countries is well known.

Such acts, instead of cutting down expenditure on arms have added to increase in the world military expenditure which in 2022, rose to \$2240bn with \$82.9bn spent on nuclear weapons alone. As per the International Campaign to Abolish of Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), in 2023, the nine nuclear-armed states spent \$10.8 billion (13.4%) more on their nuclear arsenals than the year before, a total of \$91.4 billion, or \$2,898 per second on nuclear weapons.

Every country increased the amount it spent on nuclear weapons. The United States had the biggest increase, at nearly 18%. The United States spent more than all of the other nuclear-armed states combined, at \$51.5 billion. China surpassed Russia as the second-highest spender at \$11.9 billion, and Russia came in third, spending \$8.3 billion.

This is the time for intense diplomacy to bring down the arms race and to impress upon the global community that expenditure on arms takes away our resources from

social needs. The big powers, particularly the G7, need to understand this. It is however very sad that instead of initiating diplomatic means and dialogue, the NATO in its meeting in Washington has promised US\$ 43 billion to Ukraine to keep on fighting and defeat Russia.

The double standards of the US government of asking Israel to observe restraint in its offensive on hand but on the other side supplying them large cache of weapons in the name of self-defence are intriguing. Since the start of Israel's war on Gaza in October 2023 and up to the end of June, the US had transferred at least 14,000 of the MK-84 2,000-pound bombs, 6,500 500-pound bombs, 3,000 Hellfire precision-guided air-to-ground missiles, 1,000 bunker-buster bombs, 2,600 air-dropped small-diameter bombs, and other munitions, the Reuters news agency reports.

The Military Industrial Complex is making roost by selling arms and making huge profits due to the poor diplomatic efforts to end war. The global south, facing its enormous problems of economic development and environment conservation is yearning for peace. It is only in the conditions of global peace that there would be better conditions to increase investment in the poor developing countries and a shift from the war industry to the industry for common good.

It is therefore imperative that diplomatic efforts be increased to end the on-going wars including the Russia Ukraine and War on Gaza in particular. There is also need to have dialogue to sort out conflicts in some of the African countries and to facilitate dialogue in south Asia. In the absence of NAM the BRICS can play more role even though it may not be to the liking of NATO.

It is high time that a broad initiative is taken at the international level to appeal to the nuclear weapons possessing countries to join the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). They should be made to agree to keep all the nuclear powered weapon system off high alert. The Nuclear Weapons Possessing States (NWS) should declare no first use of nuclear weapons and never to use them on any non-nuclear state. Any escalation of war in Ukraine and Gaza is fraught with the danger of use of nuclear weapons. Any complacency in this matter or lack of diplomatic initiatives to prevent the threat of use of nuclear weapons could be catastrophic. (IPA Service)

POST BAG

The need for sewage treatment plants in Guwahati

Sir/Ma'am

I wish to draw attention to the urgent need for sewage treatment plants in Guwahati. With rapid urbanization, our city's sewage system is severely overburdened, leading to untreated waste being discharged into the Brahmaputra River. This poses significant health risks and environmental hazards.

Implementing sewage treatment plants will not only mitigate water pollution but also ensure a healthier living

environment.

Proper sewage management is essential for sustainable urban development and protecting our water resources. I urge the authorities to prioritize the establishment of these facilities to safeguard public health and the environment.

Mowsam Hazarika
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Budget expectations

Sir/Ma'am

Union Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's Budget for fiscal 2024-25 should prioritize: Amending section 80C of the Income Tax Act to increase the limit on insurance premium payments encourages wider adoption of insurance products among individuals.

Targeted tax relief for lower-income taxpayers will boost consumer spending.

Expanding PLI schemes in sectors like textiles, handicrafts, electronics, auto, and semiconductors to stimulate employment and industrial growth.

Investing in digital infrastructure and skill development to enhance MSMEs' productivity and global competitiveness.

Promoting contract farming, upgrading infrastructure, and diversifying into high-value crops to increase agricultural productivity and income for farmers. These measures will definitely drive economic growth, create jobs, and foster inclusive development across sectors.

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India readies itself for a less Western-dominated world

By: Samir Puri

There was incredulity in some Western circles around the footage of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi warmly greeting President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on 8 July. How could Modi bear-hug Putin, and talk about their country's trade, while the Russian military continued to brutally assault its neighbour, Ukraine?

PM Modi's words in Moscow, that 'war cannot solve problems', and that a solution 'cannot be found on the battlefield', was consistent with India's position ever since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began. India's position deserves further reflection in light of new realities.

Back in February 2022, Modi spoke to both Putin and Ukrainian President Zelensky by phone. According to the official read-out of the conversation, Modi said told Putin that, "the differences between Russia and the NATO group can only be resolved through honest and sincere dialogue." Since 2022, as Russia's war in Ukraine has persisted, numerous other non-Western governments have taken their own stances advocating dialogue to end the war, from Indonesia to Brazil and South Africa. In fact, around the wider world, this is the far more common position than any of the alternatives.

Now, we are at the cusp of a moment when the United States (US) itself—entirely for its own domestic political reasons—could reach a similar official position on ending the Russia-Ukraine war.

With a Trump victory now far more likely in November's US presidential election, following his brush with death after a narrow escape from an assassin's bullet at a speech in Pennsylvania, the US could move towards settling the Russia-Ukraine war by forcing a deal onto Ukraine if Trump wins the election. For their own reasons that relate to appeasing their domestic voter base, Trump and his newly-announced Republican running-mate, JD Vance, do not favour continually funding Ukraine's defensive war against the Russian invasion.

Hence, Ukraine may soon be forced into a compromise with Russia by a returning Trump presidency. If this happens, India and will have an opportunity to make good on its words and lend what support it can to ending the Russia-Ukraine war. Although India is a continent away, its status as a major trading partner with Russia means that Indian diplomacy could play its own stabilising role through its channels to Moscow; for instance, by encouraging Putin's adherence to whatever peace deal emerges in Ukraine.

And what a turn-around this would be. Imagine this scenario: A war that erupted in Eastern Europe is ended through a grubby peace deal that is primarily driven by change of government in the US. But it is a deal that is also welcomed by and supported around the world, including by countries that have long-since advocated for such an end to this war, and that have their own strong channels to Moscow.

Ukraine will be the big loser, ceding territory—including a great deal of its coastline—to occupying Russian forces. The European powers that have spoken so strongly and uncompromisingly of supporting Zelensky's aspiration for Ukraine to be guarded by the West, and indeed to formally join the West through Ukraine gaining membership of the EU and NATO, will be forced to pick up the slack. The United Kingdom, France, Poland and other governments will become Ukraine's main guarantors in such an event, as major world powers from the US to India prioritise an end to the fighting. This scenario now seems possible—and there is much more significance to it than initially meets the eye. Its lessons will extend far beyond the Russia-Ukraine war. For now, the manner of this war's possible end (for now, if Trump returns to power) could offer a foretaste of the changing role

of the Western countries in world affairs for decades to come.

Responding to the changing role of the West

As this author has written in his new book, *Westlessness: The Great Global Rebalancing* (Hodder & Stoughton, July 2024), the West remains a major pillar in world affairs. But the political character of 'the West' is changing in front of our very eyes. Populists in the US but also in some European countries take 'nation-first' positions. In turn, these populists will influence Western foreign policies. Populists like Trump (and also, the Hungarian President Viktor Orbán) are well known for de-prioritising the 'world policing' roles that the West under US leadership become known for after the Cold War.

Moreover, the world is experiencing the concurrent rise of major non-Western countries to greater heights of economic prosperity and strategic autonomy. Collectively, these developments are decisively rewiring world affairs. Politics is not the only driver of these changes. Trends in geoeconomics, in demography, and many other factors besides—all contribute to a rebalanced world, in which the West remains ever-present but ever-less united behind the US, and no longer singularly dominant. The outcome, which will reveal itself

in the coming decades, will see the world order radically rebalanced.

India knows this better than almost any other nation, and it is adept at pursuing its multi-alignment policy. For as much criticism as Modi's visit to Moscow elicited in some western circles—who do not want to see Russia rewarded in any way for its aggression in Ukraine—Modi was also in attendance at the G7 Summit in June in Italy. Just as Modi has attended past G7 Summits, there is no hint at all of India turning its back on its treasured Western partners. And there is demand for further developing aspects of these relationships on all sides.

The clamour in some Western circles to deepen cooperation with India through the G7, the Quad and other forums will only grow as the West seeks more partners in a less-Western world. As Harsh Pant has written, "India remains one of the few nations which can engage with both the G7 and BRICS in a matter of days with élan", in reference to Modi's attendance at the 2022 G7 Summit in Germany. This is a great position to be in and is in perfect tune with world affairs in the mid-2020s.

But it is one thing to lap up as many trade deals as possible in non-Western forums such as BRICS, combined with India's burgeoning trade with the US in numerous areas of convergence

in trade and technology, but it is another thing entirely for India to take active and helpful steps on such global conundrums as the Russia-Ukraine war. India has been advocating dialogue to end this war for over two years now. The need to match these calls with active responses could soon dawn.

True, it is not India's obligation to play a direct role in bringing this war in Europe to an end. But, akin to a masterly chess player, India must remember that if a putative returning President Trump stabilises the war-torn situation in Eastern Europe at Ukraine's expense, his next focus will be the US's strategic contest with China. India knows all too well that it cannot be dragged into taking a side on this contest.

India is itself an autonomous player of significant standing in Asia. As such, we can expect to see a fascinating set of circumstances develop whereby the evolving less-Western world truly enters a multipolar phase, as multiple major players jostle for position in more free-flowing ways than has been the case so far. The precise form and shape of the less-Western dominated world is still only coming into focus. But some of its clearest outlines are already becoming visible to the naked eye. (Courtesy: ORF)

Are critics of student protests subconsciously anti-semitic?

By: Ajay Skaria

The institution I teach in, the University of Minnesota, has joined other universities across the US in the crackdown on students protesting Israel's killing of, as Senator Bernie Sanders noted, over 34,000 Palestinians (with another 78,000 wounded), 70% of them women and children, in Gaza. Several students have been arrested since the outbreak of protests on April 23. What has been striking throughout the process of the crackdown on protesting university students across the US is the claim by politicians and segments of mainstream media that the students are being anti-Semitic.

As a scholar who has spent over two decades studying and writing on M.K. Gandhi and non-violent movements, who follows Zionism closely because it provides a model for the Hindu supremacist ideology called Hindutva, and who has also had many conversations with the students from whose ranks the protestors come, I would argue exactly the opposite: it is critics of the students who are being racist. True, there is an enormous resurgence of anti-Semitism across the US in the wake of October 7, as also of anti-Muslim sentiment. But in US universities at least, the protests are not, barring some rare exceptions, driven by anti-Semitism. In the classes I teach, for example, these students see their opposition to what is happening in Gaza as an extension of the anti-racist movements they have been involved in at least since the George Floyd protests. Even the organisational networks are often the same, and some of the same students are participating in both protests.

I have also been struck by how, even as they consider themselves fiercely anti-Zionist, these students come down sharply on positions that bear any whiff of anti-Semitism. The distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism is quite simple. As many have pointed out for decades: while anti-Semitism is a hostility directed against Jews because of their religious or cultural identity, anti-Zionism is an opposition to Zionism as an ideology that is racist because it claims the Israeli state and the land of Israel-Palestine exclusively for the Jewish community. Zionism has not always been racist, of course: many early Zionists, such as Martin Buber initially, envisioned co-habiting in equality with the Arab community, rather than creating an exclusively Jewish state. But that Zionist tradition, always peripheral, is by now close to moribund.

Inevitably, Zionism as an ideology—like other analogous ideologies such as white nationalism or Hindutva—will justify racism and genocide, whether implicitly or explicitly. Many of the most thoughtful Jewish thinkers recognised this danger. This is why Hannah Arendt—herself by no means free of a Eurocentric mindset—was quite emphatic that "nation-states should never be able to found themselves through the dispossession of whole populations who fail to fit the purified idea of the nation." Arendt's fears about Zionism have by now come entirely true, as Israel has developed into a Jewish supremacist state organized around apartheid, and has deployed the structural, institutional and physical violence that apartheid requires to maintain itself.

And Zionism is by no means alone in having become a racism, in seeking to transform a religious community into an ethnicity with supremacist claims. The proponents of Hindutva are not only an analogous phenomenon but have in recent years stressed their affinities to Zion-

ism and are allied closely with Israel, including supporting it during the most recent genocide. Increasingly, just as Zionists have sought to paint all criticism of the Israeli state and Zionism as anti-Semitic, Hindutva's ideologues have sought to portray criticism of Hindutva or the Indian state under the BJP as "Hinduphobia," or as criticisms from "self-hating Hindus."

The students recognise this distinction, and when they demand divestment from companies connected to Israel's war machine and a halt to US support for Israeli massacre of innocent civilians, they most often see themselves as continuing the tradition of civil disobedience—the tradition that peacefully breaks the laws of the land or the rules of an institution in the name of a higher law called justice—associated with Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King. It is striking that most of the student protests have been overwhelmingly non-violent: it is the university administrations that have unleashed the punitive force of administrative sanctions and police action against them.

The distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, then, is analytically quite straightforward. The students have been emphatic in reiterating it. The question we need to ask is therefore somewhat different: what ideological blinkers seem to prevent the US House, or for that matter liberal newspapers such as the New York Times, and white liberals more broadly, from grasping it. (I say white liberals because even more rightwing African American liberals such as John McWhorter usually seem to get distinction: while he insists that the student protests are "not justice"—a claim that has been disputed—he is quite clear that the students are not anti-Semitic.) Put differently: why and how is the racism involved in Israel's attack on Gaza, and in the US support to Israel, invisible to Republicans and Democrats, and why at the time of an actual ongoing racist genocide being carried out with money and weapons they supply, is it that they see the students as racist instead?

In many cases, of course, as for example with university administrations, the Israeli state, organisations such as the AIPAC, or powerful donors sympathetic to the Zionist cause, arguably all that is going on is a cynical weaponisation of the charge of anti-Semitism, which provides a quick way to shut down opposition.

But there are also deeper ideological affinities.

As far as Republicans and neo-conservative media outlets such as Fox News are concerned, there is a direct ideological convergence. Zionism could well be described as an enhanced analogue of white nationalist fantasies for Europe and the US; this after all is why so many—including Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu—have described Israel's polity as an apartheid regime. So, when Republicans endorse Zionism, and push to have any criticism of Israel declared as anti-Semitic, they also (wittingly or not) extend a space for white nationalism. A far more complex ideological affinity is at work in the mainstream Democrats, as well as liberal media outlets such as the New York Times: they exemplify what could be described as a subconscious anti-Semitism that misrecognises itself as an anti-racism.

Till two decades back, the Democratic Party and the Times were, while opposed to the explicit racism of the Republican Party, quite complicit in dog whistle racism, and quite incapable of comprehending structural racism. But both the Democratic

Party and liberal media have become more self-consciously anti-racist over the last decade—a witness, for example, the brilliant 1619 project at the Times, or the wide-ranging Democratic support to the George Floyd protests. And yet, even as Democratic and liberal traditions have become less tolerant of explicit racism in general (while continuing to be complicit in systemic racism—this is why it has been described as a racism without racists), they have continued to aggressively support the explicit racism involved in the Zionist project.

A recent analysis by the Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting [FAIR] project provided detailed evidence that liberal outlets show systematic bias towards the Israeli state. An internal Times memo, for example, specifically asked reporters to avoid certain words, including "genocide," "ethnic cleansing," "Palestine" ("except in very rare cases"), "occupied territories" (say "Gaza, the West Bank, etc.") and "refugee camps" ("refer to them as neighborhoods, or areas"). The memo claimed that this was to "provide clear, accurate information," and avoid "heated language" but as the FAIR analysis noted, "highly emotive terms for the killing of civilians like 'slaughter,' 'massacre' and 'horrific' were reserved almost exclusively for Israelis who were killed by Palestinians, rather than the other way around."

