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Missing Guwahati boy's body retrieved after 4 days

GUWAHATI, July 7: The body of an eight-year-old boy who had fallen into a storm-water drain in Guwahati on Thursday, was recovered about 4 km downstream in Rajgarh area of the city, police said.

The body was identified by his parents at Gauhati Medical College and Hospital (GMCH), where it was taken after being retrieved on Sunday. A post-mortem examination was conducted at the hospital, and DNA samples were collected for further testing.

The body was brought to his home in Noonmati area of the city in the afternoon.

Abhinash Sarkar had slipped from his father's scooter and fallen into the open drain on Thursday evening, as they were returning home amid heavy downpour.

Multiple agencies, including NDRF and SDRF, had launched a search operation, pressing into action different machinery and sniffer dogs. Abhinash's father Hiralal had also carried out a search operation by himself, wading through the

drain, slush and garbage with a stick in his hand for the last three days, spending the first two nights under a mosquito net on the verandah of a shop near the site of the incident.

A police officer said that the body was recovered around 9.30 am by rescue agencies in Rajgarh area, more than four km downstream from hilly Jyotinagar, where the boy had fallen into the drain.

The parents initially identified the body on the basis of photographs shared with them, and later physically verified it at the GMCH morgue.

A pall of gloom descended on the entire area as neighbours and others crowded the small courtyard of Abhinash's residence.

The last rites are being conducted at the local crematorium. A sobbing Hiralal recounted his last conversation with Abhinash, saying that his son had informed him that his examinations had gone well and asked for a bicycle. "I am a good rider but (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Floods continue to wreak havoc in state

*Himanta takes stock of flood situation in Kamrup * 24 lakh people affected in 29 districts*

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 7: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday visited the Palashbari area of Kamrup district of the state and took stock of the flood situation.

During his visit, Sarma met with the flood victims and enquired about rescue, relief and rehabilitation measures being undertaken by the government.

"Today, HCM Dr. @himantabiswa visited the relief camp at Amrit Chandra Thakuria Commerce College in Palashbari, where 28 flood-affected individuals are being sheltered. HCM took stock of all the essential supplies and facilities provided to them and directed @district_kamrup to ensure the provision of medical facilities, safe drinking water, and other necessary relief materials," Assam Chief Minister Office (CMO) wrote on micro-blogging site X.

As per an official statement, Sarma also visited No. 1 Satrapara LP School at Nahira under Rampur Educational Block and talked to some 29 inmates who temporarily took shelter in the camp.

"He asked DC Keerthi Jalli to ensure adequate distribution of relief materials to the camp inmates. He also asked the DC to en-



sure that the needs of the babies and old age people if taken shelter in the camp should be addressed to," the statement added.

Besides this, the chief minister also visited a relief camp set up at Nahira Guimara High School and interacted with the inmates.

"It may be noted that there are 236 flood affected people who took shelter in the relief

camp," the statement added.

MLA Hemanta Thakuria, district commissioner Keerthi Jalli and other senior officers were present during chief minister's visit to the flood affected areas.

Meanwhile, the flood situation in Assam remained grim on Sunday with close to 24 lakh people reeling under waters, official

sources said. Several major rivers, including the Brahmaputra, were flowing over the danger level across the state.

The toll in this year's flood, landslide and storm is at 70, the sources added.

Twenty-nine districts were affected by flood, with Dhubri being the worst hit where more than 7.95 lakh people were reeling under waters.

Among other severely affected districts are Cachar and Darrang, with over 1.50 lakh people hit in each of the districts.

More than 53,000 people are taking shelter in 577 relief camps. Major rivers including the Brahmaputra were flowing over the danger level at multiple locations across the state from Jorhat to Dhubri.

Other rivers like Burhadehing, Dikhou, Disang, Dhansiri, Jia Bharali, Kopili, Barak and Sankosh have also breached the red mark in different places.

Animals, including poultry, have also been affected in the deluge, with vast tracts of cropland also under water.

Damage to infrastructure, including roads and bridges; have also been reported from different parts of the state, the sources said. (With inputs from PTI)

HT BRIEFS

Passes away

HOWRAGHAT: Suresh Basumatary (47), a teacher at Langhin Pamgaon Higher Secondary School, Karbi Anglong and advisor to All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) in Karbi Anglong district passed away at 10:30 pm on Saturday at his residence at Rajghar, Langhin. He was associated with Bodo social organisations, particularly ABSU. He was formerly the secretary and president of Sonapur Regional ABSU. He was also the assistant general secretary of the Karbi Anglong district ABSU and was serving as the advisor of the Karbi Anglong district ABSU. He was also involved in educational and social and leading Boro organisations and served as the former president of the youth branch of the Karbi Anglong district Batho Mahasabha.

Therapy centre

BOKAJAN: Khatkhati Police Station in a significant operation led by Khatkhati officer-in-charge (OC) Nitul Saikia and Magistrate Bokajan, an OSD (Opioid Substitution Therapy) Center was seized and sealed. The authorities apprehended 20 drug addicts during the raid who were subsequently released after receiving counseling. However, Ramjan Ali, who claimed to be the Project Director of the Center, was taken into custody for further investigation. The operation was initiated following multiple complaints from residents of Lahorjan colony. The residents reported that the Center was being misused by drug addicts under the guise of receiving therapy. The complaints highlighted the presence of addicts openly consuming drugs, causing concern and unrest among the local populace. The Village Defence Party (VDP) of Hanuman Mandir assisted the Khatkhati police throughout the operation which was conducted in the presence of media personnel to ensure transparency.

SC to hear batch of pleas related to controversy-ridden NEET-UG 2024 today

NEW DELHI, July 7: The Supreme Court will hear on Monday a batch of pleas related to the controversy-ridden medical entrance exam NEET-UG 2024, including those alleging irregularities and malpractices in the May 5 test and seeking a direction to conduct it afresh.

The Centre and the National Testing Agency (NTA), which conducts NEET-UG, recently told the apex court 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.

According to the cause list for July 8 uploaded on the court's website, a bench comprising Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud and Justices J B Pardiwala and Manoj Misra is scheduled to hear a total of 38 petitions related to the exam.

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.

The NTA and the Union education ministry have been at the centre of media debates and protests by students and political parties over alleged large-scale malpractices ranging from question paper leaks to



impersonation in the test held on May 5.

The Union education ministry and the NTA have filed separate affidavits in the apex court, opposing the pleas which have sought scrapping of the exam, a re-test and a court-monitored probe into the entire gamut of issues involved.

In their responses, they have said the CBI, the country's premier investigating agency, has taken over the cases registered in different states. "It is also submitted that at the same time, in the absence of any proof of any large-scale breach of (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Rahul Gandhi urges UP CM to raise compensation for families of victims

NEW DELHI, July 7: Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi has urged Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath to increase the amount of compensation for the victims of the Hathras stampede and demanded that those responsible for the incident be given severe punishment.

In a letter to Adityanath, the former Congress chief said the compensation should be given as soon as possible.

Gandhi had met the victims of the stampede in Hathras here on Friday morning. Adityanath earlier announced that the families of the deceased would receive ₹ 2 lakh each and the injured would receive ₹

50,000 each in compensation.

In his letter to Adityanath dated July 6, Gandhi said, "The compensation announced by the Uttar Pradesh government is very inadequate. I urge that the amount of compensation be increased and it should be given as soon as possible."

At the same time, the injured should be given proper treatment and they should also be given proper compensation, the Congress leader said. "I am shocked by the news of the death of more than 120 people in the stampede incident in Hathras. I am writing this letter to you with pain in my heart and I know that you too must be feeling the same pain," he said.

Gandhi said he had met many aggrieved families of Aligarh and Hathras districts and tried to share their pain. "The incident is so tragic that I fell (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Jagannath Rath Yatra celebrated with fervor at ISKCON temple in Diphu

HT Bureau

DIPHU, July 7: The Jagannath Rath Yatra, a Hindu festival reenacting Lord Jagannath's journey to Gundicha mandir, his maternal aunt's home, was celebrated at the Jagannath (ISKCON) temple in Rongthe-ang on Sunday.

This annual festival commemorates Lord Jagannath, Lord Baladev, and Goddess Subhadra's journey from Puri, Odisha to Gundicha temple. Known as the festival of chariots, it involves carrying the deities on three massive wooden chariots pulled by devotees.

Activities at Jagannath (ISKCON) temple, Rongthe-ang began early Sunday with mangal arati at 4:20 am. Devotees cleaned the temple grounds and prepared for morning prayers, including darshan arati where Lord Jagannath was adorned. At noon, devotees gathered for the Gita path, led by Prabhu



Babu Rongpi, followed by the distribution of Gita prasad among attendees.

The Jagannath Rath Yatra commenced at 4 pm from Jagannath temple, Rongthe-ang, with an image of Lord Jagannath placed inside the chariot. Thousands of devotees participated, pulling the chariot along its route from Rongthe-ang to

Diphu market via Sibari Road, Sitlabari, Matipung road, Rongnihang, and back to Rongthe-ang. Bimang Kro, an Executive Member of Jagannath Temple Committee, Rongthe-ang, reported a participation of over 3000 devotees, marking it as the largest gathering in Diphu for the event. The Yatra celebrations will continue until July 15.

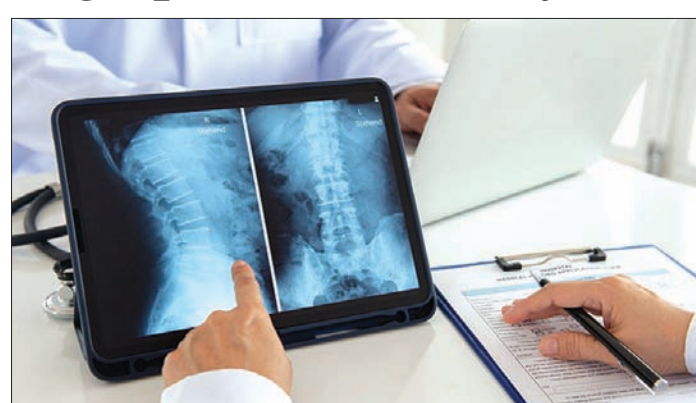
'Immediate action and proper stabilisation are pivotal in managing spinal cord injuries'

Timely action and proper stabilisation crucial for managing spinal cord injuries: Doctors

NEW DELHI, July 7: Immediate action and proper stabilisation are crucial for managing spinal cord injuries, neurosurgeons said, calling for more efforts by medical professionals and policymakers to ensure timely and adequate treatment to patients.

They also pointed out that among the injuries that people suffer in road accidents, spinal injuries are a leading cause of disability, which, the doctors said, largely stems from insufficient and delayed medical management.

"Timely stabilisation lays the groundwork for further treatment, improving prospects for rehabilitation and functional restoration," Senior director of neurosurgery at



the Max Super Speciality Hospital in Vaishali Dr. Manish Vaish said. He said it is crucial for medical professionals and caregivers to un-

derstand the urgency and significance of interventions in minimising long-term disability and optimising patient outcomes.

"Immediate action and proper stabilisation are pivotal in managing spinal cord injuries," Vaish said and added that "techniques such as immobilisation, traction and surgical interventions are vital to prevent worsening (of condition) and enhance recovery". Senior consultant at Sushrut Brain and Spine, Delhi, Dr. Yashpal Singh Bundela said that time is of the essence spinal cord injury cases.

"Every minute lost translates to potential neurological damage. Our immediate focus is on stabilising the spine and minimising pressure on the cord. Sometimes surgery is necessary to remove compressing elements. Once that initial window passes, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'Jobless growth': Congress slams govt over 'accentuated unemployment crisis'

NEW DELHI, July 7: The Congress on Sunday alleged that the Modi government had accentuated India's "unemployment crisis" with the decimation of job-creating MSMEs through the "Tughlakian demonetisation, a hastily rushed GST, and rising imports from China".

In a statement, Congress general secretary, in charge of communications, Jairam Ramesh cited a new report by Citigroup, a global bank, to flag "alarming numbers", which he claimed confirmed what the Congress stated throughout the recent election campaign.

"The Indian National Congress has been sounding the alarm on India's unemployment crisis for the past five years at least. The crisis has been accentuated with the decimation of job-creating MSMEs through the 'Tughlakian demonetisation, a hastily rushed through GST, and rising imports from China," Ramesh said.



"Even 7 per cent GDP growth will not create enough jobs for our youth - under the non-biological PM's government, we have averaged just 5.8 per cent GDP growth. The failing Modi economy is the root cause of the unemployment crisis," Ramesh said. "There are 10 lakh central government job vacancies - which is not just a travesty for our educated youth, but a constraint on our government's (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Govt mulls doubling no of AB-PMJAY beneficiaries, insurance amount in 3 yrs

NEW DELHI, July 7: The government is actively considering doubling the beneficiary base under its flagship Ayushman Bharat health insurance scheme over the next three years, with all those aged above 70 years to be brought under its ambit to begin with, and also increase the insurance coverage to ₹ 10 lakh per year.

The proposals, if given a go ahead, would entail an additional expenditure of ₹ 12,076 crore per annum for the exchequer as per estimates prepared by the National Health Authority, official sources told PTI.

"Discussions are happening to double the beneficiary base under the AB-PMJAY over the next three years, which, if implemented, will cover more than two-third population of the country with health cover, the sources said while noting that medical expenditure is one of the biggest reasons that push families to indebtedness.

"Deliberations are also underway over finalising a proposal to double the limit of the coverage amount from the existing ₹ 5 lakh to ₹ 10 lakh," they said.

These proposals or some parts of it are expected to be announced in the Union Budget to be presented later this month.

In the interim Budget 2024, the government increased the alloca-



tion for the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY), which provides health cover of ₹ 5 lakh per family per year for secondary and tertiary care hospitalization to 12 crore families, to ₹ 7,200 crore while ₹ 646 crore was assigned for the Ayushman Bharat Health Infrastructure Mission (PM-ABHIM).

President Droupadi Murmu, in her address to the joint sitting of Parliament on June 27, had said all the elderly above 70 years of age will also be covered and get the benefit of free treatment under the Ayushman Bharat Yojana now.

Those above 70 years of age add up to around 40 million-50 million more beneficiaries being covered under the scheme, another source

said. The limit of ₹ 5 lakh for AB-PMJAY was fixed in 2018. Doubling the cover amount is aimed to cater for inflation and provide relief to families in case of high-cost treatments such as transplants, cancer etc.

The NITI Aayog, in its report titled 'Health Insurance for India's Missing Middle' published in October 2021, suggested extending the scheme. It had stated that about 30 percent of the population is devoid of health insurance, highlighting the gaps in the health insurance coverage across the Indian population.

The AB-PMJAY flagship scheme towards Universal Health Coverage, and state government

extension schemes provides comprehensive hospitalisation cover to the bottom 50 per cent of the population.

Around 20 per cent of the population is covered through social health insurance, and private voluntary health insurance primarily designed for high-income groups.

The remaining 30 per cent of the population is devoid of health insurance, the actual uncovered population is higher due to existing coverage gaps in PMJAY and overlap between schemes. This uncovered population is termed as the missing middle, the report stated.

The missing middle is not a monolith - it contains multiple groups across all expenditure quintiles. The missing middle predominantly constitutes the self-employed (agriculture and non-agriculture) informal sector in rural areas, and a broad array of occupations -- informal, semi-formal, and formal -- in urban areas, the report said.

The report highlighted the need for designing a low-cost comprehensive health insurance product for the missing middle.

It primarily recognises the policy issue of low financial protection for health for the missing middle segment and highlights health insurance as a potential pathway in addressing that. (PTI)

7 proposals on table for Sebi expert group for short-term measures to tame F&O frenzy

KOLKATA, July 7: The Sebi-appointed expert group on exchange-traded derivatives started discussions on seven proposals to address regulatory issues and protect small investors from risks in index and stock option trading, sources said.

The panel members would recommend short-term strategies to bolster investor protection and improve risk metrics in this market segment, they said.

"The expert group would deliberate in detail the pros and cons of each of the seven proposals to protect small investors engaged in futures and options (F&O) trading. We know that nine out of ten small investors lose money in F&O. The recommendations of this group will be considered by the Secondary Market Advisory Committee for a final decision," a source close to the development told PTI. Options are financial contracts that give a holder a right, but not the obligation, to buy or sell an underlying asset at a specified price within a contract period.

The proposals included rationalisation or limiting weekly options, rationalisation of strike prices of the underlying assets and removal of calendar spread benefits on the expiry day, according to the sources.

The other four proposals were an upfront collection of option premiums from buyers of options, intra-day monitoring of position limits, an increase in lot sizes and a hike in margin requirements near

contract expiry. Both the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) and the Reserve Bank have expressed concern over the risks associated with retail investors, amid market volatility.

Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch recently said the capital markets regulator has anecdotal evidence of people borrowing money to place speculative bets in the derivatives segment and rued that household savings are going into such risky bets.

The regulator has also noted that option volume surges near the expiry of the weekly contracts. Currently, all five working days of a week have at least one expiry of NSE or BSE indices.

According to Sebi data, the overall derivative turnover was ₹ 210 lakh crore in FY'18, which jumped to ₹ 500 lakh crore in FY24, she said, adding that individual investors in index options jumped to 41 per cent in FY'24 from 2 per cent in FY'18.

The rapid rise in F&O trade volumes in recent years could pose several challenges as retail investors who are not following proper risk management could be impacted by sudden market movements, a Reserve Bank report stated. The equity derivatives segment has been witnessing growing participation from retail investors in recent years, increasing by 42.8 per cent from 65 lakh in 2022-23 to 95.7 lakh in 2023-24. Trading volumes in the derivatives seg-

ment have seen exponential growth over the years in notional terms, while the trading volumes measured by the premium turnover have witnessed a linear growth pattern, said the RBI's bi-annual Financial Stability Report (FSR).

The expert group will scrutinise the weekly options in detail as these are most attractive to retail investors who can participate with low capital, the sources said.

Rationalisation of strike prices is another area of interest to prevent small investors from incurring losses, they said. "Retail investors tend to buy options cheaply, hoping for very high returns, and go far from 'At the Money' options leading to losing their premium paid," one of the sources explained. 'At the Money' (ATM) describes a situation when the strike price of an option is equal to the underlying asset's current market price. The expert group will also look into options for increasing lot sizes, the sources said.

The lot sizes of index F&O were reduced by the National Stock Exchange after BSE re-launched its derivative products a year back.

NSE, the world's largest derivative exchange in terms of contracts traded, had reduced Nifty lot sizes to 25 from 50 and BankNifty to 15 from 25.

Bharat Chamber of Commerce senior vice president and SKP Securities Ltd MD Naresh Pachisia said, "SEBI's intent is in the right direction because when retail participation in options goes unpro-

FMCG makers expect single-digit revenue growth, margin improvements in Q1

NEW DELHI, July 7: Fast-moving consumer goods companies expect single-digit volume growth along with expansion in margins during the April-June quarter of this fiscal, helped by a revival in rural demand and a stable urban market.

Listed FMCG companies such as Dabur, Marico and Adani Wilmar in their latest quarterly updates have reported a "gradual improvement" in demand trends in the April-June quarter, which was on the expected lines.

Home-grown FMCG maker Dabur expects to register mid to high single-digit growth in its consolidated revenue, supported by mid-single-digit volume growth in the domestic market.

Marico said its consolidated revenue grew in high single digits in the June quarter, while the domestic business posted a "modest uptick in underlying volume growth" on a sequential basis.

Adani Wilmar, which sells edible oils and has some play in the food products under Fortune brands, has also reported an overall 13 per cent volume growth in the June quarter. Its food and FMCG business volumes grew by 23 per cent year-on-year, said Adani Wilmar. About margins, the makers expect expansion on a year-on-year basis helped by factors such as benign commodity prices and cost-saving initiatives.

"Commodity prices were stable during the quarter," said Dabur, adding, "Gross margins are likely to witness some expansion on account of rollover price in-

creases and cost-saving initiatives."

Marico, which owns brands such as Saffola, Parachute, Hair & Care, Nihar and Livon, among others, also expects gross margin to expand on a year-on-year basis. Among key inputs, copra prices stayed firm in line with forecasts, while edible oil and crude oil derivatives remained range-bound.

"Operating profit is expected to grow slightly ahead of revenue leading to a marginal inching up of operating margin on a year-on-year basis," it said.

About rural market sales, Dabur said in the June quarter Dabur saw sequential improvement in demand trends with growth picking up from those regions.

"With a forecast of a normal monsoon and continued focus by the government on macroeconomic growth, we expect the improvement to accelerate in the coming months," said Dabur which owns brands such as Dabur Chyawanprash, Dabur Honey, Dabur PudinaHara, Dabur Lal Tail, Dabur Amla, Dabur Red Paste, Real and Vatika.

According to Abneesh Roy -Executive Director (Research) at Nuvama Institutional Equities, volume growth is likely to be in low-to-mid-single-digit, largely due to heatwave, general elections and fewer marriage days. "Rural demand continues to see gradual but slight green shoots as real rural wages remain muted," he said.