Ironically, in their support for Israel and their hostility to the student protests, Democrats and the liberal media are themselves practising an anti-Semitism thinking itself to be the converse. Like Gandhi with Hinduism or King with Christianity, many protesting Jewish students are drawing on Judaic traditions to oppose the killings in Gaza (and the occupied West Bank) by the Israeli state; they are insisting that to reduce Judaism and Jewish identity to Zionism involves a most profound violence to Judaism and the Jewish identity. Indeed, just as Gandhi tried to rescue Hinduism from becoming a racism directed against Muslims and the dominated castes (and was killed by a Hindutva ideologue for that), the Jewish students especially, but also many of others, are trying to rescue Judaism from being complicit in the racism that Zionism has become. They are saying that to be Jewish is to be anti-racist.

When Democrats and liberal media fail to recognise this, they operate, paradoxically, with a subconscious understanding of Judaism as a tradition incapable of the moral compass necessary for self-reflection, for critiquing Zionism. It is that moral compass that figures like Arendt drew on in criticising Zionism, and that so many young Jewish students on American campuses draw on in criticising the genocide occurring in Gaza now. What could be more anti-Semitic than denying these students the embrace of a Judaism that is sensitive to the other, and instead conflating Zionism with Judaism and, thus, Judaism to the genocide being conducted in its name!

Could it be the subconscious Democratic and mainstream white liberal fear that they are themselves being profoundly anti-Semitic that drives the hysteria and vehemence with which they declare that there is no genocide occurring in Gaza, that it is the protesting students who are being anti-Semitic? Could this also be a return of the repressed: could it be that white liberals affirm in the Zionists the explicit racism that they must repress and disavow in their relation with African Americans and other people of colour here in the US? (Courtesy: The Wire)

In India's income-segregated cities, low-income housing should be taken off market

By: Shirish B Patel

In *The Open Society and its Enemies*, philosopher Karl Popper reminds us that "Man has created new worlds—of language, of music, of poetry, of science; and the most important of these is the world of the moral demands, for equality, for freedom, and for helping the weak." The Constitution of India is remarkably forward looking with regard to these moral demands. The demands are in direct conflict with past attitudes. We have behind us millennia of contempt for those below our station, extending at times to active cruelty. Stratifications by caste are easily replaced by stratification by income level. These old attitudes are hard to overcome. They continue to find expression in the way Indian cities function. How to change this and give India's poorer citizens in particular happier urban lives is the subject of this article.

Let us accept that we are stuck with capitalism and it is too far-fetched to expect to be able to shift to any other form of economic organisation. Capitalism is based on the principle that money is the overriding driving force in human affairs. Happily, there remain many who believe that the pursuit of money is an insufficient purpose in life.

Markets are central to capitalism. Competition is the operative principle. Competition is expected to lead to higher efficiencies and to innovations that provide higher levels of service at lower and lower costs. This is for items of daily need as well as luxuries or even invented wants.

The World Bank, the cathedral where money is god, is the world leader in its relentless doggedness and blind faith in the belief that free markets are the solution to all problems. The free market extends to land, which is to be treated no differently from any other commodity. Contrary to the World Bank's view, land markets are very different from commodity markets. All markets need to be regulated, but land markets need to be regulated differently from commodity markets, particularly if the needs of the disadvantaged half of society are to be addressed.

The classical graphs of supply and demand apply to ordinary manufactured commodities. In these graphs, the horizontal axis is quantity and the vertical axis is price. The "demand" curve is then a concave curve facing top right, meaning that as the price falls the quantity purchased increases. The "supply" curve is also concave, but facing top left, meaning that a price increase leads to increased supply in pursuit of profit.

Where the two curves intersect indicates the equilibrium point of stability, which is more or less where the ruling market currently stands in regard to price and production for the commodity being considered. A point to note is that government policies can push the supply curve up or down using tax measures. There are several reasons why land is not a commodity like other commodities. Obviously, one cannot produce more of it to meet increased demand. That is a fact but it is irrelevant. The real difference is that each piece of land is unique and not substitutable by a different piece, except by another plot in the same locality. The locality's land is fixed in place. Its value lies in (a) its location, which you cannot change and (b) its permitted use, and permitted intensity of use, both of which government can change. All such changes affect its value in the marketplace.

In a representation on the demand-supply graph, for plots of land, such graphs have to be locality by locality, and each graph is unique for that locality. It is not a collective graph for all plots, as it would be for a single commodity, like say soup or cornflakes. The "supply" line is vertical, because the quantity (the area of the locality) is fixed and cannot be more or less. The "demand" line is horizontal, which can move up and down. This means the price can vary. What that is will be determined by the market. Quite apart from variations in price arising from permitted use and intensity of use, there is now a new force affecting the price. That is individual preferences for this locality or that, and competition between individuals that settles the market price. From the very different looking supply-demand graphs it is dramatically obvious that land is not a commodity like other commodities. So the land market needs to be managed quite differently from other commodity markets. It calls for its own, very different forms of regulation. Ideally, just as there are different supply-demand graphs for each commodity, each locality needs its own unique demand-supply graph.

There is one other major difference between land and other commodities. This is that land falls into two distinct kinds of ownership. One is government-owned public land. The other is privately owned, by persons or corporations or other agencies. In principle it is only privately-owned land that can be transacted in the marketplace. Publicly-owned land is not part of the tradeable land market. It is in the shared ownership of all citizens, to be used normally for purposes that are in the highest public interest. Land for roads, for example, is owned by the government, shared by all and not for sale. Similarly land for parks, schools, government offices and even public toilets should be off the market and not for sale. They are shared facilities that serve a common public interest. Their area is not for sale, no matter how high the private market land price in the locality may be.

To function well, markets need to be regulated. One does not want monopolies and cartels. Regulating markets is an essential government function. But governments also use their power and often poke their noses into the market by imposing excise or import duties to influence price levels for political reasons. An example is import duties to protect local farmers. This is, of course, frowned upon by the World Bank because it punctures the ideology that demands that all markets must always be "free".

As a city grows, demand for land in the older areas almost invariably grows. Unless the locality is neglected and becomes decrepit, land prices are expected to rise. The older owners of property can now resell for a higher price, although they have done nothing whatsoever to bring about the price increase.

If properties are rented, owners can expect to increase their rents. Lower-income occupants are consequently often forced to move out to cheaper lands further away from the original growth centre. Market forces, in a free market for land, create pressures that force the lowest-income groups to move far away into cheaper lands. It increases their travel time. The quality of life of poorer people is adversely affected. Such diminishing is bound to affect the quality of their work. Altogether, city functioning becomes less efficient.

Ideally, for a city to function well, housing for the poor should be spread all over the city. This is where the low-level service jobs are, spread all over. The problem is, how can low-income homes be provided in localities where the land value is high? The answer is glaringly obvious. Take the land for low-income housing off the market. Low-income homes need to be placed close to low-income jobs—in other words, uniformly spread across the city.

Land is provided for roads, parks, schools and other amenities all over the city that is not for sale but reserved for its particular, prescribed use. Land for low-income housing must be similarly taken off the market and reserved for low-income housing. It is not a small area. To properly cater to lower-middle and low-income earners means 80% of those whose incomes fall below the median. That is, 40% of all residential land should be reserved and dedicated for all-time use only to house these income groups. As it happens, slum residents in Mumbai constitute 40% of the city's population. Such off-the-market lands are called community land reserves. Just as there are wildlife reserves and forest reserves, each reserved exclusively for its specific particular purpose, community land reserves will function as lands reserved specifically for low-income housing spread across the city, including in its high-value localities. Government-owned land is particularly suitable for conversion to community land reserves because it happens to be spread across the city, as community land reserves should be. The important understanding is that these occupants of low-income housing are not free to sell their accommodation. Their land is off the market. Either the premises are on rent, payable to the community land reserve managing their estate, or if the occupants are owners they own only the structures they occupy and not the land beneath it. That belongs to the community land reserves.

On leaving, such residents will fully recover the construction cost they have incurred of the premises they occupy, indexed for inflation, but not the value of the underlying land. The vacating occupant has no choice, by contract, except to sell the construction to the community land reserve. The community land reserve, by some transparent process, selects and allots the construction to a new incoming occupant. Appreciation in land value is not reflected in the rent or the ownership cost charged to the incoming occupant. Thus, the land taken off the market for low-income housing remains for all time as land to be used exclusively for that purpose.

How a community land reserve is organised and how it operates in such a way that land dedicated to low-income housing remains for just that use for all time must be the subject of a separate article. Meanwhile, what has to be first accepted is that the government is not in the same category as a developer, free to profit from ownership of land. Government lands are public lands, held in trust and to be used for what is highest in the public interest. Such lands are not to be held primarily for monetisation. Their preferred primary use must be changed to be for low-income housing or its associated amenities.

In contrast to doing what is highest in the public interest, currently the government does the exact opposite. The 2.4 square kilometres of Dharavi, at present, is home and workplace to perhaps a little over four lakh low- and middle-income residents. Most of the land in Dharavi is publicly-owned. It could be used for continuing public ownership of affordable housing and workplaces for its present residents. Instead, it has been handed over to a developer for a fraction of its market value. A large block of land has been quietly moved from public ownership into the private land market. Market forces will eventually force all lower-income residents out. Increasingly, the city is becoming segregated by income, with its poor residents living further and further away, or in new slums close to their jobs. Neither of these is as desirable an outcome as having an evenly distributed population that minimises transit demand. (Courtesy: Scroll.in)

Far-right Israeli minister visits sensitive Jerusalem holy site, a threat to Gaza cease-fire talks

JERUSALEM, July 18: Israel's far-right national security minister visited Jerusalem's most sensitive holy site on Thursday, a move that could disrupt the delicate Gaza cease-fire talks.

Tamar Ben-Gvir, an ultranationalist settler leader, said he had gone up to the contested Jerusalem hill-top compound of Al-Aqsa Mosque to pray for the return of the hostages "but without a reckless deal, without surrendering."

The move threatens to disrupt sensitive talks aimed at reaching a cease-fire in the 9-month-old Israel-Hamas war. Israeli negotiators landed in Cairo on Wednesday to continue talks.

The visit also came just days before Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu leaves for a trip to the United States, where he will address Congress.

Ben-Gvir said while standing in front of the golden dome of Al-Aqsa Mosque that he "is praying and working hard" to ensure that Netanyahu will not give in to international pressure and will continue with the military campaign in Gaza.

Ben-Gvir last visited the site in May to protest countries unilaterally recognizing Palestinian statehood. He has been convicted eight times for offenses that include racism and supporting a terrorist organization. As a teen, his views were so extreme that the army banned him from compulsory military service.

As security minister, Ben-Gvir oversees the country's police force. As a key coalition partner, Ben-Gvir also has the power to rob Netanyahu of his parliamentary

majority and try to force early elections. Ben-Gvir has used his influence to push forward pet projects and encourage Netanyahu to press ahead with the war in Gaza in the face of widespread calls to reach a cease-fire deal that would bring home hostages.

The Palestinian Foreign Ministry condemned Ben-Gvir's visit as a "provocative intrusion" that endangered the fragile status quo regarding the Jerusalem hilltop compound, which is considered holy for both Muslims and Jews.

The site is revered by Jews as the Temple Mount, and by Muslims as Haram al-Sharif, a holy site and

important national symbol. Ben-Gvir has frequently visited the site during times of conflict, drawing condemnation. Tensions over the compound have fueled past rounds of violence.

In an overnight session that lasted into Thursday morning, Israel's parliament overwhelmingly passed a resolution rejecting the establishment of a Palestinian state. The vote was largely symbolic and meant to send a message ahead of Netanyahu's trip to the U.S.

On Friday, the U.N.'s International Court of Justice is expected to issue an advisory opinion on the legality of Israel's 57-year occupation of the Palestinian territories, an ongoing legal case not connected to the current Israel-Hamas war.

Overnight Israeli strikes Thursday in central Gaza killed at least 11 people, according to the Hamas-run Civil Defense organization and hospitals. At least two children and two women were killed in air strikes on a house and a car. (AP)



important national symbol. Ben-Gvir has frequently visited the site during times of conflict, drawing condemnation. Tensions over the compound have fueled past rounds of violence.

Bangladesh govt says ready to hold talks with quota protesters; Army deployed nationwide

DHAKA, July 18: The Bangladesh government on Thursday expressed willingness to hold talks with the students protesting against the quota system in jobs after fresh violence erupted across the country as they attempted to enforce a nationwide shutdown over the issue.

Authorities deployed Border Guard Bangladesh personnel across the country including the capital, to maintain law and order, the official BSS news agency reported. Addressing a press conference, Law Minister Anisul Huq said the government decided to sit in for a dialogue with protesting students and entrusted him and Education Minister Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury with the task of the discussion.

"Whenever they agree, we will sit...it could be held this (Thursday) afternoon even," he said. "Government has agreed to hold talks with the quota reformists," he told journalists at a press briefing.

He also said Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina asked the law minister to take the initiative to hold an early hearing of the quota-related case pending with the Supreme Court. He said he has already instructed the Attorney General to take the initiative on this, and the AG will file an appeal with the Supreme Court on Sunday seeking an early hearing of the case. The government has decided to form a judicial probe committee led by High Court Justice Khandaker Diluruzzaman to investigate the violent incidents that have claimed at least seven lives, including four students.

The committee will be formed upon receiving approval from the chief justice. The law minister also requested the protesters to either end or suspend their protest as the government is ready to hold talks with them.

Fresh violence erupted in Bangladesh on Thursday after an overnight lull as thousands of students attempted to enforce a nationwide shutdown.

Mainstream media and witnesses said the protesters clashed with police, leaving many people injured and prompting people to stay indoors. Owners preferred to keep many shopping malls shut.

According to TV footage, riot police fired rubber bullets and tear gas canisters to disperse protesters while students aligned with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's ruling Awami League confronted them on the streets with bricks and bamboo sticks. Witnesses said the protesters laid a siege on the state-run Bangladesh Television Bhaban in the Rampura area in Dhaka and damaged its front side while some 1,200 staff, including journalists, were stranded inside.

The protesters overnight vowed to enforce a "complete shutdown" after days of demonstrations and violent clashes that left at least seven dead.

The seventh death was reported on Thursday in Dhaka. Government offices and banks were open as paramilitary Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), riot police and elite anti-crime Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) patrolled streets in Dhaka and other major cities, but the attendance appeared thin because of limited transport. (PTI)

In landmark verdict, South Korea's top court recognises some rights for same-sex couples

SEOUL, July 18: South Korea's top court ruled on Thursday that same-sex couples are eligible to receive the same health insurance benefits as heterosexual couples, a landmark verdict hailed by human rights groups.

The Supreme Court said it ruled that the state health insurance agency's refusal to provide spousal insurance coverage for gay couples was an act of discrimination that violates the constitutional principle of equality.

Thursday's ruling is final and cannot be appealed.

"Today's ruling is a historic victory for equality and human rights in South Korea," Amnesty International said in a statement. "The court has taken a significant step towards dismantling systemic discrimination and ensuring inclusivity for all."

A legal battle between a gay cou-

ple, So Seong-wook and Kim Yong Min, and the National Health Insurance Service began after the insurance agency revoked So's registration as a dependent of Kim, prompting So to file an administrative suit.

In 2022, the Seoul Administrative Court ruled in favour of the insurance agency. But in February 2023, the Seoul High Court overturned the earlier verdict, saying that denying So's spousal coverage rights without reasonable grounds was discriminatory because such benefits are given to heterosexual spouses.

Public views on gender issues in South Korea have gradually changed in recent years, but critics say the Asian country still has a long way to go compared with other developed countries. South Korea doesn't legally recognise same-sex marriages. (AP)

Ursula von der Leyen re-elected to a second 5-year term as European Commission president

Von der Leyen gained 401 of the 707 votes cast

STRASBOURG (FRANCE), July 18: Lawmakers at the European Parliament on Thursday re-elected Ursula von der Leyen to a second 5-year term as president of the European Union's executive commission, giving her a comfortable majority and heading off a possible leadership vacuum.