Both Dabur and Marico reported an increase in their international businesses. (PTI)

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Missing Guwahati boy's

don't know what happened that day. I would also have died had I not held on to a branch. But I wish it was me instead of my son," he lamented. Thanking the chief minister and rescue agencies for finding the body, Hiralal said, "I desperately wanted to find my son. And I am thankful to all for their efforts."

Abhinash's grandfather urged the authorities to cover all drains so that such incidents do not recur. Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who had visited the search site on Saturday, expressed his condolences to the bereaved family.

"Deeply pained! With a heavy heart, we have learnt that the child's body has been found. My deepest condolences go out to his parents and family during this unimaginable time," Sarma wrote on X. The CM also extended gratitude to the personnel of the NDRF, SDRF, police and Kamrup Metropolitan district administration for their efforts in the search and rescue operations. (PTI)

SC to hear batch of pleas

confidentiality in a pan-India examination, it would not be rational to scrap the entire examination and the results already declared," the Centre said in its preliminary affidavit filed by a director in the ministry of education. "Scrapping the exam in entirety would seriously jeopardise the lakhs of honest candidates who attempted the question paper in 2024," the ministry said.

The NTA, in its separate affidavit, reiterated the Centre's stand and said, "The cancellation of the entire examination on the basis of the aforesaid factor, would be hugely counterproductive and significantly harmful to the larger public interest, especially to the career prospects of the qualified candidates."

The agency said the entirety of the NEET-UG 2024 exam was carried out fairly and with due confidentiality without any illegal practices, and the claim of "mass malpractice" during the exam is "completely unfounded, misleading, and lacks any basis". "It is submitted that if the entire examination process is cancelled without there being any tangible factors warranting such actions it would be highly detrimental to the larger public interest involving the academic career of lakhs of students who have attempted the examination fairly without any wrongdoing or even an allegation of wrongdoing," the NTA said.

The ministry and the NTA have said there was no proof of any large-scale breach of confidentiality in the examination which was taken by over 23 lakh candidates at 4,750 centres in 571 cities. The government said it has constituted a high-level committee of experts to suggest effective measures for conducting transparent, smooth and fair examinations by the NTA.

The affidavit said the panel shall make recommendations on reforms in the mechanism of the examination process, improvement in data security protocols and structure, and functioning of the National Testing Agency.

Initially expected on June 14, the results were announced on June 4 due to early completion of the answer sheet evaluation. Allegations of irregularities, including paper leaks, have led to protests in several cities and sparring between rival political parties. The Centre and the NTA on June 13 told the court that they had cancelled the grace marks awarded to 1,563 candidates.

They were given the option to either take a re-test or forgo the compensatory marks awarded for loss of time.

The NTA announced the revised rank list on July 1 after issuing the results of the re-test held on June 23. A total of 67 students had scored a perfect 720, unprecedented in the NTA's history, with six from a Haryana centre figuring in the list, raising suspicions about irregularities in the examination. It has been alleged that grace marks contributed to the 67 students sharing the top rank. The number of candidates sharing the top rank in the NEET-UG reduced to 61 from 67 as the NTA announced the revised results on July 1. (PTI)

Rahul Gandhi urges UP CM

short of words of consolation while meeting the family members (of victims). It is not possible to compensate for what many families have lost in this incident in any way, but we can definitely try to reduce their suffering by helping the affected families in every possible way," Gandhi said in his letter in Hindi.

"The victim families also shared with me that the negligence and insensitivity of the local administration is responsible for this entire incident. A proper and transparent investigation in this case will not only be a step towards preventing such incidents in the future, but it will also restore the faith of these victim families in the justice system," the Congress leader said. From the viewpoint of justice, it is also necessary that the guilty persons be given "severe punishment", Gandhi said.

"In this hour of grief, it is the responsibility of all of us to support the affected families. All the workers of the Congress Party and I myself are available to provide you every possible support in this matter. It is hoped that seeing the seriousness of this entire matter, you will give special priority to the work to be done in relation to the assistance," Gandhi said. The Uttar Pradesh government on Wednesday formed a three-member judicial commission headed by a retired high court judge to probe the Hathras tragedy and to look into the possibility of whether there was a "conspiracy" behind the stampede.

Simultaneously, a Special Investigation Team (SIT) headed by Additional Director General of Police (Agra Zone) Anupam Kulshreshtha is also filing a detailed report on the episode, to be submitted to the UP government.

So far, nine people, including two women and three senior citizens, have been arrested in the case, in which "several unidentified sevadars (volunteers)" of the satsang are mentioned as accused. The 'godman' is not an accused in the case. (PTI)

Security tightened in Manipur

to interact with residents in relief camps," Meghachandra said. Gandhi will then travel by road to Moirang in Bishnupur district to visit additional relief camps before returning to Imphal for a scheduled meeting with Governor Anusuiya Uikey.

"He will then depart from the state," Meghachandra said, highlighting that this visit marks Gandhi's first trip to Manipur since the Lok Sabha elections, during which the Congress secured victory in both constituencies of the ethnically troubled state. O Ibobi Singh said, "Gandhi has visited the state twice since the outbreak of violence last year." (PTI)

Timely action and proper

we shift gears to rehabilitation. Physical and occupational therapists become our partners in helping patients regain strength, retrain muscles, and maximise their long-term function," he said. Spinal cord injuries are complex but with prompt medical attention and a dedicated rehabilitation programme, significant recovery is possible, Bundela said. Dr. Vaish said spinal cord injuries are a growing concern in India. Public awareness campaigns can help people recognise symptoms and seek immediate medical attention, he said. Equipping first responders with the knowledge and tools to handle such injuries on the spot is crucial, he said and added that expanding access to specialised spinal cord care throughout the country is essential. By working together, medical professionals, policymakers and the people can improve outcomes for those living with spinal cord injuries, the doctors said. (PTI)

'Jobless growth': Congress

functioning," he said. Only 21 per cent of India's labour force has a salaried job, lower than the 24 per cent pre-Covid. Ramesh said, citing a report. "The post-Covid recovery has been K-shaped - the billionaire class has been the only beneficiary, even as the road to the salaried middle class is disappearing," Ramesh claimed.

Real wages in rural areas are decreasing by 1-1.5 per cent per year, he said, alleging that "Modi is making rural Indians poorer".

The CitiGroup report also finds that many "overhyped Modi schemes" have delivered absolutely no benefits on the ground, and provides suggestions for reform, Ramesh said. Citing the report, he claimed that Skill India has been a complete failure with only 4.4 per cent of young Indians having any formal training.

"A new skilling initiative is desperately required - the Right to Apprenticeship - promised in the Indian National Congress's Nyay Patra is the need of the hour," Ramesh said. "The MUDRA and SVANIDHI jumlas have completely failed to deliver credit to small businesses, and a 'large-scale revamp' is required," he said.

Indians working in low-wage service jobs are suffering, and a "living wage" law is a necessity, he said. Ramesh said the Congress's guarantee of a national minimum wage of ₹ 400/day would be a good start. "India should be creating more jobs in the construction sector. The government should initiate a large-scale social housing programme," he further said in his statement. "The non-biological PM and his drumbeating economists have consistently attacked the idea of jobless growth. The reality of what we have seen since 2014 is perhaps even more stark jobless growth," Ramesh said in the statement. (PTI)

Budget wish list: Pharma industry seeks tax benefits, effective IPR regime

NEW DELHI, July 7: There is a need to incentivise R&D investments, offer corporate tax concessions and establish an effective intellectual property rights regime in order to push the growth of domestic pharmaceutical industry, as per the industry bodies.

Outlining the sector's wish list for the upcoming Union Budget, Organisation of Pharmaceutical Producers of India (OPPI) Director General Anil Matai urged the government to explore methods to incentivise R&D investments, such as deductions on R&D expenses, research-linked incentives for MNCs, and corporate tax concessions. The initiatives will help in accelerating R&D and innovation in the sector, he added.

"Recognising the high-risk, long-gestation nature of R&D, we suggest extending the scope of section 115BAB of the Income Tax Act, 1961 to companies solely engaged in pharmaceutical research and development and providing a 200 per cent deduction rate on R&D expenditures," Matai said.

This would significantly boost the sector's ability to undertake essential research and development, including clinical trials and patent registration, he added.

Matai also sought establishing an effective intellectual property rights regime for driving growth and encouraging research-based pharma companies, both global and domestic, to introduce innovative therapies in India towards addressing unmet medical needs.

Besides, he sought introduction of incentives for centres and companies that provide specialised training programmes for pharmaceutical employees.

"Incentives for developing treatments for rare diseases are also crucial," Matai said.

Besides, enhancing the management of rare diseases through more centres of excellence (CoEs), increased budget allocations for incentivising R&D on therapies for rare disease, and import duty waivers are essential, he noted.

"Expanding the list of life-saving drugs eligible for GST/import duty exemptions, including all oncology medications", (PTI)

Ethnix by Raymond opens new store in Guwahati

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 7: Ethnix by Raymond, a prominent name in ethnic wear, has opened its latest store in Guwahati on July 7. This new store, spanning 1500 sq ft, marks the 17th outlet in the East Region.

The store offers a diverse range of products, including Kurtas, Bundis, Sherwanis, Bandhgallas, Indo-Western outfits, and Short Kurtas. Shoppers can expect a wide variety of choices to suit different tastes and occasions.

Ethnix by Raymond boasts a strong pan-India presence, with major stores in New Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata. This expansion reflects the brand's commitment to providing quality ethnic wear across the country.



People's enthusiasm, excellent work to make India developed nation our biggest strength: PM Modi

NEW DELHI, July 7: Excellent work of Indians across various fields and enthusiasm to make India a developed nation is the country's biggest strength, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said.

In a written message to the Jain International Trade Organisation (JITO) on the seventh foundation day of its incubation innovation fund, Modi said that the kind of optimism and trust being seen worldwide for India is a reflection of the country's strength.

"India is a nation of immense possibilities. The participation of our countrymen doing excellent work in various fields and their enthusiasm to develop the country is our biggest strength," Modi said.

The Prime Minister has set a target to make India a developed nation by 2047 with a focus on the use of technology.

According to the letter shared by organisers



of the 7th foundation day of JITO Incubation and Innovation Fund (JIIF), the Prime Minister lauded the values of the Jain community for their work and efforts made in the field of education, health and other areas through JITO.

He said that reducing dependence on foreign products and promoting local products is one of their notable achievements.