Von der Leyen raised both fists in victory as the Parliament President Roberta Metsola read out the result at the legislature.

The re-election ensures leadership continuity for the 27-nation bloc as it wrestles with crises ranging from the war in Ukraine to climate change, migration and housing shortages. A majority in the 720-seat legislature voted for the German Christian Democrat after a speech in which she pledged to be a strong leader for Europe in a time of crisis and polarization. Von der Leyen gained 401 of the 707 votes cast. There were 284 votes against her candidacy, 15 abstentions and seven void ballots.

The secret ballot came hot on the heels of strong gains by the far right in last month's election for the European Parliament.

"I will never let the extreme polarisation of our societies become accepted. I will never accept that demagogues and extremists destroy our European way of life. And I stand here today ready to lead the fight with all the Democratic forces in this house," von der Leyen said in her final pitch.

If lawmakers had rejected her candidacy, it would leave leaders of the 27-nation bloc scrambling to find a replacement as Europe grapples with crises ranging from the war in Ukraine to climate change. Instead, the con-



tinental now has an experienced pair of hands at the helm.

In a speech that sought to shore up support from across the political spectrum, von der Leyen pledged to strengthen the EU economy, its police and border agencies, tackle migration and pursue policies tackling climate change while also helping farmers who have staged protests against what they call stifling EU bureaucracy and environmental rules. She also took a swipe at Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his recent visit to Russia shortly after his country took over the rotating six-month EU presidency.

"This so-called peace mission was nothing but an appeasement mission," von der Leyen said as she vowed that Europe would remain shoulder-to-shoulder with Ukraine.

One radical right lawmaker, Diana Iovanovici-Sosoaca of Romania, was escorted out of the parliament's chamber for heckling a speaker during the debate following von der Leyen's speech. Iovanovici-Sosoaca

briefly wore what appeared to be a muzzle and held up religious icons before being led out of the room.

Over the past five years, von der Leyen has steered the bloc through a series of crises, including Britain's exit from the EU, the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. She has also pushed a Green Deal aiming to make the EU climate-neutral by 2050. As the debate ended, she told lawmakers: "I hope to have your trust and confidence for the next years. Long live Europe." Von der Leyen's election came as newly elected UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer was welcoming some 45 heads of government to discuss migration, energy security and the threat from Russia as he seeks to restore relations between the UK and its European neighbours.

The leaders signed off on the conservative German von der Leyen at a summit meeting late last month. The 65-year-old von der Leyen's bid was boosted when the European

People's Party, which includes von der Leyen's Christian Democratic Union, remained the largest group at the EU Parliament after the elections. The German politician has been praised for her leading role during the coronavirus crisis, when the EU bought vaccines collectively for its citizens. But she also found herself receiving sharp criticism for the opacity of the negotiations with vaccine makers.

The EU general court ruled Wednesday that the commission did not allow the public enough access to information about COVID-19 vaccine purchase agreements it secured with pharmaceutical companies during the pandemic. Before voting got underway, a majority of lawmakers rejected a motion from a leftist bloc in parliament calling for the election to be delayed until September in light of the court ruling.

Following the elections for EU Parliament, European Union leaders agreed on the officials who will hold the key positions in the world's biggest trading bloc in the coming years for issues ranging from antitrust investigations to foreign policy. At the side of von der Leyen will be two new faces: Antonio Costa of Portugal as European Council president and Estonia's Kaja Kallas as the top diplomat of the world's largest trading bloc.

While Costa's nomination will need the leaders' approval, Kallas will also need to be approved by European lawmakers later this year. The Estonian prime minister is a staunch supporter of Ukraine and a fierce critic of Russia within the European Union and NATO. (AP)

President Biden tests positive for COVID-19, has 'mild symptoms': White House

MILWAUKEE, July 18: US President Joe Biden has tested positive for COVID-19, halting his campaign at a critical juncture in the presidential election when he was facing increasing pressure about his health and concerns about his viability as a candidate.

"I'm sick," Biden, 81, wrote on X.

Biden tested positive for COVID-19 on Wednesday, disrupting a key campaign event in Las Vegas meant to shore up support with Latino voters.

"He is vaccinated and boosted and he is experiencing mild symptoms," White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement.

Biden has returned to his home in Delaware where he will self-isolate and will continue to carry out all of his duties fully during that time. The White House will provide regular updates on the president's status as he continues to carry out the full duties of the office while in isolation, she said.

The president was scheduled to speak at the Unidos event in Las Vegas on Wednesday afternoon. "His symptoms remain mild, his respiratory rate is normal at 16, his temperature is normal at

97.8 and his pulse oximetry is normal at 97%." The President has received his first dose of Paxlovid. He will be self-isolating at his home in Rehoboth," the White House said.

"I feel good," Biden told reporters, as he boarded Air Force One in Las Vegas to fly back to his beach house in Delaware. He was not wearing a mask, nor were the people closest to him on the tarmac. It's unclear where and when the president contracted COVID-19. But the sudden diagnosis will place him behind closed doors at a time when Democratic lawmakers have been clamouring to see him out front.

Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends staying home until the infected person has been without a fever — with no fever-reducing medicine — for at least 24 hours and symptoms have been improving for 24 hours. It then recommends wearing a mask for five days after.

The president's physician, Dr Kevin O'Connor, said that Biden "presented this afternoon with upper respiratory symptoms, to include rhinorrhea (runny nose) and non-productive cough, with general

malaise". The president felt okay for his first event of the day, but given that he was not feeling better, point-of-care testing for COVID-19 was conducted, and the results were positive for the COVID-19 virus, he said.

"Given this, the president will be self-isolating in accordance with CDC guidance for symptomatic individuals. PCR confirmation testing will be pending," the doctor said.

Having Covid is all but certain to complicate President Biden's ability to answer his critics, many of whom have said they want him to show that he still has the vigour and energy to prosecute the case against rival Donald Trump in campaign rallies, interviews and other events, The New York Times said.

The top two Democrats in the US Congress, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries are both reported to have met Biden individually to express concerns over his bid for the White House.

Nancy Pelosi, the former House Speaker, has also privately indicated to Biden that he cannot beat former president and the Republican Party's nominee Donald Trump in the election, according to CNN. Biden's re-election attempt was already being impacted by growing dissent among top Democrats after his disastrous debate performance against Trump last month. (PTI)

North Korea launches balloons likely carrying trash toward South Korea

SEOUL, July 18: North Korea resumed flying balloons likely carrying trash toward South Korea on Thursday, the South's military said, days after it vowed to respond to what it called repeated South Korean civilian leafletting campaigns in the North.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement that the balloons were flying north of Seoul, which is about an hour's drive from the border, on Thursday afternoon.

It warned the South Korea

public to be cautious of falling objects and report to authorities if they spot balloons on the ground.

Beginning in late May, North Korea has floated numerous balloons carrying wastepaper, scraps of cloth, cigarette butts and even manure toward South Korea, saying they were in response to South Korean activists sending political leaflets to the North via their own balloons. No hazardous materials were found.

In response, South Korea suspended a 2018 tension-reduction deal with North Korea, resuming propaganda broadcasts briefly and frontline live-fire military drills at border areas.

Earlier this week, the powerful sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un vowed to respond to what she called new South Korean civilian leafletting activities.

She said South Korean balloons have been found frequently at the North Korean border and other areas.

In her statement Tuesday,

Kim Yo Jong threatened new retaliatory steps, saying South Korean "scum" must be ready to pay "a gruesome and dear price."

That raised concerns that North Korea could stage physical provocations, rather than balloon launches.

South Korea's military said Wednesday it has boosted its readiness to brace for any provocation by North Korea. It said North Korea may fire at incoming South Korean balloons across the border.

(AP)

Fire at shopping mall in China kills 16 people

BEIJING, July 18: At least 16 people were killed after a fire broke out at a shopping mall in southwest China's Sichuan province.

The incident occurred on Wednesday around 6 pm at the 14-story building, located in a high-tech zone in the city of Zigong, Sichuan province, according to Chinese state media.

Dramatic images and videos showed a huge column of black smoke billowing from the building. Several people were also seen gathered on a balcony. The rescue operation was completed on Thursday. Around 75 people who were trapped inside the building were evacuated, the local fire department said.

A total of 16 people were killed, and the rest were evacuated from the building, state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

According to the preliminary investigations, the fire was caused by construction work, the report added.

China's Ministry of Emergency Management and National Fire and Rescue Administration said it has dispatched a working team to investigate the incident. Fire experts from across the country will also be sent to participate in the accident investigation, the Ministry said.

China continues to witness major fire accidents despite the directives from President Xi Jinping to implement strict preventive measures for provincial governments. Officials say the number of fire accidents in public places like hotels and restaurants was due to faulty electrical and gas pipelines.

Thirty-nine people were killed when a fire broke out in a commercial building in the Chinese province of Jiangxi in January this year.

Fifteen people were killed in a fire at a residential building in Nanjing city in the following month. (PTI)

Seattle police fire officer who said Indian student killed had 'limited value'

NEW YORK/SEATTLE, July 18: A US police officer, whose insensitive comments and laughter following the horrific death of a 23-year-old Indian student had caused outrage, has been fired from the Seattle Police Department. Jaahnavi Kandula was struck by a speeding police vehicle driven by Seattle Police Officer Kevin Dave as she was crossing a street on January 23 last year. Dave was driving at more than 119 kmph on the way to a report of a drug overdose call. Kandula was thrown 100 feet when she was struck by the speeding police patrol vehicle.

In bodycam footage released by the Seattle Police Department, Officer Daniel Auderer was heard laughing after the deadly crash and had remarked: "Uh, I think she went up on the hood, hit the windshield, and then when he hit the brakes, flew off the car...But she is dead." After making these comments, Auderer "laughed hard for four seconds," the department's Disciplinary Action Report said.

Auderer's body-worn camera also captured him saying, "Yeah, just write a check. Just, yeah (laughter). USD 11,000. She was 26, anyway. She had limited value." When asked at an Office of Police Accountability interview about his comments that Kandula had "limited value", Auderer claimed he was "ridiculing the city attorneys who would be



tasked with litigating a potential wrongful death lawsuit." Interim Chief Sue Rahn at the Seattle Police Department said in an internal email, seen by PTI Wednesday, that the hurt Auderer's words have inflicted on Kandula's family "cannot be erased. The actions (of) this individual police officer have brought shame on the Seattle Police Department and our entire profession, making the job of every police officer more difficult."

Rahn said that as the leader of the organisation, it is her duty to uphold the high standards necessary to maintain public trust. "For me to allow the officer to remain on our force would only bring further dishonour to the entire department. For that reason, I am going to terminate his employment," she said in the internal email. (PTI)

During the exercise, 24 (Male-8, Female-16) of Myanmar origin were identified

Biometric details of 24 Myanmar people collected in Tengnoupal: Manipur CM

IMPHAL, July 18: Manipur chief minister N Biren Singh said that biometric details of 24 people from Myanmar, including 16 women, were collected in Tengnoupal district as part of an exercise to identify illegal immigrants from the neighbouring country.

The state police along with Assam Rifles personnel and a team of officials collected the biometric details of these Myanmar people residing in Govajang village on Wednesday, he said.

"...a combined team of DC, Tengnoupal led by Md. Ejaj, SDO, Moreh, E-Coy 5 AR, Moreh and OC, Moreh Police Station along with joint bio-metric team of Tengnoupal conducted search of houses in Govajang Village for purpose of re-verification/ re-identification of individuals residing in the vil-



age," Singh posted on Facebook. "During the exercise, 24 (Male-8, Female-16) of Myanmar origin were identified. Further, their bio-

metric were captured by the team," he said.

The state government had started the identification process earlier, but it came to a halt after violence broke out in May last year, an official said.

The administration had resumed the process in July last year, he said. "Further biometric exercises will continue in Moreh and adjoining areas. Thanks to all security personnel and other government officials," the chief minister said on social media.

Manipur shares a 398-km-long border with Myanmar, and of which only 10 km have been fenced.

Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has been given the responsibility of fencing the majority section of the international boundary and the work is underway, another official said.

Chins, who share ethnic ties with Kukis of Manipur, reside in Myanmar. (PTI)

UNC, COCOMI condemns murder of civilian

IMPHAL, July 18: The United Naga Council (UNC) and the COCOMI, "in no uncertain terms", condemned the "cool blooded murder" of one MS Marangir Chiru of Kangchup Chiru village on July 15, 2024, by an "armed miscreant".

The two organisations, in a joint statement issued recently, also said the entire communities are aghast by the "inhumane act of violence meted out against the innocent civilian and we are deeply saddened by the loss of a precious life".

The statement then said that the COCOMI came forward expressing "their regret" over the incident by owning up its moral responsibility. The COCOMI also expressed "their utmost concern" to the victim's family and the community by ensuring

the best cooperation to resolve the matter amicably.

"We extend our heartfelt condolences to the bereaved family, loved ones and dear ones and we stand in solidarity with them during this difficult time," the joint statement of the UNC and the COCOMI further said, adding, "We stand for justice for the victim and the family. We had categorically pressed the authority to book all the culprits involved and investigate this heinous crime thoroughly and bring the matter in the limelight of justice and ensure the welfare and future security of the victim's family".

The joint statement also said that the matter had been resolved amicably as per the Naga customary law. As such, the UNC and the COCOMI appealed to both communities to refrain from further escalation in regard to this unfortunate incident.

The two apex bodies once again fervently appealed to all concerns to maintain peace and tranquility amongst the communities.

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M'laya CM invites pro-ILP groups for discussion

SHILLONG, July 18: Meghalaya chief minister Conrad K Sangma has invited pro-Inner Line Permit (ILP) groups for talks on Friday following the latter's decision to intensify checking of documents of migrant workers across the Khasi-Jaintia region of Meghalaya.

"I am directed to inform you that the Chief Minister desires to hold a meeting with some of the members of the Union in his office chamber on July 19 at 12 pm," East Khasi Hills deputy commissioner RM Kurbah said in a letter to the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) general secretary Donald V Thabah.

The KSU had claimed that over 2500 migrant workers, who allegedly failed to produce valid documents, were detected and pushed back from the state during its ongoing checking drive held in the last 12 days.

On Wednesday, KSU president Lambokstarwell Marngar had announced the union's decision to further intensify the checking drive as a mark of protest against the state government's failure to implement existing laws including the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act (MRSSA), 2016 besides mounting pressure on the Centre to immediately implement the inner line permit (ILP) to check unabated influx into the state.

He said that the KSU will also soon meet with other NGOs to decide on other courses of action to address the important issue.

"We will continue to intensify the checking of documents of migrant labourers despite government-police action against the union and its members," Marngar had said.

"Over 2500 migrant workers are found to be working without valid documents. The question also arises whether they are Indian citizens or not," he had said while adding "We also want to know how many cases have the government filed against such illegal migrant workers without valid documents, and what action is being taken against contractors for violating the rules."

"In fact, we are just trying to help the government to effectively implement the existing laws but we were instead alleged to be taking law into our own hands. The KSU along with other NGOs are forced to take action so that it will be a wakeup call to the state government," Marngar had stated. (NNN)



Delay in setting up of entry-exit points due to 'political games' alleges KSU

SHILLONG, July 18: Khasi Students' Union (KSU) chief Lambokstarwell Marngar recently alleged that the delay in setting up of the entry-exit points as mandated by the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act (MRSSA), 2016 was due to "political games".

"There is a political game among the political masters. Due to their political interest, they are playing with the issues concerning the people and the state," Marngar told reporters at the sidelines of a meeting to commemorate the 189th death anniversary of a legendary Khasi freedom fighter - U Tirot Sing Syiem - in Shillong.

He informed that in fact, the government had already identified 18 locations for setting up of entry-

exit points in 2015-16 adding more than 21-23 locations were identified in Garo Hills.