"Today's optimism and unwavering belief in our capabilities extend to all areas, including

space science, defence, and business. Organisations like JITO have played a significant role in these achievements over the past decade, contributing to the vision of a self-reliant India," Modi said. The JITO Incubation and Innovation Foundation (JIIF) hosted its annual Innovation Conclave on July 6-7 with the theme 'Ideas to Impact: Cultivating Innovation and Entrepreneurship'. The two-day event featured leading minds from various sectors, including Vijay Shekhar Sharma (Paytm), Aadit Palicha (Zepto), and Sanjeev Bikhchandani (Infoedge). It brought together over 300 angel investors, 100 startups, 30 unicorns, and numerous international investors, providing unparalleled networking opportunities.

JIIF, a subsidiary of Jain International Trade Organization (JITO) has invested over ₹ 200 crore in 80 companies and incubated over 25 Jain entrepreneurs. (PTI)

Minister Ashok Singhal reviews progress across various departments DDC meeting highlights development priorities in Sonitpur

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, July 7: The monthly DDC meeting for July was held on Saturday at Dhekiajuli Bhotpara Stadium, with a strong focus on the flagship schemes of the government implemented in the district of Sonitpur.

Attending the event, the minister for Housing and Urban Affairs and Irrigation, Ashok Singhal, reviewed the status of work on the flagship government schemes under various departments such as Education, PWD, Panchayat and Rural Development, Agriculture, Water Resource, Irrigation, Housing and Urban Affairs, Fishery, Food & Civil Supply, PHE, Transport, Sports, Cultural Affairs, Excise, etc. Emphasising the timely completion of projects and proper utilisation of government funds, the minister directed the concerned officials to prioritise field visits, especially to schools that performed poorly in the last Gunotsav, conduct stricter excise raids, issue ration cards to eligible



beneficiaries, organise focused health camps for rural and tea garden areas, and sensitise Water User Committees, among other initiatives.

Among those present at the meeting were DC Sonitpur Deba

Kumar Mishra, Pabitra Ram Khaund, secretary to the government of Assam, district development commissioner Gaya Prasad Agarwal, CEO of Zila Parishad Karabi Saikia Karan, ADC Pranjit Deb, and ADC Kabita Kakati

Konwar.

In his closing remarks, the district commissioner urged all officials to take a proactive approach in acting upon the decisions, directions, and suggestions put forward in the meeting.

Margherita flood victims face rising theft incidents

Theft incidents reported include LPG cylinders, cash, and livestock

HT Correspondent

MARGHERITA, July 7: Since more than a week of flood in various areas under the Margherita revenue circle, residents face thefts amidst severe flooding in Margherita.

In a distressing turn of events, the flood-stricken residents of Dehing Puria Bhati Gaon Namoni under Ward no 8 of the Margherita Municipal Board have fallen victim to a spate of thefts.

Despite the devastating floods that have displaced numerous families, thieves are exploiting the chaos to pilfer essential commodities from abandoned homes.

The Margherita revenue circle has been grappling with severe flooding for over a week, compelling many to seek refuge in various relief camps. However, the safety of their unattended homes remains compromised. On Friday, several thefts were reported in the Dehing Puria Bhati Gaon Namoni area, exacerbating the plight of the already struggling flood victims.

Among the victims is Bholu Borah, who reported the theft of two LPG cylinders, a mobile phone belonging to Raju Das, and



₹ 22,000 in cash. Additionally, livestock thefts have also been reported.

Gunaram Das, a permanent resident of the area, disclosed that two of his goats were stolen. He suspects that the culprits are primarily local youths involved in drug abuse, taking advantage of the chaos to engage in criminal activities.

Gunaram Das appealed to the Margherita sub-divisional administration (Civil) and the Margherita Police for stringent action against these individuals, as these drug-

abusing youths are creating turmoil in the flood-affected areas.

"We urge the authorities to take immediate steps to ensure the safety and security of our homes and properties," Das said.

The ongoing thefts are adding to the woes of the flood-affected residents, who are already battling the aftermath of one of the worst floods in recent years. The local administration and law enforcement agencies are being urged to intensify patrols and provide necessary security measures to protect the vulnerable population.

Flood-affected farmers in Morigaon to receive free seeds



HT Correspondent

MORIGAON, July 7: With an aim to revamp the economy of the flood-affected farmers who lost everything in the current flood, the Agricultural Department has initiated a development scheme in the district.

The department has adopted a scheme called 'Raising Community Nursery', which is being implemented under the Rastriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY) 2024-25 scheme. The seeds of the improved Ranjit Sub-1 variety were sown in selected soils on the banks of Charanbeel under the Morigaon Agricultural Development Circle on Sunday.

The Agriculture Department of Assam has taken the initiative to provide free seeds to the flood-affected farmers by preparing collective seedbeds in the state. The program was attended by senior agricultural development officer Padum Bora, assistant agricultural inspector Mohan Bora, and other concerned officers and employees. The scheme aims to provide relief to lakhs of farmers affected by the floods in the state.

51st biennial conference of Tezpur Sub-Divisional Primary Teacher's Association held

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, July 7: The day-long 51st biennial conference of the Tezpur Sub-Divisional Primary Teacher's Association was held on Friday at the North Haleswar Cultural Auditorium under the Balipara education block area in Sonitpur district.

The programme, organised by the teachers' body in association with the Balipara and Ghoramari Center Primary Teacher Association, featured a special delegate meeting. Among a slew of resolutions and future work plans, the delegates unanimously resolved to change the name of the organisation. From now onwards, the teachers' body will be known as the Sonitpur District Primary Teacher's Association instead of the Tezpur Sub-Divisional Primary Teacher's Association.

Earlier in the morning, the president of the organisation, Jyoti Bhattacharya, started the day's agenda by unfurling the flag of the organisation, while secretary Abani Kumar Borah commenced the programme of 'shraddhanjali'.



The delegate meeting was inaugurated by ex-president of the teachers' body, Kanak Chandra Borah. Among other dignitaries present were Jyoti Bhattacharya, the president of the organisation, and executive member of Akhil Bharatiya Prathamik Shikshak Sangha, Mohan Haloi. Addressing the delegates, Haloi mentioned that if the government doesn't create headmaster posts in elementary-level schools by the end of July,

the organisation would be compelled to declare a programme of agitation against the government's lackadaisical attitude.

During the programme, a souvenir titled 'Banti', edited by Janardan Pathak, was released by ex-secretary Biren Borah.

Later, the committee for the session 2021-2024 was dissolved, and a new committee was formed, with Gaurab Mahanta as president and Bhagaban Baisya as secretary.

Other members of the new committee included Umananda Boro and Biju Saikia as vice presidents, Jayanta Kumar Sut as assistant secretary, Kamaluddin Akand as office secretary, Indra Kumar Das as magazine secretary, Haren Das as office secretary, Chandra Mohan Basnet as education and cultural secretary, and Sapunti Goswami, Dipak Saikia, Momi Mahanta Kakati, and Pradip Nath as state members.

APEDA organises international buyer seller meet in Shillong

Over 70 buyers from 12 countries participated in the event



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 7: The Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) along with the department of agriculture and farmers' welfare, govt of Meghalaya organized a one-day Bharat Agri Conclave cum International Buyer-Seller Meet in Shillong, Meghalaya recently.

The primary objective of the event was to promote the agri-horti products in the North East Region (NER), especially those from Meghalaya. The event was inaugurated by Mazel Amparen Lyngdoh, minister for agriculture and farmers welfare department, government of Meghalaya along with Vijay Kumar D, IAS, commissioner and secretary, agriculture and farmers welfare, govt of Meghalaya and Abhishek Dev, IAS, Chairman APEDA.

Several senior officials from APEDA, other central as well as state govt officials graced the event that emanated a beneficial outcome in forging the bonds between buyers and sellers.

Minister, Dr M. Ampareen Lyngdoh in her address to the Bharat agri conclave expressed her appreciation to APEDA for its initiatives in promoting Meghalaya's

agriculture quoting, "it gives us a great sense of hope." She emphasized on the tremendous potential of the state in offering and contributing agricultural produce to domestic and global market.

Vijay Kumar D, commissioner and secretary, agriculture and farmers welfare, govt of Meghalaya shared the initial success story of first export shipment of Khasi Mandarin (GI) and Pineapple to the Middle East. He outlined the vision of the state government to scale up such more initiatives of exports of local products to international markets to increase farmers income.

Abhishek Dev, chairman APEDA in his address emphasised on the export potential of agriculture products from Meghalaya. He also outlined various initiatives to augment organic exports from the state and also initiative in easing the organic certification process and further added that APEDA is expediting the accreditation of more certification bodies, especially from the northeast, in the interest of the local organic farmers.

The exclusive Buyer Seller Meet in Meghalaya provided an opportunity for producers and processors of Meghalaya to showcase their products to global and

domestic buyers. Buyers from 12 countries viz., Uganda, Ghana, Indonesia, Greece, Kuwait, Oman, Vietnam, Nepal, Bangladesh, Singapore, Kenya, and the United Arab Emirates actively participated and interacted with the exporters in the Bharat Agri Conclave cum International Buyer-Seller Meet in Shillong, Meghalaya.

Over 41 exporters across the country and 106 FPO/FPCs, Corporate Societies and other producer groups from the state participated. The event has seen a display of a wide range of agricultural products, including organic fresh fruits and vegetables, processed food products, spices such as Lakadong turmeric, natural honey, aromatic rice, pulses, and others. This event aims to link the producers and processors of Meghalaya with buyers from India and abroad. This initiative is expected to broaden the base of the export basket of NER, thereby increasing farmers' income and accelerating the overall growth in the region.

To underline its focus on the NER, APEDA in this financial year will be organizing more such events in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Assam and Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC).

Tripura minister wants regional office of BCAS in Agartala

AGARTALA, July 7: Tripura transport minister Sushanta Chowdhury has asked Civil Aviation Minister K Rammohan Naidu to sanction a new regional office of the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security in Agartala.

In a letter to Naidu, the Tripura transport minister said MBB Airport in Agartala is the second busiest airport in the northeast after Guwahati's Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport.

"It is reliably learnt that 17 new offices of BCAS will be set up across the country shortly. MBB Airport in Agartala, Tripura, is the second busiest airport in the entire Northeast of India after Guwahati's Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport. The annual traffic at MBB Airport is about 13 lakh," Chowdhury said in a letter to the Union minister on Saturday.

Chowdhury stated, "The new terminal building of MBB Airport which was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in January 2022 is a modern and international category. Infrastructure for international flight operations between Agartala and Chittagong has been made and ready for inauguration after the ministry's nod," he said. (PTI)

Manipur Congress leaders discuss Rahul Gandhi's visit to Manipur

IMPHAL, July 7: Manipur Congress leaders along with AICC state-in-charge Girish Chodankar on Sunday discussed Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi's visit to the northeastern state.