"Three years ago, the government had expressed that the financial implication would be huge if they had to construct building infrastructures for the entry-exit point but we suggested the government go for prefab structures. The government had agreed and accordingly it has set up at the entry point at Umling as a pilot project but the entry point at Umling has been abandoned after the covid pandemic," Marngar said while demanding the state government to immediately set up the entry-exit points as mandated by the MRSSA.

Further, the KSU chief also demanded the state government to come out clear on the Centre's stand on the inner line permit (ILP) demand, inclusion of Khasi language in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India and other issues.

"The state government, which has from time to time taken up the issue with Centre, should clarify to the people of the state on the reason why the Centre is not willing to implement Inner Line Permit (ILP) in Meghalaya," he said while adding, "If for three-four states in North East, ILP can be implemented, why not in Meghalaya? Okay, the government can claim that Meghalaya is a transit state but we are living in a technology

world, you cannot say that we cannot resolve such issue to ensure movement of people through Meghalaya will not at all be disturbed but I am concern what if the state government is not having the political will to push for ILP. Maybe it has passed the ILP resolution in 2019 just to calm the situation arising out of public agitations over the delay to implement the anti-influx mechanisms in the state."

Marngar also said that the state government should also come out clear on the observations made by the Centre in regards to the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security (Amendment) Bill, 2020, which was returned to the state recently. (NNN)

Opposition-less govt in Nagaland a tragedy: Cong MP

DIMAPUR, July 18: Newly elected Congress Lok Sabha MP from Nagaland S Supongmeren Jamir on Wednesday said the aversion of the state legislators to sit in the opposition

bench is a tragedy for the common people of the state. "This tantamount to the murder of representational democracy of the land," Jamir said at a meeting with the leaders of the Rengma Hoho in Tseminyu town.

Budget session of Arunachal assembly from Friday

ITANAGAR, July 18: The budget session of the Arunachal Pradesh assembly will begin on Friday and the annual financial statement for the 2024-25 fiscal will be presented on July 24, an official said.

The session will conclude on July 26. Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein, who also holds the Finance and Planning portfolio, will present the budget on July 24 during the eight-day session, Assembly Secretary Kago Habung said.

This will be the first budget of the Pema Khandu government after its return to power for the third term.

The budget session will commence on Friday with the motion of thanks to the governor's address, Habung said.

Governor Lt Gen (Retd) K T Parnaik had addressed the members of the House during the first session of the Eight Legislative Assembly that met for two days on June 14 and 15.

Three important government bills - 'The Arunachal Pradesh Amending Bill, 2024', 'The Arunachal Pradesh Public Examination (Measures to Prevent Unfair Means in Recruitment) Bill, 2024', and 'The Balipara/Tirap/Sadiya Frontier Tract Jhum Land Regulation (Amendment) Bill, 2024' would be tabled on the opening day of the session, Habung said.

Arunachal Assembly Speaker Tesam Pongte on Wednesday chaired a meeting of the Business Advisory Committee to plan the agenda for the budget session. (PTI)

Scientists discover new plant species in Arunachal Pradesh

ITANAGAR, July 18: Researchers from the Botanical Survey of India (BSI) have discovered a new plant species from a wildlife sanctuary in Arunachal Pradesh, officials said.

'Phlogacanthus Sudhanusekharii', the plant species recently discovered from Itanagar Wildlife Sanctuary in Papum Pare district, belongs to the family 'Acanthaceae' and the 'Phlogacanthus' genus, they said.

The species is named to honor Dr Sudhansu Sekhar Dash, a scientist at the BSI, for his "significant contribution" to plant and ecological research in the Indian Himalayan region, the BSI officials said.

The detailed research paper on the new species has been published by the authors Samrat Goswami and Rohan Maity in the Indian Journal of Forestry.

The genus 'Phlogacanthus' comprises 13 species in India and is spread over mainly the north-eastern and eastern Himalayan states, they said.

"The newly described species is closely allied to Phlogacanthus Guttatus (Wall) Nees, but differ in various morphological characters, mainly in its shape and size of calyx, stamens and strikingly different corona colour," a BSI official said.

Chief Minister Pema Khandu has expressed delight over the development. (PTI)

No. BTC/LR- 110/2023/17, Dated Kokrajhar, the 18th July, 2024.

NOTICE INVITING QUOTATION

Sealed quotation affixing a court fee stamp of Rs.8.25 (Rupees eight and paise twenty five only) is hereby invited from the intending registered farms/ submit Quotations for **IT Equipments & Stationaries** with the following terms and conditions.

The quotation will be received from 18.07.2024 to 07.08.2024 (11:00 AM till 3:00 PM) and will be opened on 07.08.2024 at 3:30 PM in presence of Quotationers or their representatives. In case of any unusual occurrence like Strike/ Govt, holiday etc. the receiving & opening of quotation will be on the next working day at the same time.

Terms & Conditions

- The quotation should be submitted with up-to-date documents as follows:-
 - Income Tax clearance for 3 (three) years.
 - GST Registration Certificate.
 - PAN Card.
 - Trade License.
 The Council may ask for any additional documents, if required.
- The rate of the items shall be quoted excluding GST and GST amount shall be shown separately.
- The undersigned is not bound to accept the lowest rate and reserves the right to reject any or all quotation at any time without assigning any reason thereof.
- An amount of Rs. 10,000.00 (Rupees Ten Thousand only) is to be deposited as security money in the form of Bank Draft in favour of the Principal Secretary, BTC along with quotation which will be refundable in due course.
- For details contact CALA, BTC Secretariat during office hours.

Sd/-Secretary,
Bodoland Territorial Council, Kokrajhar.

IPR(BTC)/C/2024-25/150

No. BTC/LR- 110/2023/18, Dated Kokrajhar, the 18th July, 2024.

NOTICE INVITING QUOTATION

Sealed quotation affixing a court fee stamp of Rs.8.25 (Rupees eight and paise twenty five only) is hereby invited from the intending registered farms/ submit Quotations for **Electrical Items & Furniture** with the following terms and conditions.

The quotation will be received from 18.07.2024 to 07.08.2024 (11:00 AM till 3:00 PM) and will be opened on 07.08.2024 at 3:30 PM in presence of Quotationers or their representatives. In case of any unusual occurrence like Strike/ Govt, holiday etc. the receiving & opening of quotation will be on the next working day at the same time.

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Sd/-Secretary,
Bodoland Territorial Council, Kokrajhar.

IPR(BTC)/C/2024-25/149

অসম লোকসেৱা আয়োগ
ASSAM PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION
Jawaharnagar, Khanapara, Guwahati-781022.

No.50PSC/DR-6/1/2023-24

NOTIFICATION

This is for information to all concerned that the Assam Public Service Commission will hold the Screening Test (OMR Based) for recruitment to the post of **Assistant Engineer (Mechanical) under joint cadre of Public Works Roads (PWRD) and Public Works (Building & National Highway) Department (PW&NHDI) (Advt. No. 34/2023, dated 18/12/2023)** as per programme given below:

PROGRAMME OF SCREENING TEST			
Name of Post	Date & Day	Time	Subjects
Assistant Engineer (Mechanical) under joint cadre of Public Works Roads (PWRD) and Public Works (Building & National Highway) Department (PW&NHDI)	04-08-2024 (Sunday)	10:00 AM to 12 Noon	(Paper-I) Mechanical Engineering
		1:30 PM to 3:30 PM	(Paper-II) General Studies & General English

No intimation letter to the eligible candidates shall be sent separately by post. The list of candidates shall be uploaded on 22/07/2024 and e-Admission Certificate on 29/07/2024 in the Commission's official website (www.apsc.nic.in). The candidates shall have to download their own e-Admission Certificate from the aforesaid website.

The Commission would like to clarify that the Commission reserves the right to cancel the candidature of any candidate on verification of their application form at any time or stage even after the Screening Test, if it is found that they do not fulfill any of the eligibility criteria/conditions as per terms of the aforementioned advertisement.

PwBD candidates willing to apply for scribe for the said Screening Test may inform in writing with supporting documents to the Commission or send mail to apsc-asm@nic.in on or before 24/07/2024.

Sd/- Secretary,
Assam Public Service Commission
Jawaharnagar, Khanapara, Guwahati - 22

Janasanyog /D/2658/24/19-Jul-24

Notice for Farmers

It is for general information to all the farmers of Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong District that the following scheme under Agriculture Department, Govt. of Assam will be implemented at subsidized rate.

Name of scheme :- Sub-Mission on Agriculture Mechanization (SMAM)-2024-25.

Sl.No	Name of Farm Machinery	Allotted No.			District	Govt. Subsidy
		Gen.	SC	ST		
1	Village Level Farm Machinery Bank [VLFMB].	3	1	0	Karbi Anglong	95% or maximum 9.50 Lakhs
		2	0	0	West Karbi Anglong	
2	Power Tiller	27	4	3	Karbi Anglong	Maximum 1.25 Lakhs
		21	3	2	West Karbi Anglong	

Interested Farmers/ASG/FPC/SHG are requested to apply in the prescribed format to the Executive Engineer (Agril), Karbi Anglong Division, Diphu & the Asstt. Executive Engineer (Agril), Hamren Sub-Division, Baithalangso within 25th July/2024.

For detail information, farmers may contact the following mobile no. of office of the Executive Engineer (Agril) Karbi Anglong Division, Diphu & the Asstt. Executive Engineer (Agril), Hamren Sub-Division, Baithalangso.

Contact No.
9435575975 (Karbi Anglong)
7896811433 (Karbi Anglong)

8638859463 (West Karbi Anglong)
7896688222 (West Karbi Anglong)

Sd/- Executive Engineer (Agril) Karbi Anglong, Divn::Diphu

Telangana govt to launch farm loan waiver scheme

₹ one lakh will be deposited in the farmers' accounts at 4 pm on Thursday

HYDERABAD, July 18: Telangana government will launch a farm loan waiver programme, part of its poll promise benefitting 70 lakh farmers, on Thursday, official sources said.

Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy had earlier announced that the government would implement the loan waiver up to ₹ 2 lakh by August 15.

The loan waiver funds up to ₹ one lakh will be deposited in the farmers' accounts at 4 pm on Thursday.

The chief minister said ₹ 7,000 crore in total would be credited to the accounts of farmers whose loans of up to ₹ one lakh are being waived. Crop loans of up to ₹ 1.5 lakh would be waived by the end of July, and the loan waiver process would be completed in August when loans of up to ₹ two lakh are dispensed with.

Reddy also suggested organising



a gathering of farm loan waiver scheme beneficiaries at 'Rythu Vedikas' and Ministers, MLAs and

farmers.

Ahead of the launching of the flagship programme, Deputy CM Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka will hold a meeting with bankers this morning.

A senior level officer will be made available for two districts (undivided old district) in the Secretariat to clarify the doubts, if any, raised by the Collectors on loan waiver scheme and resolve them immediately.

The state government has clarified that ration cards are used only for family identification.

The total number of ration cards in the state is 90 lakh and the number of farmer accounts with bank loans is only 70 lakh.

The chief minister clarified that 6.36 lakh farmers who do not possess ration cards and took farm loans are also eligible to avail the farm loan waiver benefit. (PTI)

VISHALGAD VIOLENCE

Cong demands action against local authorities



MUMBAI/CHHATRAPATI SAMBAHAJINAGAR, July 18: Congress leader Vijay Wadettiwar on Thursday demanded a high-level inquiry into the violence during an anti-encroachment drive at Vishalgad Fort in Kolhapur as well as action against the collector and superintendent of police.

In a letter to chief minister Eknath Shinde, the leader of opposition in the state assembly claimed anti-social elements targeted a particular community in the name of removing encroachment in Vishalgad.

"The violence at Gazapur in Vishalgad was government-sponsored," Wadettiwar alleged and said the main culprit should be unmasked.

"The unfortunate incident happened in the presence of the collector and superintendent of police. The collector should be transferred and the superintendent of police should be suspended," he said.

The anti-encroachment drive at Vishalgad Fort turned violent on Sunday as a mob hurled stones at police personnel and damaged properties, leading to the arrest of 21 persons, according to police.

The situation turned tense after some right-wing activists led by Maratha royal and former MP

Sambhajiraje Chhatrapati, who had come from Pune, were stopped at the base of the fort in view of prohibitory orders.

Addressing a press conference here, Wadettiwar claimed the ground was slipping under the feet of communal forces after the victory of a candidate upholding progressive values in the Lok Sabha polls in Kolhapur.

"The violence was engineered keeping in mind the upcoming assembly elections. Those indulging in violence cannot be followers of Chhatrapati Shivaji. Hence, the government must find out who are the culprits," he said.

The Congress leader accused the police of inaction while the violence was on. The issue of encroachment could have been resolved through dialogue, but the government did not want that to happen, he claimed.

Speaking to reporters in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, former All India Majlis e Itehadul Muslimeen MP Imtiaz Jaleel said his party would protest against the alleged damage to a mosque and homes at Gazapur.

The protest will take place at the divisional commissioner's office complex on Friday and also in various talukas and districts, Jaleel

said.

"Such incidents are unacceptable. We will also protest against the police which took no action to stop the violence," the former Aurangabad Lok Sabha MP said.

On Tuesday, Maha Vikas Aghadi leaders, including Kolhapur MP Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj and MLC Satej Patil, both from Congress, visited Vishalgad.

Chhatrapati Shahu appealed to the government to ensure peace at the site.

Deputy chief minister Devendra Fadnis on Tuesday underlined the government's commitment to legally address the issue of encroachments at the Vishalgad Fort.

The Deputy CM has urged Opposition leaders to clarify their position on the Vishalgad issue, emphasising the need to preserve historical sites while dealing with illegal constructions.

Vishalgad Fort holds profound significance in Maratha history as Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj escaped to it after being besieged at Panhala Fort in 1660.

In 1844, Vishalgad was ruled by the Kolhapur State when a rebellion was led against a Brahmin regent installed by the British as the natural heir to the throne was underage. (PTI)

TN minister inspects multipurpose hall

ERODE (TAMIL NADU), July 18: Tamil Nadu Minister M P Saminathan inspected the multipurpose mandapam (hall), constructed at Bhavanisagar in memory of former Erode MLA M A Eswaran.

Speaking to reporters here on Wednesday, the minister said chief minister M K Stalin had ordered the construction of the hall with a life-size bronze statue of Eswaran, who was also a freedom fighter.

The hall, built at a cost of ₹ 3.04 crore, would be inaugurated by the chief minister soon, said Swaminathan, who holds the portfolio of Tamil Development, Information & Publicity.

Erode district Collector Raja Gopal Sunkara and Public Works (Buildings) Department personnel accompanied the minister.

Representing Erode Assembly Constituency in the then Madras Provincial Assembly as MLA from 1946 to 1952, Eswaran was instrumental for construction of an earthen dam across the River Bhavani at Bhavanisagar. (PTI)

VALMIKI CORP SCAM

BJP leaders trying to lay siege to 'Vidhana Soudha' detained in Bengaluru

BENGALURU, July 18: BJP leaders, including the party's Karnataka unit President B Y Vijayendra, were detained when they tried to lay siege to 'Vidhana Soudha' here on Thursday demanding the resignation of chief minister Siddaramaiah over the alleged scam in the Karnataka Maharshi Valmiki Scheduled Tribes Development Corporation Ltd.

Holding placards, banners and posters, the BJP legislators and workers raised slogans against the Congress government charging it with indulging in large-scale corruption.

The party leaders alleged that the "anti-Dalit and anti-tribal face" of the Congress has been exposed after the scam came to light.

"The Chief Minister has lost the moral right to continue in office. Our protest will continue till he resigns," Vijayendra told reporters as he was taken into preventive custody near 'Vidhana Soudha', the seat of state legislature and secre-



tariat, where the monsoon session was underway.

He also referred to the statement of the Enforcement Directorate, which is probing the scam, on Wednesday that approximately Rs 90 crore was diverted from the state-run Corporation to 18 fake accounts in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

"A substantial amount of funds were utilised to procure a significant quantity of liquor just prior to the general elections. Additionally, high-end vehicles, including a Lamborghini, were purchased using proceeds of the scam," the

federal probe agency said.