Gandhi will visit Manipur on Monday and will interact with violence-affected people in Jiribam, Churachandpur and Imphal districts. He will be spending the entire day with the people of the state. Manipur Congress president Keisham Meghachandra, Congress legislature party leader O Ibobi Singh, two Congress MPs of the state Angomcha Bimol Akoijam and Alfred Kangnam Arthur and Girish Chodankar attended the meeting on Sunday to discuss Gandhi's visit to Manipur, a party leader said.

"Gandhi has chosen to visit Manipur where peace is necessary... We are grateful that he chose to visit the state after being chosen as the leader of the opposition in Lok Sabha," a Congress leader told PTI.

The state Congress president said Gandhi would travel from Delhi to Silchar on a flight, and from there would head to Jiribam district where fresh violence happened on June 6.

"Gandhi will visit some relief camps in the district. He will then return to the Silchar airport, and from there, take a flight to Imphal," Meghachandra said.

"After landing in Imphal, he will head to Churachandpur district where he will interact with people living in relief camps," he said.

From Churachandpur, Gandhi will get to Moirang in Bishnupur district by road and visit some relief camps. He will then return to Imphal where a meeting with Governor Anusuiya Uikey is being planned.

"He will then leave the state," Meghachandra said.

This will be Gandhi's first visit to Manipur after the Lok Sabha elections, in which the Congress won both the constituencies in the ethnic violence-hit state. O Ibobi Singh said, "Gandhi visited the state twice since the outbreak of the violence on May 3 last year. He has visited relief camps to learn about the pains and sorrow of the people. (PTI)

Rath Yatra celebrated with fervour in Haflong

Devotees brave rain to pull chariots, seek blessings of Lord Jagannath

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 7: The holy Rath Yatra festival was celebrated with tremendous enthusiasm in Haflong, Dima Hasao, echoing festivities observed across the country. The celebrations commenced at the Sri Jagannath Temple in Haflong with rituals and prayers offered in reverence to Lord Jagannath.

A grand procession featuring a chariot carrying Lord Jagannath was conducted, pulled by hundreds of devotees chanting 'Jai Jagannath'. Despite the rain, a large number of people participated, offering prasada, prayers, and ea-



gerly pulling the chariot, believing it would bring blessings from Lord Jagannath.

In Haflong, three chariots were taken out from the Govinda Bari Mandir and Gauria Math, adorned

with colourful decorations. Devotees dressed in vibrant attire joyously pulled the chariots while chanting prayers and slogans dedicated to Lord Jagannath. The holy procession concluded around 6:00 pm.

Traditionally, it is believed that Lord Jagannath will return from his aunt's house after seven days, marking the occasion known as 'Phira Rath' or the Return of the Chariot.

Rath Yatra celebrations were also reported from other parts of the district, and fortunately, no untoward incidents were reported during the festivities.

Female safai worker missing

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, July 7: Preety Basfor (36), wife of Putu Basfor of Thanamukh Harijan Colony, who was engaged as a safai worker in the ONGC Colony office, has remained untraced since the morning of June 27. A mother of three children, Preety left her Thanapatty home to go to her parents' home in Jorhat and has not returned since. Her husband has lodged an FIR at the Sivasagar Police Station.

Oikya inaugurates Satriya Cultural Centre in Sivasagar

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, July 7: Lakshmikanta Mahanta, satradhikar of Sri Sri Ujanial Satra and a noted entrepreneur of the state, inaugurated a Satriya Cultural Centre under the aegis of the prominent socio-cultural organisation Oikya in Muktinath Chariali on Sunday.

In his speech, Mahanta said that it is the responsibility of every Assamese to spread the message of the great reformer Srimanta Sankardev, and the new centre is a step in that direction.

The meeting held on the occasion was attended by Oikya president Dhananjay Saikia, Satra Mahasabha representative Pankaj Saikia, cultural worker Hemanta Dutta, journalist MI Bora, AGP leader Ghana Gogoi, Swapnali Bezbaruah, Raju Das, Jamalluddin Ahmed, Pibujit Chetia, members of the organisation, and the learners.

BSF beefs up security along Indo-Bangla border

AGARTALA, July 7: The Border Security Force (BSF) has beefed up security at sensitive outposts and launched a crackdown on smugglers and touts enabling human trafficking, a senior official said.

BSF Tripura Frontier Inspector General (IG) Patel Piyush Purushottam Das said that during recent talks in Shillong with Bangladesh Border Guards, a dossier containing a list of Bangladeshi criminals operating in the border areas has been handed over to the force of the neighbouring country.

"The BGB has assured us that action would be taken against them as per the law," Das told reporters here on Saturday. (PTI)

QUOTE OF THE DAY

When one burns one's bridges, what a very nice fire it makes.
-Dylan Thomas

Revanth Reddy's ascent

KChandrasekhar Rao (KCR), the former Chief Minister of Telangana and founder of the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), renamed his party to Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) with aspirations for a national role and the Prime Minister's chair. However, this ambition has not borne fruit. The BRS faced significant setbacks, losing the 2023 Telangana assembly elections to the Congress, and failing to make an impact in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Despite KCR's assertions that the BRS remains strong, the party is experiencing a wave of defections. Leaders are leaving, much like a spouse abandoning a troubled marriage. This turmoil began after Revanth Reddy, the new Congress Chief Minister of Telangana, rose to power, a shift that KCR subtly acknowledged when he mentioned efforts to "dis-mantle" the BRS. KCR has been trying to rally his party's morale, emphasizing temporary setbacks and a promise to "bounce back," as seen in Karnataka and the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. However, the BRS's narrow loss in the 2023 Telangana Assembly elections by 1.8 percent has left the party in a precarious position. Adding to KCR's woes, his daughter K. Kavitha is currently in Tihar Jail, alongside Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and other AAP leaders. KCR, grappling with his daughter's imprisonment, faces a daunting task in reviving his party's fortunes.

Despite the setbacks, KCR remains optimistic, predicting a "bright future" for the BRS and claiming it will return to power in Telangana for the next 15 years. He has been actively addressing meetings and engaging with party leaders, aiming to rejuvenate the party from its current slump. The BRS's challenges are manifold. The morale within the party is low, exacerbated by the defeat to Congress and the exodus of party members. KCR is focusing on rebuilding the party, creating new leadership, and raising issues that resonate with the public, such as concerns about the state's power and drinking water supply problems under Revanth Reddy's government. KCR criticizes Revanth Reddy's Congress government as "inefficient," predicting it will fall due to internal conflicts and poor governance. He draws parallels to past instances where Congress governments struggled post-election victories. KCR urges patience within his party, despite the ongoing defections. Recently, six BRS members of the Telangana Legislative Council defected to the Congress, with Revanth Reddy personally welcoming them. This defection increases the Congress's strength in the 40-member Council, setting the stage for a potential cabinet expansion. Revanth Reddy, feeling pressure within his party, is fortifying his position by attracting BRS leaders. Among the latest defectors is Rajya Sabha MP K. Kesava Rao.

Revanth's rapid rise in the Congress, from joining in 2017 to becoming the TPCC Chief within six years, has caused friction with long-standing Congress leaders. The BRS now faces the challenge of countering Revanth Reddy's consolidation of power. KCR must think creatively to restore his party's former glory. For now, his focus is on motivational speeches and maintaining party morale amid ongoing defections. Revanth Reddy's rise has come at a significant cost to KCR and the BRS. To regain its footing, the BRS needs strategic innovation and renewed unity, as established leaders' trust wavers. The road ahead for KCR and his party is fraught with challenges, demanding resilient and adaptive leadership to navigate through these turbulent times.

South Africa's new coalition government of ANC and DA facing multiple challenges

By: Tirthankar Mitra

Cautious optimism fraught with challenges has been ushered in South Africa post President Cyril Ramaphosa forming a coalition government. The new government has economic and social rejuvenation high on its agenda with the inclusion of Democratic Alliance (DA) leader John Steenhuisen and other Opposition parties.

The coalition was formed after African National Congress (ANC) failed to win electoral majority. The election was held on May 29 this year. The formation of the coalition government is unprecedented. It has its potentials and pitfalls. The challenge before the coalition government arises from the very nature of its formation. The ruling ANC's desire to continue its rule might have prompted to opt for the white dominated main opposition party Democratic Alliance (DA) ignoring the wide ideological differences between the two.

The expanded Cabinet, enlarged to accommodate coalition members has raised eyebrows. Increasing the number of deputy ministers to 43 is a burden to the state's resources. Moreover, it contradicts previous calls by DA itself for a leaner government. The efficiency of the government could be diluted by an inflated Cabinet.

Moreover, the expansion of the Cabinet does not conform to DA's centre-right pro-business stance. Yet DA's inclusion in the government and its representatives being given key portfolios like agriculture, basic education, environment and public works is considered to be a much needed step fostering growth and stability.

Business leaders have expressed their agreement to collaborate with the new administration. To call a spade by no other name, such offers from captains of industry to a new administration is routine.

To be fair to the business community, the coalition dispensation must not squander the goodwill. Political expediency must not play second fiddle to national interest.

Reverting to the Cabinet composition, the absence of outside experts in key portfolios could hinder the coalition's ability to implement effective policies. To refresh collective memory, it needs to be recalled that South African economy is suffering from a decade long slump. The coalition government needs to adopt bold programs for generating jobs to ease the acute unemployment problem in the nation.

Appointing ministers and their deputies based on political consideration rather than their ability to address a nation's urgent issues, may not help.

To tackle poverty, unemployment and inequality, swift and decisive measures are needed. Effectively balancing economic imperatives with nation's political interests will mark the extent of the coalition government's success.

Experts say that the Cabinet of President Ramaphosa has to navigate prudently the dynamics of coalition politics. It is in itself a complex process. The coalition dispensation has to deliver on its promise of revival and progress. South Africa stands at a crossroads. If the coalition government fails or falters it would lead to ethnic and socio-economic divide which has long plagued the nation.

Promises of revival would go for a toss. The coming months will be critical. There is little alternative but to chart a course to a brighter future by mobilizing the services of the best technocrats.

Genuine collaboration has to be prioritised cutting across political lines. It will be a delicate balancing act on whose success depends the fate of the change South Africa desperately needs. (IPA Service)

UK general election: A Conservative setback rather than a Labour triumph

The UK general election results indicate a clear setback for the Conservative Party rather than a decisive win for the Labour Party. The electorate's dissatisfaction with the current government was evident, but there was no strong surge of support for Labour either.