The ED arrested former Minister B Nagendra last week in connection with the scam.

During search operations at the premises of Nagendra and Basanagouda Daddal, the Chairperson of the Corporation and Raichur Rural Congress MLA, the ED said it recovered incriminating documents linking them to the handling of diverted funds during the recent elections. Additionally, associates closely connected to Nagendra were implicated in the fund diversion and cash management, the agency said. (PTI)

Failing to table reservation bill will attract people's wrath: BJP to Congress



BENGALURU, July 18: The opposition BJP in Karnataka on Thursday warned the Congress government in the state to be prepared for the wrath of the people if it fails to table the bill that mandates reservations for Kannadigas in the private sector in the ongoing Legislative session.

The party slammed chief minister Siddaramaiah for taking an U-turn on the Karnataka State Employment of Local Candidates in the Industries, Factories and Other Establishments Bill, 2024, which was cleared in the Cabinet meeting on Monday and put on hold late Wednesday night after uproar by the industry.

Clarifying on the decision to hold back the bill, Siddaramaiah said on Wednesday that the draft bill intended to provide reservations for Kannadigas in private sector companies, industries, and enterprises is still in the preparation stage.

A comprehensive discussion will be held in the next Cabinet meeting to make a final decision, he said.

BJP state president B Y Vijayendra in a post on 'X' asked, "Why did you bring the bill to give employment to the kannadigas? Why did you hold it back? Why mess with the lives of Kannadigas? Do you need Kannadigas to insult?"

"Let the government present the job reservation bill for Kannadigas, which has given hope to lakhs of unemployed people in rural areas who were deprived of job opportunities despite their qualifications, in the current session, or else be ready

to face the anger of Kannadigas," the Shikaripura MLA said. Vijayendra condemned the 'cowardly decision' of putting the bill on hold which 'insulted Kannada-Kannadiga-Karnataka'. The bill aims to provide employment to Kannadigas.

The BJP leader sought to know why the government, which had moved forward to address the demand of the pro-Kannada fighters, after many years of struggle to protect the employment rights of the children of this land, gave up within a day.

It seems that the lobby of the anti-Kannada forces, which suppress the self-respect of the country, the self-esteem of the Kannadigas, has prevailed over the chief minister, forcing him to take a 'U-turn' three times within a day, Vijayendra alleged.

"Fearing the split in the INDI Alliance, Delhi's big 'hand' must have tied the hands of the chief minister, otherwise how can he take an escapist decision to sideline the bill that will improve the lives of Kannadigas?" the BJP state president said.

The people of the state will never forgive the Congress government and the chief minister held back the 'pro-Kannada bill' in an attempt to divert public attention and also mislead the investigation into the Karnataka Maharshi Valmiki Scheduled Tribes Development Corporation (KMVSTDC) and Mysuru Urban Development Authority (MUDA) scams that have rocked the state, he said. (PTI)

PM, Railway minister must take responsibility for 'lapses' Congress on train derailment in UP

NEW DELHI, July 18: In the wake of the Chandigarh-Dibrugarh Express derailment, the Congress on Thursday demanded that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw must take responsibility of the "massive lapses" and the Kavach anti-collision system should be installed expeditiously on all routes.

Four people were killed and 20 injured when eight coaches of the Chandigarh-Dibrugarh Express derailed near Gonda in Uttar Pradesh on Thursday, officials said.

Uttar Pradesh Deputy chief minister Brajesh Pathak said four people were killed in the accident.

Congress president Mallikarjun

Kharge said the derailment of Chandigarh-Dibrugarh Express in Uttar Pradesh is yet another instance of how the Modi government has "systematically jeopardised" rail safety.

"Our deepest condolences to the families of the bereaved and our thoughts and prayers are with the injured. A month ago, 11 people lost their lives when a goods train collided with the Sealdah-Agartala Kanchanjunga Express," he said.

Kharge pointed out that the Commissioner of Railway Safety has stated that the accident was "waiting to happen".

"Failure of automatic signal, lapses at multiple levels in manag-

ing operations and non-availability of critical safety equipment such as walkie-talkie with the loco pilot and train manager are some of the reasons cited for collision in the probe report," Kharge said.

"PM Narendra Modi and his Railway Minister, who leaves no opportunity for self-publicity, must take direct responsibility of the massive lapses that have plagued the Indian Railways," he added.

The Congress president said his party's single demand was that the Kavach anti-collision system be "installed expeditiously" on all routes across India to ensure enhanced safety measures and prevent accidents. (PTI)

'One who eats beef shows Lord Shiva's picture in Parliament'

JAIPUR, July 18: In an apparent attack on Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, Rajasthan BJP chief C P Joshi has said those who "consume beef" show picture of Lord Shiva in Parliament.

Joshi made the remarks at a party meeting in Dausa on Wednesday. A video of his speech has surfaced on social media.

"In the India-China fight, there is tension on the international border and Rahul Gandhi sits with the Chinese ambassador... One who consumes beef brings a picture of Mahadev to Parliament. This cannot be tolerated," Joshi said, without taking any names.

"If someone labels Hindus as terrorists, calls them violent, and opposes Ram Mandir, will we remain silent? Those who mock President Droupadi Mumu for her skin colour will continue to succeed if we remain a mute spectator," he said.

On July 1, Gandhi, while speaking during the debate on the Motion of Thanks on the President's Address held up pictures of Lord Shiva, Guru Nanak and Jesus Christ as he referred to Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, Buddhism and Jainism to underline the importance of fearlessness.

He also cited the attributes of Lord Shiva and teachings of Guru Nanak, Jesus Christ, Buddha and Mahavir to state that all religions and great people of the country have said "daro mat, daro mat (do not be scared, do not scare others)". (PTI)

Consensus among all sections prerequisite for UCC: SP MP Nadvi

'Progress will happen through work, by removing negativity from society'

NEW DELHI, July 18: Consensus is a prerequisite for bringing in a Uniform Civil Code and any move that does not consider the views of all sections is a forced one and hence against the Constitution, says Samajwadi Party MP Maulana Mohibullah Nadvi.

In an interaction with PTI editors at the agency's headquarters here, the imam of the Jama Masjid across the road from Parliament also said issues of the Muslim community were the same as that of other sections in the country and education and health have to be a priority for development.

The Rampur MP, whose Lok Sabha polls candidature caused a flutter with SP veteran Azam Khan reportedly opposing it, hailed Khan as a big leader of the state, party and Rampur.

"There was no opposition, the election was fought with everyone's support. I did not face any such thing (opposition). There are no differences with him," he added.

Nadvi, who has led prayers as the imam of the mosque, popularly called Parliament Masjid, for 19 years and won his election by over 87,000 votes, is a rare instance of a practising imam joining electoral politics.

"A culture had emerged in the country that only those who had money or a background can come into politics. But an ordinary imam who had the confidence of the people coming into the mosque was given the ticket and he got support from people of all sections of society and won."

Discussing the trend of renaming of places and cities in the last few years, the



first-time MP and debutant politician said progress does not happen by changing the names of places.

"Progress will happen through work, by removing negativity from society. History cannot be reversed. What has been written has been written," the 48-year-old said.

Asked about his views on the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) amid the BJP's push to bring it in states such as Uttarakhand, Nadvi said, "So there should be consensus among everyone to move towards it. If you don't take someone's views into account then that would be by force and hence against the Constitution."

"Consensus is important and is the spirit of democracy," added the imam of the 'Parliament Masjid'.

Asked if consensus and unanimity were

prerequisites for bringing in a UCC, Nadvi answered in the affirmative.

"Of course, consensus is the first step before bringing anything. People's concerns are different, foundations are different. In our country, we have so many diverse cultures. The culture of the north is different from the south; east and west are different, languages are different... But we also have a larger culture which encompasses all of these. So we need to have a consensus."

Nadvi said his sole motive to enter politics was to serve people and he would continue to handle both responsibilities -- of representing the people of Rampur and the 'imamat' at the mosque.

It's just a few steps from his mosque to Parliament, and a giant leap from religion to mainstream politics. But the greenhorn in politics is no stranger to politicians.

He said he has led the likes of former president A P J Abdul Kalam, former vice president Hamid Ansari and the late Sambhal MP Shafiqur Rahman Barq in prayers.

The mosque, Nadvi stressed, has a very rich history and even India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and first president Rajendra Prasad visited it.

"Former presidents Zakir Hussain, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, APJ Abdul Kalam and former vice presidents Hamid Ansari have all prayed here. In fact, Ahmed sahab's grave is also situated within the mosque's premises. World leaders such as Najib Razak and Mahathir Mohammed, among others, have also prayed here," he said.

On why he chose the Samajwadi Party

once he decided to enter politics, Nadvi said, "Samajwad (socialism) is a thought. First Mulayam Singh did it and now Akhilesh Yadav is providing leadership to ensure that all sections get equality and no one is deprived... I came in touch with more SP people who came to the mosque to pray."

He also hailed the SP-Congress alliance in Uttar Pradesh and said there is ideological unity between the two parties.

Discussing his first few days in Parliament, Nadvi said he was shocked to find that members take oath according to their beliefs but once they step down from the podium they forget about the oath.

"While everyone has decided that all will work together according to the Constitution irrespective of caste, creed and religion, it does not happen. I do hope this will happen in the future," he said.

Asked about some members during their oath raising 'Jai Shri Ram' and 'Jai Palestine' slogans, Nadvi said, "The Speaker has formed a committee and I don't think I have to add anything on that. What has happened has happened, everything should happen according to the Constitution."

On priorities for his constituency, Nadvi said Rampur desperately needs a medical college.

"In Rampur, there is not a single medical college while there are 18 lakh people, 1,000-1,500 patients daily and only 250 beds in the district hospital. People are suffering. So I urge the Health minister to provide a medical college for the district," Nadvi said. (PTI)

Top court gets first judge from Manipur SC attains full strength as 2 judges take oath

NEW DELHI, July 18: Chief Justice of Jammu and Kashmir High Court, Justice N Kotiswar Singh on Thursday took oath of office and became the first judge to have been elevated to the Supreme Court from Manipur.

Acting Chief Justice of Madras High Court R Mahadevan was also sworn in as judge of the apex court.

Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud administered the oath of office to both judges at a function in the apex court premises here. With the swearing-in, the top court has attained its full strength of 34 judges, including the Chief Justice of India.

The Supreme Court will function with 34 judges until Justice Hima Kohli retires on September 1, 2024, followed by CJ Chandrachud, who superannuates on November 10 this year. Two posts have fallen vacant after the retirement of Justice AS Bopanna and Aniruddha Bose.

The Centre has cleared the recommendation of the Supreme Court collegium on July 16.

On July 11, the five-member collegium presided over by the CJ had recommended to the Centre the names of Singh and Mahadevan for elevation to the apex



court.

"His appointment as a judge of the Supreme Court will provide representation to the North-East, and in particular he will be the first judge from the state of Manipur to be appointed as a judge of the Supreme Court," the SC Collegium said on July 11 while recommending Justice Singh's name along with that of Justice Mahadevan.

Justice Singh was appointed as a judge of the Gauhati High Court in October 2011. Following the formation of the Manipur

High Court, he was transferred there.

In February 2023, he was appointed as chief justice of the Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh High Court and will demit office in February 2028 on attaining the age of 65 years.

While recommending Justice Mahadevan's name for elevation, the collegium had noted that he belongs to a backward community from Tamil Nadu and his appointment will bring diversity to the (SC) Bench.

"The Collegium has taken due

note of the fact that Justice Mahadevan ranks third in the order of presently serving judges of the Madras High Court including the judges who have been posted as chief justices outside the Madras High Court.

"At this stage, the Collegium has given precedence to the candidature of Justice Mahadevan in order to give representation to the backward community," it noted.

Justice Mahadevan was born on June 10, 1963 and will demit office in June 2028. (PTI)

Another gunfight in J-K's Doda; 2 soldiers injured

JAMMU, July 18: Two army personnel were injured in a gunfight with terrorists in a remote forest village in Jammu and Kashmir's Doda district early Thursday, officials said, as security forces continued their operations despite inclement weather and challenging terrain.

The gunfight, lasting more than an hour, took place at Jaddan Bata village in the Kastigarh area at around 2 am when terrorists opened fire on a temporary security camp established in a government school for the ongoing search operations, the officials said.

A defence spokesperson said one of the critically injured soldiers was evacuated to Udhampur-based command hospital by an advanced light helicopter (ALH) despite challenging weather conditions.

"Swift action by ALH from Air Force Station, Udhampur saved a critically injured soldier's life in Doda (J&K). Despite challenging weather, the evacuation was successful, ensuring timely medical care at Command Hospital, Udhampur. Kudos to the team for their dedication & bravery," PRO Defence Jammu posted on X. Separately, security forces guarding a forward post opened fire after observing suspicious movement near the Line of Control (LoC) in the Sunderbani sector of Rajouri district late Wednesday night.

The area was searched on Thursday morning but nothing linked to suspicious movement was found on the ground, the officials said.

In Doda, a massive search operation is underway following the killing of four army personnel, including a captain in Desa forests during the intervening night of Monday and Tuesday, the officials said. Security forces are determined to eliminate the terrorists and restore peace in the area, they added.

"All security forces on the ground are engaged in a well-coordinated operation against terrorists with whom we had contact yesterday and today as well. The operation is under progress and we will get success soon," Deputy Inspector General of Police, Doda-Kishtwar, Ramban range, Shridhar Patil told reporters in Kastigarh.

However, he refused to share more details citing the continuation of the operation. (PTI)



The officials said two army personnel were injured when the terrorists attacked the forces camping inside the school building before fleeing into the dense forest area. Heavy rains and dense fog added to the challenge as the security forces continued their manhunt for the fleeing terrorists - who are believed to be the same group which killed four army personnel.

A massive search operation was launched in Desa and adjoining forest areas following the killing of the army personnel.

The operation entered its fourth day on Thursday and also witnessed a brief exchange of fire at two places in Desa forests on the intervening night of Tuesday and Wednesday.

Doda district, which was cleared of terrorism in 2005, has witnessed a series of attacks since June 12 when six security personnel were injured in a terror attack in Chattergala pass, followed by a firefight in Gandoh the next day which left one policeman injured. Three terrorists were killed in a day-long operation in the Gandoh area of the district on June 26, while another encounter occurred in Ghadi Bhagwah forest on July 9.

A total of 27 people, including 11 security personnel, a village defence guard, and five terrorists, were killed in nearly a dozen terror attacks in six districts of Jammu province since the beginning of this year. The dead also included seven pilgrims returning from Shiv Khori temple in Reasi district on June 9. (PTI)

12 Naxalites killed in Gadchiroli encounter carried cumulative bounty of ₹ 86 lakh

GADCHIROLI, July 18: The 12 Naxalites, including three senior cadres, who were killed in an encounter with security forces in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra carried a total cash reward of ₹ 86 lakh on their heads, police said on Thursday. Due to the success of the operation, the entire Korchi-Tipagad and Chatgaon-Kasansur Dalams of Maoists have been wiped out, they claimed.

Twelve Naxalites, including five women, were killed and three security personnel injured in the encounter that took place on Wednesday near the Chhattisgarh border. The exchange of fire started in the afternoon and lasted around six hours, an official said.



"Credible information was received yesterday morning that 12 to 15 members of Korchi-Tipagad and Chatgaon-Kasansur joint local organisation squad (LOS) are camping in a forest area near Chhattisgarh border in Wandoli village with an aim to carry out subversive activities in view of the upcoming Martyrs' Week observed by Naxalites (between July 28 and August 3)," a release issued by the Superintendent of Police (SP) Gadchiroli office said.

"Accordingly, seven units of the anti-Maoist C-60 squad led by Deputy Superintendent of Police (Operations) Vishal Nagargoje were immediately despatched for the area search operation. While the teams were engaged in the operation, the Maoists indiscriminately fired at them, which was retaliated strongly by the C-60 teams," it said.

SP Neelopal said in a press conference that the Maoists managed to flee into the dense forest upon

witnessing the increasing police pressure.

After the exchange of fire, a search was conducted in the area, which led to the recovery of the bodies of seven male and five female Maoists, he said.

Besides the bodies, the police recovered several firearms, including seven automatic weapons, three AK47 rifles, two INSAS rifles, one carbine gun and one self-loading rifle (SLR). Maoist literature, explosives, detonators and other belongings were recovered from the spot, the SP added.

"Entire Korchi-Tipagad and Chatgaon-Kasansur LOS of Naxalites, including three senior cadres of the rank of divisional committee member, five area committee members and four Dalam members carrying a total reward of ₹ 86 lakhs were wiped off in the encounter," Neelopal said.

"Most of north Gadchiroli has been cleared of armed Maoist formations," he said.

The Maoists killed in the encounter were identified as Yogesh Tulavi alias Narendra (36), Vishal Atram alias Laxman (43) and Pramod Kachlami (31) all three were from Chatgaon-Kasansur Dalam with each carrying a reward of Rs 16 lakh, the police said.

Other deceased, Maharu Gawade (31), Anil Darro (28), Sarita Parsa (37), Rajjo Gawade (35) and Vijju, were all area committee members from Chatgaon-Kasansur and Korchi-Tipagad LOS and each one carried a reward of ₹ 6 lakh, they said.

Besides, Chanda Podyam, Sita Hawke, Roja and Sagar - all members of Chatgaon-Kasansur and Korchi-Tipagad LOS, carried a reward of ₹ two lakh on their heads.

Neelopal said, "Since 2021, 80 hardcore Maoists have been neutralised in Gadchiroli, 102 Maoists were arrested and 29 others have surrendered before the Gadchiroli police." (PTI)

NEET-UG paper leak case: CBI questions 4 AIIMS Patna students

NEW DELHI, July 18: The CBI questioned four AIIMS Patna students on Thursday in connection with the NEET-UG paper leak case, officials said.

They said three MBBS third-year students and one from the second year were taken to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) office for questioning in connection with the case.

They were picked up from their hostel rooms in the presence of senior faculty members, who had been informed that the students were needed for the probe, the officials said.

The agency has sealed their hostel rooms as well, they said.

"The CBI has taken away four AIIMS Patna students. Chandan Singh, Rahul Anant, and Kumar Shanu are third-year students and Karan Jain is a second-year student," AIIMS Patna Director G K Paul said.

He said a senior officer had sent them photographs and mobile numbers of the students.

An inspector and a CBI team took the students in the presence of the dean, hostel warden and the OSD to the director, Paul said.

The students are with the CBI and are yet to return, he added.

The move comes two days after the CBI arrested Pankaj Kumar alias Aditya, a 2017-batch civil engineer from the National Institute of Technology Jamshedpur, who allegedly stole the NEET-UG paper from the NTA trunk in Hazaribagh, the officials said.

Kumar, a resident of Bokaro, was arrested



from Patna, they said.

The CBI has also arrested one Raju Singh, who allegedly helped Kumar steal the paper, from Hazaribagh, the officials said.

The CBI, which is probing the alleged irregularities in the medical entrance exam, has lodged six FIRs. The FIR from Bihar pertains to a paper leak and the rest from Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra are regarding impersonation of candidates and cheating.

The agency's own FIR on a reference from

the Union education ministry pertains to a "comprehensive investigation" into the alleged irregularities in the NEET-UG 2024.

NEET-UG is conducted by the National Testing Agency (NTA) for admissions to MBBS, BDS, AYUSH and other related courses in government and private institutions.

This year, the exam was conducted on May 5 at 4,750 centres in 571 cities, including 14 abroad. More than 23 lakh candidates took the test. (PTI)

One held for waving Palestinian flag Puja Khedkar's mother remanded in police custody till July 20

DUMKA, July 18: The Jharkhand Police on Thursday said it arrested a 28-year-old man for allegedly waving a Palestinian flag during a Muharram procession in the state's Dumka district. Another person was also detained in this connection.

The police launched an investigation after videos purportedly showing some youths waving Palestinian flags during a Muharram procession in Dumka district went viral on social media on Wednesday. In one such video, a youth was seen waving the flags atop a vehicle and raising slogans during the Muharram procession at Dudhani Chowk.

"We have arrested a resident of Deoghar Sabji Mandi from his relative's place in Dudhani for waving a Palestinian flag during the Muharram procession. We have also detained another person. Their interrogation is on," Dumka Town police station Officer in Charge, Amit Kumar Lakra, told PTI. (PTI)

PUNE, July 18: A court in Maharashtra's Pune district on Thursday remanded Manorama Khedkar, mother of IAS probationer Puja Khedkar, in police custody till July 20 after she was arrested for allegedly threatening some persons with a gun over a land dispute.

Manorama was apprehended from a lodge in Mahad in Raigad district in the morning. She was hiding there, police said.

Manorama was then brought to the Paud police station in Pune district and placed under arrest.

She was produced before a local court which remanded her in police custody till July 20, said an official.

Police had launched a search for Manorama and her husband Dilip Khedkar after a video surfaced

showing her allegedly threatening some persons with a gun over a land dispute at Dhadwadi village in Pune's Mulshi tehsil.

The Paud police in Pune rural have booked the Khedkar couple and five others under the Bharatiya Nyay Sanhita (BNS) sections, including 323 (dishonest or fraudulent removal or concealment of property), and the Arms Act.

"Manorama Khedkar was apprehended from Mahad in Raigad district and she was brought to Paud where, after the completion of formalities, she was placed under arrest," Superintendent of Police, Pune Rural, Pankaj Deshmukh, had said earlier.

Puja Khedkar is under scrutiny in her claims regarding disability and Other Backward Class (OBC) certificates in her Union Public

Service Commission (UPSC) candidature, as well as her conduct during her tenure at the Pune collector's office.

Amid the row, the government on Tuesday put on hold the 'district training program' of Puja Khedkar, who was earlier transferred to Washim as a supernumerary assistant collector from Pune, as she was summoned back to the Mussoorie-based Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration for "necessary action".

The Pune Anti-Corruption Bureau unit has received a complaint seeking an open inquiry against Puja Khedkar's father Dilip Khedkar, a retired government official, in connection with alleged disproportionate assets, a senior official said on Wednesday. (PTI)

Vessel to be built by GRSE to explore Indian Ocean for rare minerals: Official Contract was signed by officials of the GRSE and NCPOR in Goa on Tuesday

PANAJI, July 18: A ship to be built by defence PSU Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers (GRSE) as part of its pact with a Goa-based government institution will explore the deep Indian Ocean for rare minerals and metals, officials said on Thursday.

With a length of 89.5 metres, it will be the largest research vessel to be built in an Indian shipyard for deep sea exploration, a spokesperson of the National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR) in Goa said in a release.

The vessel will be deployed for undertaking deep sea scientific surveys and sampling towards the Deep Ocean Mission of the Ministry of Earth Sciences, he said.

It will have an all-weather capability and capacity to carry 34 scientists at a time

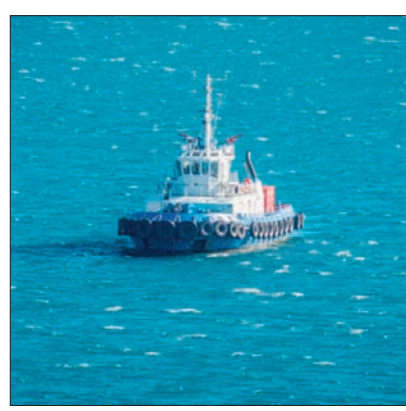
and is expected to serve India for the next 30 years, he said.

The vessel, to be built by the Kolkata-headquartered GRSE in 36 months at a contract value of ₹ 839.55 crore, will "explore the deep Indian Ocean for rare minerals and metals as part of India's Deep Ocean Mission," the release said.

The contract was signed by officials of the GRSE and NCPOR in Goa on Tuesday, it said.

The state-of-the-art multidisciplinary research vessel will be built by the GRSE under the government's 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' initiative.

"The vessel will have a maximum speed of 14 knots and will be equipped with state-of-the-art laboratories, scientific equipment and facilities," the spokesper-



son said.

It will be a multidisciplinary vessel, covering all areas of oceanography and

deep sea mineral exploration, with major facilities like multibeam bathymetry system, multichannel seismics, various ocean profilers, seabed samplers, onboard analytical systems, and all requisite heavy-duty deck machinery, the release said.

"It will be fitted with a DP2 dynamic positioning system, which will enable very accurate manoeuvring and exact location maintenance required for high-precision scientific operations at sea," the spokesperson said.

The vessel is designed for Silent-A specifications to minimise the underwater radiated noise, he said.

The new ship will be built under the dual classification of Indian Register of Shipping (IRS) and American Bureau of Shipping (ABS), and will conform to the

latest MARPOL (Marine Pollution) standards of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), the release said.

The overall length of the vessel will be 89.50 metre and it will be 18.80 metre wide, the official said, adding that the ship will have a gross weight of 5,900 tonnes, a GRSE official said in a statement on Tuesday.

In December 2023, GRSE delivered INS Sandhayak, the largest survey vessel to be built in the country, to the Indian Navy.

Three more vessels of this class are at various stages of completion at the shipyard, the official said, adding that this experience will stand GRSE in good stead while designing and building the ocean research vessel for NCPOR. (PTI)

ELECTRICAL WORKS AT DIBRUGARH WORKSHOP

E-Tender Notice No. DBWS/Elect/ AC Coach/2024-25 Dated: 17-07-2024. E-Tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following works: **Tender No. EL/DB/W/1/ AC Coach/2024-25/76. Name of work:** At Dibrugarh workshop: "Electrical work in upper and under gear in LHB and ICF SG AC coaches for a period of one year". **Tender Value:** ₹49,18,447.99 inclusive GST. **Bid Security:** ₹98,400/-. **Date & Time of closing of tender:** 15.00 hrs. of 08-08-2024 & opening at 15.30 hrs. of 08-08-2024. The complete information with the tender document of above e-tender will be available upto 15.00 hrs. of 08-08-2024 in website www.reps.gov.in.

Dy. Chief Electrical Engineer, Dibrugarh
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'My Spy: The Eternal City' a love letter to Italy: director Pete Segal

NEW DELHI, July 18: A real-life personal story served as the starting point for his latest release "My Spy: The Eternal City", says filmmaker Pete Segal, who describes the film as his "love letter" to Italy.

The movie, a sequel to Segal's 2020 action comedy "My Spy", brings back Dave Bautista and Chloe Coleman as veteran CIA operative JJ and his high school-going stepdaughter and protege, Sophie.

"My Spy: The Eternal City", which started streaming on Prime Video from Thursday, sees the action shift from Chicago to Italy when Sophie's high school choir goes on a tour to the European country. The trip is interrupted by a nefarious nuclear plot targeting the Vatican which compels the duo to reunite to save the world again.

"The choir trip (in the film) is based on a real choir trip that I was actually a chaperone on for my children's high school. They have a tremendous choir, led by the real Dr Brookie, who we portrayed with another actor in the film, and the tour started in Venice.

"Then, they took the kids to Florence on the train and then they all performed before the Pope in the Vatican and I just wanted to capture that same adventure on film... So, it's a bit of

a love letter to Italy, and I'm excited for people to see the characters they love but in this new, bigger environment," Segal told PTI in an interview when asked why he chose to move the plot in the follow-up film to Italy.

The sequel is bigger and grander than "My Spy", which was made on a USD 19 million budget, he said, adding Amazon Studios gave the team "triple" the amount to mount the new movie.

"We were the beneficiaries of our success on the first movie. It was the third biggest movie of 2020. And so our budget originally was USD 19 million. And, Amazon rewarded us with triple that to do the sequel. So, we knew we had a lot more money to make a bigger canvas.

"We wanted the set pieces to be bigger. We wanted the action to be bigger. We wanted new characters. You have to challenge yourself not to repeat. Just because a joke worked in the first movie, don't do it again. Try to be as fresh and original as you can," he added.

The director, best known for comedies such as "50 First Dates", "The Longest Yard", "Anger Management", and "Get Smart", said "My Spy: The Eternal City" is one of the few films to be shot inside the Colosseum, the historical landmark in Italian capital Rome, in a while. (PTI)



Ellipsis Entertainment announces film on 'India's biggest bank scam'

NEW DELHI, July 18: Production house Ellipsis Entertainment on Thursday said it will back a movie based on the infamous 1971 scam at a State Bank of India branch in Delhi.

The currently untitled film will explore what is billed as "one of the most sensational scams in India's banking history", investigated by a team of Delhi police officers, led by the then SHO of Chanakya Puri, Hari Dev Kaushal.

According to the makers, an alleged double agent called Rustom Nagarwala had pulled off the con.

The production banner, known for "Do Aur Do Pyaar" and "Sharmajee Ki Beti", is casting for the role of Hari Dev Kaushal, who happens to be the father of actors Rahul Dev and Mukul Dev.

Mukul Dev, known for films such as "Dastak" and "Yamla Pagla Deewana", has penned the script along with Suprotim Sengupta and Kunal Aneja. He previously wrote 2018's "Omerta", directed by Hansal Mehta.

Producer Tanuj Garg said they can't wait to lock the cast and go into shoot. "As a huge fan of the espionage genre, I was intrigued to read about the case, which continues to remain shrouded in mystery. Several people associated with the probe, including the primary suspect, kept dying within months of the incident," Garg said in a statement. "My first photographic assignments in 1990 were with Rahul and Mukul Dev who are also personal friends. I had the good fortune of personally interacting with their father, Hari Dev Ji, extensively. It's poetic that he is the hero of this compelling story," added Atul Kasbekar. (PTI)



Natalie Portman reveals how Rihanna helped her get through divorce

LOS ANGELES, July 18: Hollywood star Natalie Portman says her viral interaction with pop star

Rihanna during the Paris Fashion Week in January was very helpful as she was going through her divorce at the time.

Natalie Portman filed for divorce from French choreographer Benjamin Millepied in July 2023 after 11 years of marriage. The former

couple has two children.

In an appearance on The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon on Monday, the Oscar-winning actor spoke about the interaction in which Rihanna called her "one of the hottest b***** in Hollywood."

"It was an amazing experience for me. I think every woman going through a divorce should get to have Rihanna say to her that she's a bad b*****.

It was exactly what I needed. It was a formative moment in my life, the "May December" star said as Fallon stood up to applaud.

In the viral video, the two stars were spotted embracing after meeting outside the Dior Haute Couture show in Paris in January.

I love you, Portman told the singer and Rihanna responded, I am a f***** fan. You are one of the hottest b***** in Hollywood forever. I don't get excited about anybody, but I f***** love you. (PTI)

Charlize Theron says 'The Old Guard' sequel will come out soon

LOS ANGELES, July 18:

Hollywood star Charlize Theron says post-production shutdown by Netflix on the action drama "The Old Guard 2" delayed the release of the much anticipated film but the sequel will come out soon.

Written and directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood, "The Old Guard" was released in 2020 and emerged as among the most popular movies to ever hit the streaming platform.

Theron, who played Andy/Andromache the Scythian heading a group of immortal warriors fighting for justice, said the follow-up film finished shooting about two years ago. It faced a lengthy delay due in part to a change in Netflix leadership.

"Netflix went through quite a changeover. We got kind of stuck in that and our post-production shut down, I think, five weeks into it," she told Variety.

The actors and writers' strikes also played a role in pushing back the film.

"They were going through a lot of changes, and I totally understand it. We finally picked it back up and I'm really excited about it. It's really good... It will come out soon... It's a really important film to us. I only wanted to do it if we could make it amazing. I really love this movie," the Oscar winner added.

Upon its release, "The Old Guard", based on the comic book series by Greg Rucka and illustrator Leandro Fernandez, was praised for its stunning female-led action sequences and background score.