The massive Labour majority in the recent UK election was driven by a protest vote against the Conservative government. This election saw one of the lowest voter turnouts in UK history. Many traditional Conservative supporters either stayed home or opted for the more extreme right-wing Reform UK party. This led to a crushing defeat for the Tories, with even former Prime Minister Liz Truss and numerous ministers facing humiliating losses.

Labour's lackluster support stemmed from widespread distrust in party leader Keir Starmer, who was seen as unreliable due to his frequent policy reversals on issues such as the green transition, taxing billionaires, workers' rights, child benefits, and the welfare system. Instead of presenting clear proposals, Starmer chose to embrace ambiguous politics, promising change without detailing specific plans. This approach was based on his belief that voters were dissatisfied with the Conservative Party's rule, yet he failed to provide solid alternatives.

The Liberal Democrats also gained from the discontent with

the Tories. As the primary challengers to the Conservatives in regions like South West England, they secured 71 seats in Parliament, marking their best electoral performance since 1923. This positioned them as the third-largest party, following the Conservatives and Labour.

The Green Party has experienced remarkable success. After over a decade of holding just one seat, they broke through this time, winning all four of their targeted seats by wide margins. The party contested 574 seats across England and Wales to promote its vision and program, even in areas lacking a strong party structure. They also finished second in a significant number of races, hinting at the potential for further growth.

The Green Party's rising influence signals an increasing awareness, especially among younger and university-educated voters, of the need for green economic policies to prevent a climate crisis. With nearly 8 percent of the national vote, the party's representation and influence in Parliament and policymaking would significantly increase under a proportional representation system.

The push to move from the flawed first-past-the-post election system to proportional representation is strongly backed by the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party. The Labour Party conference has also offi-



cially approved a resolution in support of proportional representation, but it remains to be seen if the new government will pursue this electoral reform. The UK is the only European country without any element of proportional representation in its election system. Unfortunately, this first-past-the-post approach has influenced its former colonies, including several South Asian countries.

Over the past five years, the Conservative government's market-oriented governance has led to significant mismanagement of the economy, resulting in the deterioration of public services like the National Health Service, schools, social care, sewerage, and public transport, particularly the railways. This mismanagement was most evident during Liz Truss's short stint as Prime Minister. Her aggressive tax-cutting policies

funded by debt, unsettled the markets and triggered a rise in inflation, which, in turn, led to increased interest and mortgage rates. The rise in mortgage rates, along with skyrocketing food prices due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, significantly raised the cost of living for many people.

Rishi Sunak and his Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, had limited time to repair the economic damage caused by Liz Truss's mismanagement. Despite this, they showed some economic skill, which contributed to their victories in their constituencies, even as many of their Conservative colleagues faced defeat. However, their focus on catering to wealthier segments of the population led them to implement policies that reduced welfare spending, which ultimately eroded their political support.

The UK consists of four distinct regions, or nations: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Each of these regions has its unique political

culture and complexities. England is the largest among them.

In Scotland, the Scottish National Party (SNP), which advocates for independence from the UK, suffered a significant defeat despite ongoing support for independence. Voters turned away from the SNP due to the party's financial mismanagement and instead chose Labour candidates for the first time in many years, aiming both to penalize the SNP and to oust the Conservatives.

In Wales, the Conservative Party failed to secure any seats in the recent election. Plaid Cymru, which supports Welsh independence, saw an increase in both seats and voter support, despite Labour securing a majority.

In Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin, advocating for a united Ireland, became the largest party for the first time, with no representation from any of the main parties based in England.

The upcoming Labour government under Starmer confronts a range of challenges. These include revitalizing the economy to enhance public services, navigating immigration issues amid the emergence of anti-immigrant sentiments promoted by Reform UK, decentralizing power to address calls for independence in non-English regions, contributing to easing tensions in Ukraine and Gaza, and addressing the growing impacts of climate change. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmigmailtd@gmail.com)

Four assembly bypolls in Bengal have special significance for BJP

By: Tirthankar Mitra

The four Assembly by-polls in West Bengal, one of which is scheduled to be held at Manikata in Kolkata and the others to be contested at Bagda, Ranaghat Dakshin and Raigunj hold differing political significance to Trinamool Congress and the Opposition comprising BJP, Left Front and Congress. While Manikata Assembly segment has been vacated by the death of the sitting MLA, Sadhan Pandey, two other Assembly seats are going for the by-polls as the legislators representing them had stepped down to contest the parliamentary polls.

Though Trinamool Congress scored a resounding victory in the Lok Sabha polls, the two MLAs Krishna Kalyani and Mukut Mani Adhikari, who stepped down and contested as TMC nominees in Lok Sabha lost the elections. Their electoral reverse is all the more humiliating as they lost to inexperienced BJP candidates.

It is up to these two candidates to prove to the top leadership of the TMC to substantiate that their support base is intact. It is the only way the duo can ensure their nomination in 2026 Assembly elections with just two years to go before it.

And they ought not to try too hard as going by conventional political norms; the ruling party nominees hold a definite edge against Opposition nominees. The saffron camp and the Left having earlier criticised the social security schemes of TMC dispensation as "dole politics" have had to eat their words.

The TMC nominees will continue to enjoy the popularity of these schemes among the voters. Yet they can take these voters for granted at their own peril. For the voters of the three suburban constituencies belong to Lok Sabhas where BJP nominees have won. It is a pointer to



the underlying support to the saffron camp which has not been swayed by the TMC wave which swept the state in last Lok Sabha polls.

The cohesion of INDIA coalition partners Congress and CPI(M) has remained during these coming byelections. But two other Left Front nominees Forward Bloc and RSP have made it clear that they will not be participants to alliance with Congress in future in West Bengal and the byelections mark the parting of ways.

Vacated by the passing away of state cooperation department minister, Sadhan Pandey Manikata Assembly segment has been the cynosure of all eyes. The Trinamool nominee and the previous MLA's widow Supti Pandey ought to have been sitting pretty given her late husband's support base and the sympathy factor for the bereaved nominee.

Moreover, the BJP candidate Kalyan Choubey pitted against the TMC nominee in this by-election lost to Sadhan Pandey in 2021 Assembly polls. But given the narrow margin of lead of TMC Lok Sabha nominee for Kolkata (North) Sudip Bandopadhyaya from Manikata, there is no room for complacency for the TMC nominee. The TMC workers are working round the clock to ensure the victory of Pandey.

It remains to be seen whom the residents of several private housing estates vote for after "bike and auto" brigades of allegedly TMC activists zoomed through them in intimidatory mode after Lok Sabha poll results were declared. The residents had reportedly not voted for the ruling dispensation of the state. And therefore faced the wrath of the TMC cadres.

Things came to such a pass that chief minister Mamata Banerjee stated to be keeping the by-election in mind sent her representative to apologise to the terror stricken residents who had merely exercised their franchise. Intra-party squabble is another cross the TMC nominee is aware of and which can reduce her victory margin.

Rajib Majumdar, the CPI(M) nominee from Manikata will take on Pandey, the TMC candidate. Aided by local Congress activists, he will try to tap whatever support base remains of the Left and the Congress in this constituency. The BJP is the main rival, still the CPI(M) candidate aided by the young cadres of Kolkata district committee are working hard.

Come any election in the Matua belt, a member of the Thakurbari, a guiding light to the community takes part in the poll fray. At Bagda by-poll, it is Madhuparna Thakur who is the TMC nominee.

While the TMC nominee is the daughter of Matua Rajya Sabha member, Mamatabala Thakur, the BJP has made Benoy Kumar Biswas, a Matua himself as its candidate. The Forward Bloc has its nominee Gour Biswas, the son of five time FB MLA Kamalakshi Biswas. Apparently, the TMC and BJP nominees are evenly matched though Thakur has a leg up. It remains to be seen how much his father's support base Biswas can regain.

Adhering to coalition politics, the Con-

Prime Minister Prachanda is finally cornered in the fluid Nepal politics

By: Arun Kumar Shrivastav

Nepal's tumultuous politics is once again at it, threatening to replace the current government with a new one. The one-and-a-half-year-old government headed by Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' has been pushed to minority after the former Prime Minister KP Sharma's CPN-UML with 78 members in the 275-member House of Representatives withdrew from the government on July 2.

Prachanda, famously known in the Himalayan nation, has said he would not resign but face a no-confidence vote in the next 30 days. Prachanda's Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) has 30 members in the House of Representatives.

After hitting a deadlock with its former alliance partner, Nepali Congress, the single-largest party with 89 members, Prachanda forged an alliance with CPN-UML on March 4 and signed an 8-point agreement to run the government on consensus. The differences in the alliance emerged after the recent

budget, which supposedly did not go well with the Oli camp.

While Prachanda has survived four no-confidence motions in the last one-and-a-half years by forging last-minute alliances with one of the two big parties, this time, both the big parties, Nepali Congress and CPN-UML, have come together to dislodge the wily Prachanda from power. They have agreed to a power-sharing formula that covers not only the national government but also the six provincial governments. Nepali Congress and CPN-UML have 167 members in parliament, way ahead of the majority of 128 seats.

For the first one-and-a-half years, Oli will become the prime minister, and then the Nepali Congress will have its turn to appoint a prime minister from its party. Nepali Congress president Sher Bahadur Deuba is said to be an India-favourite, while Oli is known for his China inclination.

However, the power-sharing formula reached between the two biggest political parties in Nepal's politics doesn't pronounce a dead-end for Prachanda, who has been pursu-

ing an independent policy as the Prime Minister and not giving in to pressures from the big parties. In regional South Asian politics, Prachanda has been steadily working to project the image that Kathmandu can take an independent stance and not give in to pressures from either India or China.

Two notable developments in the recent past underscore Prachanda's refusal to come under pressure on important issues. In the first instance, his government cracked down on the Chaudhary Group, led by the country's only billionaire and politically influential Vinod Chaudhary. His brother Arun Chaudhary was arrested in February in a land-grab case dating back over 30 years.

In another incident, China's ambassador to Nepal, Chen Song, was involved in an angry spat with a journalist on X (formerly Twitter). The point of contention was China charging an excessive interest rate for its loan to build Pokhara International Airport. The airport commissioned in January was built by a Chinese company at a cost of \$216 million.

According to the media re-

ports, Chinese lenders are charging a higher interest rate for loans than was formally agreed upon. To this, the Chinese ambassador, conspicuous by his over-enthusiasm for outdoor engagements, enjoying the country's rich culture and traditions, and attending even small events enthusiastically, reacted angrily, seeking the journalist to prove his allegations. In his reply, the journalist referred to government documents as the basis of his allegation and reminded the Chinese diplomat not to threaten journalists in a country where he is a guest.

Chen Song moved on and soon posted a message rooting for the success of the Nepali cricket team. Subsequently, more similar messages followed.

However, this spat sharply highlighted China's growing influence in Nepal.

Unlike other politicians, Prachanda is not fond of making friends or being part of lobbies. He is a friend of neither China nor India. Even in Nepali politics, he prefers to remain aloof than hobnobbing with opportunistic elements. It explains why his party is not the biggest

in his county despite his big political stature. His tenure as the Prime Minister hints at his understanding of how development can be brought to the people.

For example, since January this year, leading international newspapers and magazines have been reporting how Nepal has become a luxury tourist destination, leaving behind its image of a hippy haven for backpackers. A travel writer took a 5-day trip to Muktiath in Mustang, costing him a whopping \$7000. Nepal has seen rapid strides in attracting investments in luxury tourism, and the country boasts high-budget facilities at premier tourist destinations. It has left behind Bhutan and is fast catching up with the Maldives in high-budget tourism.

Prachanda's focus on the pro-people agenda is seen in several other areas. For example, a few days back, he rode a tractor in a muddy paddy field, stressing that he would make Nepal self-sufficient in rice production.

While another government can replace Prachanda as the Prime Minister, replacing him from Nepal's collective psyche is difficult. (IPA Service)

Acupuncture can help boost sleep quality in Parkinson's disease

By: Erika Watt

Parkinson's disease is a type of nervous system disorder that affects movement and can cause cognitive changes. While there is not a cure for the disease, there are some treatments available that can either slow progression or help with symptoms. One problem many people with Parkinson's disease face is difficulty with getting quality sleep. Poor sleep can exacerbate symptoms, so researchers based in China recently conducted a study to see whether acupuncture can help improve sleep. When compared to a placebo form of acupuncture, the study participants saw improvements in both sleep and their quality of life. The study findings are published in JAMA Network Open.

Why people with Parkinson's disease have poor sleep

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), around 500,000 people in the United States have Parkinson's disease, and experts suspect that number could be twice as high since many people live with Parkinson's for some time before diagnosis. An early symptom of the disorder is developing a

tremor, and people may eventually develop muscle stiffness, coordination issues, sleep problems, depression, and later experience difficulty swallowing, walking, and communicating. Parkinson's disease worsens over time, but symptoms can be managed with medications, surgical treatments such as deep brain stimulation, and occupational or physical therapies. While these therapies help with symptoms, they can also contribute to reducing sleep quality in people with Parkinson's disease. Poor sleep can worsen Parkinson's symptoms and overall contribute to a worsened quality of life. Sometimes providers prescribe sleep medications, but oftentimes these medications cause drowsiness during the day. This led researchers in the current study to see whether acupuncture could help with sleep quality. **How 4 weeks of acupuncture treatment affected sleep in Parkinson's** Acupuncture is a form of traditional Chinese medication and has been around for thousands of years. According to the NIH, acupuncture involves inserting needles into pressure points in the skin to treat

health issues that include:

- fibromyalgia
- sciatica
- osteoarthritis
- cancer pain
- migraine

According to the authors of the current study, "when used as an adjunctive therapy with anti-Parkinson medications, acupuncture has shown positive effects in improving sleep quality and reducing motor symptoms." Since the prior research on using acupuncture to help with sleep quality in Parkinson's disease was limited, the researchers in the current study wanted to delve further into this with a double-blind clinical trial. The researchers studied 78 participants who were aged 30 to 80. All participants had moderate to severe sleep issues and were presently taking an anti-Parkinson's medication. Prior to treatment, all participants completed the Parkinson's disease Sleep Scale (PDSS) questionnaire. The researchers used this to assess their sleep quality. The scientists randomly placed the participants into one of two groups: real acupuncture or sham acupuncture. The sham group was a placebo group that did not receive ac-

tual acupuncture therapy. The participants received their acupuncture treatments three times per week for 30-minute sessions for 4 weeks. After the 4 weeks were up, the participants completed the PDSS again and then one more time at an 8-week follow-up. The researchers also administered tests to assess motor skills and non-motor skills of the participants to see how

One problem many people with Parkinson's disease face is difficulty with getting quality sleep. Poor sleep can exacerbate symptoms, so researchers based in China recently conducted a study to see whether acupuncture can help improve sleep

ease," wrote the authors. The participants in the real acupuncture group had an improvement of 29.65 points in their PDSS score at the 4-week appointment compared to a 10.47 point improvement in the sham acupuncture group. Additionally, at the 8-week follow-up, the participants in the real acupuncture group continued to show improvement in their PDSS results but

The researchers saw similar results in the overall quality of life improvement for people in the real acupuncture group. They had a reduction in both motor and non-motor skills severity compared to their baseline scores. Since none of the participants had adverse side effects, the authors concluded that acupuncture is a safe and effective adjunct therapy for improving both sleep quality and

quality of life in people with Parkinson's disease. **Acupuncture does not replace traditional treatment** Lijana Shestopal, DTCM, LAc, CSMA, a licensed acupuncturist based in Illinois, spoke with Medical News Today about the study. Shestopal was not involved in this research. She commented that: "Considering that acupuncture has no side effects and it does not interfere with any of the pharmaceuticals the patient might be on, this is a groundbreaking finding." Shestopal treats patients with Parkinson's disease and noted that the study can "really help with educating the general public just how much acupuncture can help." While she emphasized how much acupuncture can help, she also noted that people must stick with the treatment and be realistic about their expectations. "It is not a magic pill from which you get automatic results after one treatment, but with a course of treatments, health does improve in many ways without side effects," emphasized Shestopal. Raveesh Sunkara, MBBS, MS, MCh, a neurosurgeon associated with ClinicSpots in

Hyderabad, India, also spoke with MNT about the study findings. Like Shestopal, Sunkara was not involved in the recent study. "Overall, investigating acupuncture for sleep in Parkinson's disease holds promise for improving patient well-being," Sunkara told MNT. "However, further research and overcoming logistical hurdles are necessary for its widespread integration into standard care." Sunkara noted that this type of therapy could be difficult for some people to obtain. He said finding acupuncturists who have experience treating people with Parkinson's disease could be difficult, and the cost of the therapy could also pose a problem. "Insurance coverage for acupuncture can vary, potentially limiting patient access," he cautioned. Sunkara also emphasized that acupuncture in people with Parkinson's disease would not replace existing treatments for Parkinson's. "Acupuncture should not replace traditional Parkinson's disease medications but can be a complementary therapy," he advised. (Courtesy: Medical News Today)

We finally know why some people got COVID while others didn't

By: Marko Nikolic & Kaylee Worlock

Throughout the pandemic, one of the key questions on everyone's mind was why some people avoided getting COVID, while others caught the virus multiple times. Through a collaboration between University College London, the Wellcome Sanger Institute and Imperial College London in the UK, we set out to answer this question using the world's first controlled "challenge trial" for COVID – where volunteers were deliberately exposed to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID, so that it could be studied in great detail. Unvaccinated healthy volunteers with no prior history of COVID were exposed – via a nasal spray – to an extremely low dose of the original strain of SARS-CoV-2. The volunteers were then closely monitored in a quarantine unit, with regular tests and samples taken to study their response to the virus in a highly controlled and safe environment. For our recent study, published in Nature, we collected samples from tissue located midway between the nose and the throat as well as blood samples from 16 volunteers. These samples were taken before the participants were exposed to the virus, to give us a baseline measurement, and afterwards at regular intervals. The samples were then processed and analysed using single-cell sequencing technology, which allowed us to extract and sequence the genetic material of individual cells. Using this cutting-edge technology, we could track the evolution of the disease in unprecedented detail, from pre-infection to recovery. To our surprise, we found that, despite all the volunteers being carefully exposed to the exact same dose of the virus in the same manner, not everyone ended up testing positive for COVID. In fact, we were able to divide the volunteers into three distinct infection groups (see illustration). Six out of the 16 volunteers developed typical mild COVID, testing positive for several days with cold-like symptoms. We referred to this group as the "sustained infection group". Out of the ten volunteers who did not develop a sustained infection, suggesting that they were able to fight off the virus early on, three went on to develop an "intermediate" infection with intermittent single positive viral tests and limited symptoms. We called them the "transient infection group". The final seven volunteers remained negative on testing and did not develop any symptoms. This was the "abortive infection group". This is the first confirmation of abortive infections, which were previously unproven.

Despite differences in infection outcomes, participants in all groups shared some specific novel immune responses, including in those whose immune systems prevented the infection. When we compared the timings of the cellular response between the three infection groups, we saw distinct patterns. For example, in the transiently infected volunteers where the virus was only briefly detected, we saw a strong and immediate accumulation of immune cells in the nose one day after infection. This contrasted with the sustained infection group, where a more delayed response was seen, starting five days after infection and potentially enabling the virus to take hold in these volunteers. In these people, we were able to identify cells stimulated by a key antiviral defence response in both the nose and the blood. This response, called the "interferon" response, is one of the ways our bodies signal to our immune system to help fight off viruses and other infections. We were surprised to find that this response was detected in the blood before it was detected in the nose, suggesting that the immune response spreads from the nose very quickly. **Protective gene** Lastly, we identified a specific gene called HLA-DQA2, which was expressed (activated to produce a protein) at a much higher level in the volunteers who did not go on to develop a sustained infection and could hence be used as a marker of protection. Therefore, we might be able to use this information and identify those who are probably going to be protected from severe COVID. These findings help us fill in some gaps in our knowledge, painting a much more detailed picture regarding how our bodies react to a new virus, particularly in the first couple of days of an infection, which is crucial. We can use this information to compare our data to other data we are currently generating, specifically where we are "challenging" volunteers to other viruses and more recent strains of COVID. In contrast to our current study, these will mostly include volunteers who have been vaccinated or naturally infected – that is, people who already have immunity. Our study has significant implications for future treatments and vaccine development. By comparing our data to volunteers who have never been exposed to the virus with those who already have immunity, we may be able to identify new ways of inducing protection, while also helping the development of more effective vaccines for future pandemics. In essence, our research is a step towards better preparedness for the next pandemic. (Courtesy: Down To Earth)