The film followed a small group of immortal soldiers, led by Andy, who has been working as mercenaries for centuries. But the group gets a shock when they find a new immortal woman, not long after they discover that an evil group has video evidence of their immortality.

The second chapter was directed by Victoria Mahoney with Uma Thurman and Henry Golding joining returning cast members Theron, Kiki Layne, Matthias Schoenaerts, Marwan Kenzari, Luca Marinelli, Veronica Ngo and Chiwetel Ejiofor. (PTI)

Will fight against copyright infringement case in court: Rakshit Shetty's Paramvah posts open letter

BENGALURU, July 18: Reacting to the copyright infringement FIR filed against actor-filmmaker Rakshit Shetty, Paramvah Studios has issued an open letter on its Instagram page stating that the production house has decided to fight the case in court.

The case was filed by MRT Music alleging that the production house had used two songs owned by it without any authorisation in the film Bachelor Party.

Paramvah Studios was floated by Rakshit Shetty, who was named in the FIR.

The police said on July 15 that the complaint was filed against Shetty and his production house by Naveen Kumar, who is a partner at MRT Music, at Yeshwanthapura police station, alleging that two songs — "Gaalimathu" and "Nyaya Ellide" — were used in the comedy film without obtaining permission.

A notice has been sent to the actor in this connection, police added. In the FIR, the complainant had alleged that Shetty used these songs in violation of The Copyright Act without purchasing broadcast and ownership rights. He also alleged that discussions were held between the two parties in January about using these songs but they were

unsuccessful.

However, in the open letter, Paramvah Studios has stated that the songs in contention were used in the film indirectly — in one scene, a school girl sings one of the songs while in her class and for the other song, a short clip of it was shown playing on a TV in the background.

"We had previously spoken with MRT before the Bachelor Party movie's release, but the price quoted was beyond our budget and not open for negotiation," the letter stated.

The letter went on to question if these instances mentioned were really infringement and if exorbitant prices quoted the MRT are justified, given the fleeting nature of the usage of the songs.

"To seek justice and clarity, we have decided to fight this case in court. Not just for us but for any and every filmmaker who might face similar challenges in the future," the letter added. When contacted by PTI, a representative of Paramvah Studios, choosing to remain anonymous, said the company does not wish to comment any further on this, as advised by their legal counsel. Bachelor Party was directed by Abhijit Mahesh and was released on January 26. (PTI)



ARGENTINA TOPS FIFA MEN'S RANKINGS AS GOVERNMENT HITS BACK AT CRITICS OF TEAM'S RACIST FRANCE SONG

BUENOS AIRES (ARGENTINA), July 18: Argentina was confirmed as the world's No. 1 team in the FIFA men's rankings on Thursday, as the national government doubled down on defending the players who celebrated winning the Copa America by singing a racist song targeting No. 2-ranked France.

The fallout of the chant sung late on Sunday in Miami — which mocked the African heritage of some France players — continued four days later, including a rebuke to Argentina's critics by the vice president in its far-right government.

Argentina's government on Wednesday fired one of its lead-

ing sports officials who urged Lionel Messi and the president of the Argentine Football Association to apologize.

The sports under-secretary, Julio Garro, spoke after FIFA said it was looking into the incident and English club Chelsea started a disciplinary process against its midfielder Enzo Fernandez. He broadcast the footage on social media from the Argentina team bus in Florida.

Fernandez later published an apology on his Instagram account, which disappeared by Thursday, saying he was "truly sorry. That video, that moment, those words, do not reflect my beliefs or my character."

However, a defiant post by the

vice president of Argentina, Victoria Villarruel, on social media hit back at the country's critics.

"No country with a colonial history is going to put us down for a song sung on a field nor for speaking a truth that nobody wants to admit," Villarruel wrote.

"Enough of pretending to be offended, hypocrites. Enzo I am with you, Messi thanks for everything! Argentines always keep your heads high! Long live Argentina!"

Villarruel said Argentina's history had been forged by people of all races: "We never forced our way of life on anyone, nor will we tolerate that someone tries to do the same to us."



The song refers to France players being "all from Angola," having parents from Nigeria and Cameroon, and also includes an

offensive reference to Kylian Mbappé.

One of Fernandez's French teammates at Chelsea, Wesley

Fofana, who is Black, described the video as "uninhibited racism." France players Jules Koundé and Mike Maignan also posted critical comments about the Argentina incident.

The chant was first sung by Argentina fans in Qatar ahead of the 2022 World Cup final against France. Argentina won a penalty shootout after a thrilling 3-3 draw.

FIFA President Gianni Infantino has said soccer and its 211 national federations must have a zero tolerance approach to racism and in May committed to relaunching a task force to monitor incidents.

Argentina has topped the FIFA rankings since April 2023

and has extended its lead over second-placed France, which lost in the European Championship semifinals to Spain.

Euro 2024 winner Spain rose five places to No. 3. Beaten finalist England moved up one place, swapping with No. 5 Brazil. Copa America beaten finalist Colombia rose three places to No. 9.

Morocco is at No. 14, with the 2022 World Cup semifinalist dropping two places as Africa's top-ranked men's team. The United States dropped five places to No. 16, one ahead of its CONCACAF regional rival Mexico.

No. 18 Japan is the highest-ranked Asian team. (AP)

Shillong gears up to host the Indian Oil Durand Cup for the first time

HT Correspondent

SHILLONG, July 18: The three magnificent Trophies of the 133rd Indian Oil Durand Cup reached the Meghalayan capital of Shillong and were proudly displayed at a grand ceremony at the U Soso Tham Auditorium in Secretariat Hills, in the gracious presence of chief minister of the State, Conrad K. Sangma. As the city geared up to host the prestigious football tournament for the very first time, Sangma hailed the efforts of the Durand Cup Organizing Committee in bringing about this historic moment for the State, which would put Shillong on the football map of the country.

The three trophies will tour the city and the surrounding districts, starting from the venue in the presence of Sangma, Air Marshal SP Dharkar, Air Officer Commanding in Chief Eastern Air Command, Lieutenant General Sanjay Malik, General Officer Commanding 101Area, Maj Gen Rajesh A Moghe, VSM Vice Chairman Durand Cup Organising Committee and a number of senior military and civil officials. The three trophies were flagged off on July 10 for a nationwide tour by the President of India Droupadi Murmu from the national capital.

Maj Gen Rajesh A Moghe,



VSM welcomed and thanked the chief minister, state govt officials, military officers, the sponsors and organisers of the event and the media personnel. He brought out the schedule of matches and wished the Teams best of luck on behalf of Lt Gen Ram Chander Tiwari GOC-in-C Eastern Command and Patron of Durand Cup Organising Committee.

Speaking with immense pride on the occasion, Conrad Sangma said, "Football is the most loved and followed sport in Meghalaya and it is an absolute honour for us to host the prestigious Durand Cup for the first time. I urge all the football loving people of the state to come and watch the matches and I am sure that they will be entertained with some quality foot-

ball games between some top sides. I will be rooting for our favourite Shillong Lajong, however we look forward to competitive and exciting football matches in the coming days and wish all visiting teams and guests a wonderful time in Shillong. I wish to place on record the excellent co-ordination between Indian Army and State Govt machinery for ad-

ministrative support and infrastructure creation."

Also sharing his thoughts was Lieutenant General Sanjay Malik who said, "The Indian Army is proud to host this prestigious tournament in Shillong, as we continue with our commitment to spread the reach of the Durand Cup further into the region."

Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium will host Group F consisting of local side Shillong Lajong FC, Indian Super League sides FC Goa, Hyderabad FC and Nepal's Tribhuvan Army Football Club. The first match will be played between Shillong Lajong FC and Tribhuvan Army FC on 2nd of August. The game will start at 4 pm IST.

All matches of the Indian Oil Durand Cup will be broadcast LIVE on the Sony Sports Network and can also be livestreamed on the SonyLiv OTT platform.

A total of 24 teams, including the three services teams and two Services teams from Nepal and Bangladesh, will be seen in action across 43 matches, which will be played in the four host cities of Kokrajhar, Shillong, Jamshepur (last two named making their debut as host cities) and Kolkata, which will also host the grand final on August 31st at the hallowed Vivekananda Yuba Bharati Kriangan (VYBK).

India will look to dominate rivals in Asia Cup: Harmanpreet

DAMBULLA (SRI LANKA), July 18: Seeking to continue their domination over teams in the sub-continent, India captain Harmanpreet Kaur on Thursday said they are using the Women's Asia Cup as a platform to prepare for the upcoming T20 World Cup.

The continental tournament, to held in the T20 format this year, begins here from Friday with India taking on traditional rivals Pakistan, while the World Cup will be hosted by Bangladesh later this year.

Since the tournament's inception in 2004, India have ruled the roost, clinching the trophy in all the seven editions (T20Is and ODIs combined).

"This tournament is very important for all of us because we give equal respect to this tournament and want to improve at the Asian as well as at the world level.

"So our focus will remain same as we prepare for the T20 World Cup or any other World Cup. Each and every game is important for us and we will try to give our best," Harmanpreet said at the captains' press conference. "The challenge will be to keep doing the right things which we have done in the past Asia Cups, keep playing the same type of cricket, and keep dominating other teams and enjoy our cricket," she added.

The Harmanpreet-led side is

the team to beat going into this iteration of the Asia Cup.

India are the most successful team in the Women's Asia Cup T20 with 17 wins in 20 matches. They beat Bangladesh in the final of the last edition in 2022.

India's record against Pakistan, who they will face in their campaign opener, has also been stellar in the shortest format, with 11 wins against three defeats in 14 matches so far.

"We always enjoy playing against Pakistan but each and every team is important. Whenever we go and play, we always want to play good cricket and we will follow the same method," Harmanpreet said on the eve of her opener.

Pakistan skipper Nida Dar knows India's strength and is looking to learn valuable lessons from their neighbours.

"We just wanted to play against India because we had some good experiences and the way they are playing is great. Their approach in T20 is great, we have seen their approach. So this series is very important as at least we can learn from them," Dar said.

Besides India and Pakistan, other participating teams in this edition of the tournament are hosts Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Nepal, Thailand and United Arab Emirates. (PTI)

AFC Women's Champions League: Odisha FC pitted against Jordan and Singapore clubs

NEW DELHI, July 18: Indian club Odisha FC were drawn alongside Etihad Club (Jordan) and Lion City Sailors FC (Singapore) in Group B of the preliminary stage of the 2024-25 AFC Women's Champions League, following the draw conducted in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday.

Odisha FC, the champions of the 2023-24 Indian Women's League, will travel to Jordan to play in the preliminary stage, which will be held in a centralised league format from August 25 to 31. Thirteen sides will contest the preliminary stage, which features four groups — one group of four teams and three groups of three. The four group winners will qualify for the 12-team group stage, joining the other eight clubs that have qualified directly.

Should Odisha FC top their preliminary stage group and qualify for the next group stage, they will be placed in Group C alongside Urawa Red Diamonds Ladies (Japan), Taichung Blue Whale Women's Football Team (Chinese Taipei), and hosts Ho Chi Minh City Women's FC (Vietnam).

The group stage comprises three groups of four teams and will also be contested in a centralised league format from October 6 to 12. Clubs were seeded and placed



in pots for the draw according to their respective member association rankings, based on the FIFA women's world ranking (as of March 15, 2024).

The top two finishers of each group and the two best third-placed sides will progress to the quarterfinals, to be played on March 22 and 23, 2025.

A knockout stage draw will be conducted prior to the quarterfinals to determine the four pairings, which will be contested in a single-leg format, with the higher-ranked team of each tie to serve as the home side. This will be followed by a centralised final, which will see the semi-finals and final — all single-leg ties — being played out from May 21 to 24, 2025, to determine the first ever champions of the tournament. (PTI)

I am going all-out to win gold in Paris, says Olympic medallist PV Sindhu

NEW Delhi, July 18: Badminton ace PV Sindhu says she is "going all-out" in her quest to become the first Indian to win an unprecedented third individual Olympic medal in Paris, drawing on her experience from a successful past.

Sindhu stands on the brink of history as she pursues the gold medal in the upcoming Games, having won a silver and bronze in 2016 Rio and 2020 Tokyo edition respectively.

In an exclusive conversation on JioCinema's 'The Dreamers,' Sindhu spoke about her unwavering focus on making history at Paris, though it is going to be an extremely difficult task for the Indian star. "That third medal at Paris definitely motivates me, and I am going all-out to get that gold medal. For me, the Olympics is where I give my 200%," Sindhu

said. "The journeys in 2016 and 2020 were wonderful, filled with immense effort and unforgettable moments.

"As I prepare for Paris 2024, it's a fresh start, and I have to give my 100% no matter what."

Ranked among the world's top players, Sindhu draws from her past experiences to fuel her quest for gold. "There are a lot of experiences from my previous outings at the Olympics that I will take into Paris 2024, but I don't want to get overconfident thinking about the medals.

"I hope I can fulfil the hope of the nation and get the third medal because getting three consecutive medals is not a joke. My mindset is focused on winning the gold and this gives me a lot of motivation and confidence." She spoke at length about her

preparation for the mega event, which will run from July 26 to August 11.

"My preparations are focused on putting in the hard work while being smart and focused on that particular day."

The former world champion understands the fierce competition that awaits and respects the calibre of her opponents.

"The Olympics is extremely competitive, and all the athletes are at their peak. The top 10-15 players in the world are of the same standard, be it the likes of AN Se Young, Akane Yamaguchi, Carolina Marin, or TAI Tzu Ying.

"There are no easy points at the Olympics, and we need to play hard for every point we score against an opponent. Anything can happen at the Olympics; one small mistake can change everything."

Sindhu also shared her perspective on working with Indian badminton legend Prakash Padukone, terming it her good fortune to be associated with the 1980 All England champion.

"This time, we have a whole new team with Prakash (Padukone) sir as my mentor and Agus (Dwi Santoso) as the new coach. Our practice is focused on getting everything per-

fect and to the point.

"It is my fortune that Prakash sir is my mentor and a part of my journey, and I hope his support can help me win that medal."

Currently ranked 13th in the world, Sindhu's illustrious career boasts of numerous accolades. She has won five BWF World Championship medals, including a gold, and an Olympic silver and bronze, making her the only Indian to achieve this feat.

Her Commonwealth Games achievements include gold in 2022, silver in 2018, and bronze in 2014 in the women's singles event, along with gold in 2018 and silver in 2022 in mixed teams.

Additionally, she claimed silver in women's singles at the 2018 Asian Games and bronze in women's teams at the 2014 Asian Games. (PTI)

Surya to lead India in T20Is; Rohit, Kohli decide to play ODIs

NEW DELHI, July 18: Big-hitting batter Suryakumar Yadav was on Thursday named captain of the Indian T20 team for this month's three-match series against Sri Lanka, while ODI skipper Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli made themselves available for the 50-over rubber against the same team next month.

Shubman Gill has been named vice-captain for both the formats. The team will depart early next week for the tour which will mark the beginning of new head coach Gautam Gambhir's three-year tenure.

Riyan Parag, who scored seven half-centuries in the Vijay Hazare Trophy, and Delhi speedster Harshit Rana are the two new faces in the ODI squad.

Seasoned all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja, who retired from T20Is along with Rohit and Kohli after India's World Cup triumph in the Caribbean last month, did not find a place in the ODI squad.

Having shouldered the team's pace-bowling responsibility for a prolonged period, the lead pacer Jasprit Bumrah was rested on expected lines.

The first T20 International will be held on July 27, followed by games on July 28 and 30. All the ties will be played at the Pallekele International Cricket Stadium.

The ODIs will be held on August 2, 4 and 7 at the R. Premadasa Stadium in Colombo.

Suryakumar, 33, was chosen as skipper for the T20 series over Hardik Pandya, the designated vice-captain during India's title run in the Americas.

Star all-rounder Pandya is three years younger to the Mumbai swashbuckler but was not the preferred choice of both chairman of selectors Ajit Agarkar and Gambhir.

It is learnt that the two had a

word with Pandya on this issue on Tuesday and conveyed to him that a long-term option in Suryakumar was being considered. Pandya is expectedly there in the T20 squad and has opted out of ODIs due to personal reasons.

Previously, Suryakumar led India to a 4-1 win over Australia in a T20I series last November and followed it up with a 1-1 draw in South Africa.

Shreyas Iyer, despite losing his national contract for missing domestic cricket, made a comeback to the ODI squad alongside KL Rahul, who performed the dual role of keeper-batter during the 50-over World Cup last year at home.

Iyer was captain of this year's IPL champions Kolkata Knight Riders, for whom Gambhir was the team mentor.

Gambhir is taking over from Rahul Dravid, whose tenure ended last month with the World Cup triumph. Dravid declined an extension despite being persuaded by Rohit.

The team is looking to build towards the 2026 T20 World Cup, which India will co-host with Sri Lanka.

The Squads: T20I Squad: Suryakumar Yadav (C), Shubman Gill (VC), Yashasvi Jaiswal, Rinku Singh, Riyan Parag, Rishabh Pant (WK), Sanju Samson (WK), Hardik Pandya, Shivam Dube, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Ravi Bishnoi, Arshdeep Singh, Khaleel Ahmed, Mohd. Siraj.

ODI Squad: Rohit Sharma (C), Shubman Gill (VC), Virat Kohli, KL Rahul (WK), Rishabh Pant (WK), Shreyas Iyer, Shivam Dube, Kuldeep Yadav, Mohd. Siraj, Washington Sundar, Arshdeep Singh, Riyan Parag, Axar Patel, Khaleel Ahmed, Harshit Rana. (PTI)



Dominant India begin Women's Asia Cup defence with clash against arch rivals Pakistan

DAMBULLA, July 18: The Women's Asia Cup is set for a blockbuster start when defending champions India take on arch-foes Pakistan in a prime-time clash here on Friday, with the eight competing teams hoping to firm up their combinations ahead of the T20 World Cup in October.

Harmanpreet Kaur's India are the team to beat going into this iteration of the Asia Cup, having won the competition three out of four times in the T20 version and each of the four times in 50-overs format.

Additionally, India are also the most successful team in the Women's Asia Cup T20 with 17 wins in 20 matches. They beat Bangladesh in the final of the last edition in 2022.

India's record against Pakistan has also been stellar in the shortest format with 11 wins against three defeats in 14 matches so far and Kaur's team will lean on it in addition to the rich form shown in recent outings to clinch the Group A clash here.

While India are coming off a 1-1 draw against South Africa earlier this month with the second of the three T20s being washed out, Pakistan will be short on game-time as well as confidence since their last outing was in England in May when the hosts blanked them 3-0.

Smitri Mandhana's rich form with the bat will be India's greatest weapon at the top of the order but the biggest gain from recent all-format outings has been the way their bowling has shaped up, with



pacers and spinners putting on a combined show.

India pacer Pooja Vastrakar's eight wickets across three outings against South Africa indicate her form but additionally, Radha Yadav's successful return to the mix of spinners has been encouraging. The spin attack also includes Deepti Sharma, Sajeevan Sajana and the sprightly Shreyanka Patil.

Even though Pakistan retained

Nida Dar as skipper for the Asia Cup, the squad has undergone significant overhaul since the debacle in England.

Three players, Iram Javed, Omaira Sohail, Syeda Aroob Shah, who have not played any matches so far this year, were included with the uncapped Tasmia Rubab while six others were dropped.

Also placed in Group A are Nepal and the United Arab Emi-

rates who will face off here earlier in the day at the Rangiri Dambulla International Stadium.

The top two teams from the group will play in the semifinals.

While Nepal are returning to the competition for the first time since 2016, UAE are set for their second consecutive appearance and will be high on confidence having won more than half of their matches this year.

The lack of game-time will be a

concern for Nepal whose last outing was in mid February when they lost to Malaysia in the Asian Cricket Council's Women's Premier Cup.

UAE were last seen in action in May when they lost in the T20 World Cup Qualifier semifinal to Sri Lanka.

Teams:

India: Harmanpreet Kaur (c), Smitri Mandhana, Shafali Verma, Jemimah Rodrigues, Richa Ghosh (wk), Uma Chetry (wk), Pooja Vastrakar, Deepti Sharma, Arundhati Reddy, Renuka Singh, D Hemalatha, Asha Sobhana, Radha Yadav, Shreyanka Patil, Sajeevan Sajana.

Pakistan: Nida Dar (c), Aliya Riaz, Diana Baig, Fatima Sana, Gull Feroza, Iram Javed, Muneeba Ali, Najiba Alvi (wk), Nashra Sandhu, Omaira Sohail, Sadia Iqbal, Sidra Amin, Syeda Aroob Shah, Tasmia Rubab, Tuba Hassan.

Match starts at 7pm (IST)

Nepal: Indu Barma (capt), Sita Rana Magar, Rajmati Airee, Rubina Chhetry, Dolly Bhatta, Mamta Chaudhary, Kabita Joshi, Kabita Kunwar, Kritika Marasini, Puja Mahata, Bindu Rawal, Roma Thapa, Sabnam Rai, Samnjana Khadka, Kajal Sreshtha (wk).

UAE: Esha Oza (c), Theertha Satish (wk), Emily Thomas, Samaira Dharmidharka, Kavisha Egodage, Lavanya Keny, Khushi Sharma, Indhuja Nandakumar, Rinitha Rajith, Rishitha Rajith, Vaishnavi Mahesh, Suraksha Kotte, Heena Hotchandani, Mehak Thakur, Rithika Rajith.

Match starts at 2pm (IST). (PTI)

Ravaged but resolute H S Prannoy focussed on increasing speed ahead of Paris Olympics



NEW DELHI, July 18: His body has been ravaged by a spate of illnesses, the most recent being a bout of chikungunya, but seasoned Indian badminton player H S Prannoy is unwilling to let it come in the way of a dream Olympic debut that is happening a tad late in his career.

He is focussed on building his stamina for the grind that awaits him in Paris later this month and helping him is his coach and former player RMV Gurusaidutt.

The 32-year-old Kerala shuttler, a 2022 Thomas Cup title winner and a world and Asian Games bronze-medallist, has battled past a chronic stomach disorder, a nagging back injury, and more recently a week-long bout of the mosquito-borne viral disease.

"The preparations that we started after the Australia Open, those are on point, we are on the right track," Gurusaidutt told PTI.

"The best thing about Prannoy in this entire journey is that though he was struggling, he was showing up for training and giving his best. Of course now, since he had another rough patch, it is not easy to get into the winning momentum," he explained.

But Gurusaidutt is confident nonetheless and does not feel that the latest illness will trigger "too many changes" in Prannoy's training routine.

"He has been that kind of a player who steps up on big occasions. He's done that multiple times over the last three or four years. So, as a coach, me and Gopi sir (national coach Pullela Gopichand) have that confidence in him."

Following the high of his world championship bronze in 2023, Prannoy was laid low by another stomach disorder, a condition which was similar to the chronic acid reflux problem that he had suffered in the past. Such was complexity of his illness that it was difficult for him to have a meal without wanting to throw up later.

The result was six first-round exits and a semifinal and a quarter-final appearance this year. But he has persevered.

Gurusaidutt said the coaching team has introduced some specific drills to address the minor issues,

mainly related to speed and enduring long rallies.

"We wanted to introduce a few programs. Gopi sir thought he needed to play longer matches...Based on the last 3-4 tournaments, I particularly felt people were trying to push him at the pace in terms of making him move quickly

"...there is not too much time for him to get space between the shots. So that was something that we thought we could make it easier for him in training. Otherwise, it was about getting him confidence, and getting his fitness levels up. Those were the major aspects," he said.

Elaborating on the need to step up his pace, Gurusaidutt said, "...we wanted work on it to prepare him for somebody playing some sharp shots, and cross-courts. So, it was meant to make him feel comfortable for those things.

"So, once he picks those up, he gets into his style, that's where the game changes usually. If somebody is pushing at him constantly, once he is out of that, once he survives it then he gets into his zone again."

Gurusaidutt, a 2014 Commonwealth Games bronze-medallist, feels Prannoy also needs to mix things up, be flexible but not predictable.

"We should have a counter when someone is attacking him but also we need to make sure that he's not too defensive. He has to mix up a lot, not be predictable in one style of play."

It will be Prannoy's maiden Olympics and he said he wants to keep things "simple and usual" without taking unnecessary pressure.

"I think everyone just wants to talk about Paris. But I just want to be a little bit more pressure-free, kind of enjoy it a little bit more and just take it as one more tournament in my career," Prannoy had said during an earlier interview with PTI.

"So from a preparation point of view, I think for me it's really important to kind of get back to basics...I was not there mentally in a lot of matches. So I think that's what I tried to do and just try to be a little bit more simple and usual." (PTI)

FIFA RANKINGS: India remain on 124th position, toppers Argentina consolidate position

NEW DELHI, July 18: Success-starved India held on to the 124th position in the FIFA men's rankings released on Thursday, even as reigning world champions and Copa America winners Argentina strengthened their grip at the top of the pecking order.

In the FIFA rankings released in June, the Indian men's national football team dropped down three places in the list after its failure to qualify for the third round of the 2026 World Cup Qualifiers after losses to Qatar and Afghanistan.

Since December last year, India have been sliding down. They had broken into the top 100 last year, with a best ranking of 99, but since then it has been a downward spiral.



In Asia, India remained on the 22nd position, behind the likes of Lebanon, Palestine, and Vietnam. Having successfully defended

their Copa America crown, Argentina (1st) tighten their grip at the top of the table. France (2nd) remained their

closest challengers, after reaching the semi-finals of EURO 2024.

Newly crowned European champions Spain (3rd, up 5) have yet more reason to celebrate after hauling themselves into the top three of the ranking, while beaten finalists England (4th, up 1) were just behind the leading pack, having leapfrogged Brazil (5th, down 1).

Belgium (6th, down 3) now find themselves outside the top five, with the Netherlands (7th) and Portugal (8th, down 2) just behind them.

Colombia (9th, up 3) may find solace in their creditable return to the top 10 despite a narrow defeat to the Albiceleste in the Copa América final. (PTI)

Chotrani, Semwal top seeds in Maharashtra Open Squash

MUMBAI, July 18: Veer Chotrani and Anjali Semwal are the top-seeded players in the men's and women's draws respectively in Bombay Gymkhana 47th Maharashtra State Open Squash Tournament starting here on July 20.

Rahul Baitha is seeded second while Mahesh Mangaonkar and Om Semwal are the men's joint third and fourth seeds.

In the women's competition, Sunita Patel is seeded second and the joint third-fourth seeds

are Aradhya Porwal and Rani Gupta.

Siddhant Rewari is the top seed in boys' under-19 top while Reiva Nimbalkar is the girls' under-19 number one seed.

Seeding:

Men's: 1. Veer Chotrani, 2. Rahul Baitha, 3/4. Mahesh Mangaonkar & Om Semwal.

Women's: 1. Anjali Semwal, 2. Sunita Patel, 3/4. Aradhya Porwal & Rani Gupta.

Boys' U-19: 1. Siddhant Rewari, 2. Kushal

Vir Singh, 3/4. Aditya Chandani & Vivaan Bhatta.

Girls' U-19: 1. Reiva Nimbalkar, 2. Aryaa Dwivedi, 3/4. Durga Hiru Paradhi & Harshini Pandey.

Boys' U-17: 1. Darshil Parasrampur, 2. Ishaan Dabke, 3/4. Arjun Ramdas & Varun Shah.

Girls' U-17: 1. Rudra Singh, 2. Karina Phipps, 3/4. Yomika Khandelwal & Eesha Shrivastava. (PTI)

Geoffrey Boycott undergoes successful surgery to remove throat tumour

LONDON, July 18: England cricketer great Sir Geoffrey Boycott has undergone a successful surgery to remove a tumour from his throat, his daughter Emma said.

The former England batter had undergone extensive chemotherapy for the same in 2002. But in May, the 83-year-old learnt his cancer had returned.

"Just to let everyone know my Father, Geoffrey, has successfully come out of surgery this evening after a 3 hour operation to remove his throat cancer.

"Yet to see him but surgeon says it went well. He asked that I post an update," Boycott's daughter Emma tweeted from the cricketer's account on Wednesday.

In his illustrious career spanning 1964 to 1982, Boycott scored 100 first-class hundreds while amassing over 8,000 runs in 108 Tests at an average of nearly 48.

Former Australia player and head coach Darren Lehmann reacted to the news along with ex-England players Alan Butcher and Michael Vaughan, who posted a red heart on X.

"Thanks for the update, please pass on our thoughts to the whole family and glad the surgery went well," Lehmann wrote, while Butcher wrote, 'Great news'.

While announcing his diagnosis last month Boycott had said, "In the last few weeks, I have had an MRI Scan, CT Scan, a PET Scan, and two biopsies, and it has now been confirmed I have throat cancer and will require an operation."

"From past experience, I realize that to overcome cancer a second time I will need excellent medical treatment and quite a bit of luck, and even if the operation is successful, every cancer patient knows they have to live with the possibility of it returning. So I will just get on with it and hope for the best," he added. (PTI)



NEW DELHI, July 18: Standing on the 2023 National Games podium adorned with 10 medals, eight of them gold, ace Indian swimmer Srihari Nataraj was utterly exhausted.

After all, he had been competing non-stop at major events since 2017 when he was just 16, and the relentless competitive grind, coupled with the rigours of training had finally taken a toll on his body.

"I just needed time off to rest because my 2023 season was crazy and so hectic with so many races. I think if I didn't take any time off, my body would have broken down by now," Nataraj told PTI in an interview.

"And it could have led to an injury or I would have lost the drive to train. My body was under so much stress. I kind of just needed a few weeks off just to let my body rest," he added.

Refreshed after the much-needed break, the 23-year-old is ready for his second Olympics, where he will compete in the 100m backstroke event.

Nataraj qualified for the Paris Games via the Universality Quota, which allows countries to recommend their two highest-ranked swimmers for the showpiece if no



one makes the cut through the regulation process.

Having secured direct qualification for the previous Tokyo Olympics, the entry to the Paris Games through the Universality Quota was not ideal by Nataraj's own admission. But he has opted not to dwell on the disappointment.

"It was annoying and disappointing that I didn't get the qualifying time because I had been training really well. But I'm not re-

ally bothered about what happened," he asserted.

"I got the quota spot. It might be a step back, but I still got the spot. And now I can spend the coming weeks either thinking 'oh, this is not the way I wanted it'. Or I can focus on what I want to do in Paris. So, I'm taking it as motivation."

Since returning from the break, Nataraj has been training better, which resulted in two silver medals at the Mare Nostrum meet in Spain

and France in May.

"This season, the training's been so much better than last season. It's so good. I think it's all because of that break," he said.

There have been times when Nataraj has come close to a podium finish but missed out by a fraction of a second. Some other times, his best performance has not come at the right time.

"I think it just hasn't clicked on race day yet," he conceded.

Nataraj has not been able to improve his best time in the 100m backstroke since 2021, when he clocked 53.77s.

However, he and his coach Nihar Ameen have been able to identify where exactly the Bengaluru swimmer has been lacking.

"I think it's just race execution. I am working on having a little more speed -- front end speed and a little more natural speed so that I don't have to put in as much effort on the first 50," he explained.

He has been able to improve his first 50m and claims to have gone "fastest I've ever been" in training.

"We're doing a lot more high intensity explosive short sprints. And we're just hoping that it converts in time and I can open the first 50 a little more effortlessly.

"I've always had good capacity in good second 50m."

Nataraj, who has a season's best of 54.68s, aims to better his personal best time which would put him in semifinal contention at the Paris Games.

"I just have a goal towards trying to get a personal best. And I think if I make a personal best, it puts me in a good spot to be in the semifinals." (PTI)