Reducing salt intake can curb the chances of hypertension by 75%

By: Dr Balbir Singh

Hypertension is one of the most common ailments trending among the Indian youths. Prevalence of hypertension has increased rapidly in the past 2-3 years that poses serious threat to increase in the number of non-communicable diseases like stroke and cardiovascular diseases. The reasons attributing to the rise in numbers include stressful lifestyle, unhealthy eating habits, and long working hour among many others. Recent social norms and addictions to smoking, bingeing on alcohol are some factors which play a vital role in aggravating the condition. It is estimated that about 22-40% of adults in age above 40 years have high blood pressure in Urban India and about 12 to 20 % in Rural India. But the worst is the fact that 60 to 70 % of the people surveyed did not know about high BP which means that hypertension is a

silent disease and unless checked many will not be aware of this. Attributable risks are the main cause that makes hypertension the deadliest disease across the world. Though preventable, it leads to 54% chances of stroke, 50% chances to have ischemic and other heart diseases. Other complications linked to it are hypertension heart disease, heart failure, dissection of aorta and retinal damage as well. Summing up all the risk factors makes hypertension the leading silent killer. The increasing prevalence of hypertension is attributed to population growth, ageing and behavioral risk factors such as unhealthy diet, harmful use of alcohol, lack of physical activity, excess weight and exposure to persistent stress. The adverse health consequences of hypertension are compounded because many hypertensive people also have other risk factors that increase the odds of heart attack, stroke

and kidney failure. These risk factors include tobacco use, obesity, high cholesterol and diabetes mellitus. Premature death, disability, personal and family disruption, loss of income, and healthcare expenditure due to hypertension takes a toll on families, communities and national finances. In low- and middle-income families, many people do not seek treatment for hypertension because it costs a lot over a long period of time. Timely diagnosis can lead to better outcomes in management of the disease. Do not delay treatment in case your blood pressure is found to be high and does not settle with dietary precautions. The longer you have untreated hypertension; more are chances of getting complications. Self-monitoring of blood pressure is recommended for those who are capable enough for same there is urgent need to increase awareness regarding hypertension among young adults.

At present several effective and safe drugs are available so it's recommended to bring BP to 130/80 to produce maximum benefit this was based out of the data from SPRINT trial which was conclusive that a target of 130/ 80 is associated with reducing the number of heart attacks, brain strokes and kidney failure. As per several hypertension society guidelines anyone having either Systolic BP more than 140 mm or diastolic more than 90 mm are to be labelled as hypertension and need to be treated. Excess sodium intake leads to casualties due to hypertension. When the amount of sodium in the blood is high, it raises the arterial pressure, thus increasing the systolic and diastolic blood pressure. 90% of the hypertensive people have no identifiable cause, which is known as primary hypertension and only 10% develop it due to pre-existing condition known as secondary hypertension. Various

factors like age, genetic history of diabetes, excess body weight and sedentary lifestyle have been linked to essential hypertension. It is important to spread awareness among the masses and follow a healthy lifestyle to prevent the silent killer. Reducing the sodium intake and limiting packed or fried foods lessen the chances of hypertension by 75%. Instead eat high fibre food, like fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products and whole wheat grain. Make sure to exercise atleast 20 minutes a day. Immediately consult the doctor, when you sense an increase in blood pressure to avoid further complications. Even in case of pre-hypertension, doctors prescribe lifestyle changes and heart healthy diet to bring it down to normal range. Quitting smoking and reducing alcohol intake can have substantial effect on the blood pressure. (The author is the Chairman, Cardiac Sciences, Max Hospital, Saket)

STSS: A serious condition, not a flesh-eating frenzy

By: Subhajit Acharya

Recent news reports from Japan about a rise in Streptococcal Toxic Shock Syndrome (STSS) have caused understandable concern. Headlines comparing its spread to COVID-19 can be alarming, but it's important to separate fact from sensationalism. Let's delve into STSS, understand the recent surge, and equip ourselves with the knowledge to navigate this situation effectively. **STSS: Not a New Villain, But a Potentially Serious One** STSS isn't a novel disease. It's a rare but potentially life-threatening complication caused by the bacterium Streptococcus pyogenes, commonly known as Group A Strep. This bacterium is usually responsible for relatively mild infections like strep throat and impetigo. However, in rare instances, it can produce toxins that trigger a rapid and severe illness – STSS. **A Familiar Foe with a New Face? The Recent Surge in Japan** STSS typically occurs when Group A Strep gains access to the bloodstream through a break in the skin, ranging from a minor wound to complications following childbirth. The recent surge in Japan seems to involve a particularly virulent strain. This strain might be producing a higher concentration of toxins or have developed resistance to some antibiotics. However, more research

is needed to confirm this. The term "flesh-eating" bacteria used in some reports can be misleading. While STSS can cause skin and tissue damage, it's not as aggressive or contagious as some headlines might suggest. **Building Our Defences: How to Resist Streptococcal Infection** The good news: STSS isn't highly contagious like COVID-19. Here are simple yet effective ways to reduce your risk of contracting a streptococcal infection: **• Hygiene is Your Hero:** Frequent hand washing with soap and water is your first line of defence. **• Treat Wounds with Respect:** Clean and cover any cuts or scrapes to prevent them from becoming a gateway for infection. **• Extra Vigilance During Vulnerable Times:** Be extra mindful of hygiene during childbirth and menstruation, as these periods can increase susceptibility. **• Early Diagnosis is Key:** Don't ignore a worsening sore throat, a persistent skin infection, or a fever that won't quit. Early medical attention can prevent complications. **The Deadly Threat: Mortality Rate and Recognizing the Signs** While not as common as other infections, STSS is a serious illness with a mortality rate ranging from 10% to 30%. It causes a rapid drop in blood pressure, organ failure, and even death if not treated promptly. Here's what to watch out for: **• Sudden onset of high**

fever. **• Redness, intense pain, and swelling at the infection site.** **• A rash resembling sunburn, often appearing on the palms and soles.** **• Nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.** **• Confusion and dizziness.** **World Health Organization (WHO) and the Current Situation** The World Health Organization (WHO) is closely monitoring the situation in Japan. While they haven't issued a global health alert yet, staying updated on any developments through reliable sources like the WHO website is crucial. **Moving Forward: Knowledge is Power** The recent surge in STSS cases in Japan is a cause for concern, but there's no need to panic. By practising good hygiene, seeking medical attention for concerning symptoms, and staying informed through reputable sources, we can effectively manage the risk. Remember, early diagnosis and treatment are critical for preventing complications associated with STSS. If you're worried about something, a healthcare professional can offer personalized guidance. In conclusion, STSS is a serious illness, but awareness and preventive measures can significantly reduce your risk. Let's focus on facts, prioritize hygiene, and seek medical attention if needed. Together, we can navigate this situation effectively. (Courtesy: Youth Ki Awaaz)

Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm repair is a serious medical condition where the large blood vessel called the aorta, which supplies blood from the heart to the abdomen, pelvis, and legs, becomes enlarged and bulges out. This condition is dangerous because if the aneurysm bursts, it can cause life-threatening internal bleeding. Fortunately, advancements in medical technology have provided effective treatment options to manage this condition, one of the most notable being Endovascular Aneurysm Repair. **Understanding Abdominal Aortic Aneurysms** The aorta is the main artery that runs from the heart down through the chest and abdomen. Over time, the walls of the aorta can become weakened, leading to the formation of an aneurysm. Factors such as high blood pressure, smoking, and atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) can contribute to the development of an Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm. Genetics also play a role. It often grows slowly without symptoms, making it a silent threat. However, some people may experience a pulsing sensation in the abdomen, deep and constant pain in the abdomen or side, or back pain. Large or rapidly growing aneurysms are at higher risk of rupturing and require immediate medical attention. **Traditional open surgery** Traditionally, the standard treatment for a large or symptomatic Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm has been open abdominal surgery. This procedure involves making a large incision in the abdomen to directly access the aorta. The surgeon then removes the aneurysm and replaces the weakened section of the aorta with a synthetic graft, which is sewn into place. While effective, open surgery is highly invasive, requiring significant recovery time. Patients typically stay in the hospital for a week or more, and full recovery can take several months. The procedure also carries risks such as infection, significant blood loss, and complications related

to anaesthesia. **Endovascular Aneurysm repair** Endovascular Aneurysm Repair is a modern, minimally invasive alternative to traditional open surgery. Introduced in the 1990s, it has revolutionized the treatment of Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm, offering a safer and quicker recovery option for many patients. In this procedure, the surgeon makes small incisions in the groin area to access the femoral arteries. Using fluoroscopic imaging for guidance, the surgeon threads a catheter through the arteries to the site of the aneurysm. A stent graft, which is a tube made of fabric supported by a metal mesh, is then placed inside the aneurysm. Once in position, the stent graft expands and attaches to the healthy portion of the aorta above and below the aneurysm, creating a new path for blood flow and reducing pressure on the aneurysm. **Benefits of Endovascular Aneurysm Repair** The benefits over traditional open surgery are significant. Because the procedure is less invasive, patients typically experience shorter hospital stays, often going home within two to three days. Recovery time is significantly reduced, allowing patients to return to normal activities within a few weeks. Additionally, smaller incisions mean less postoperative pain and discomfort, and the risk of complications such as infection and blood loss are lower compared to open surgery. Endovascular Aneurysm Repair represents a significant advancement in the treatment of abdominal aortic aneurysms, offering a minimally invasive option with numerous benefits over traditional open surgery. While not suitable for every patient, it provides an effective and safer alternative for many, reducing recovery times and improving overall outcomes. Continued advancements and research in this field promise even better solutions for those affected by this potentially life-threatening condition. (The author is the Director & Head - Cardiothoracic & Vascular Surgery, Yatharth Hospital, Greater Noida)

Israeli protesters block highways, call for cease-fire to bring back hostages as war marks 9 months

Israeli protestors released 1,500 black and yellow balloons to symbolise those who were killed and abducted

TEL AVIV, July 7: Marking nine months since the war in Gaza started, Israeli protesters blocked highways across the country Sunday, calling on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to step down and pushing for a cease-fire that could bring back the hostages held by Hamas.

The demonstrations come as international mediators have renewed efforts to broker a deal. Hamas over the weekend appeared to have dropped a key demand for an Israeli commitment to end the war, according to Egyptian and Hamas officials who spoke to The Associated Press.

The war, triggered by the Palestinian militant group following a cross-border attack on October 7, saw 1,200 people killed and 250 others taken hostage. A retaliatory Israeli air and ground offensive has killed over 38,000 Palestinians, according to the territory's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between combatants and civilians in its count.

Sunday's "Day of Disruption" started at 6:29 AM, the moment that Hamas militants launched the first rockets toward Israel in October. Protesters blocked main roads and demonstrated outside of the homes of members of Israel's parliament.

Near the border with Gaza, Israeli protesters released 1,500 black and yellow balloons to symbolise those who were killed and



abducted. Hannah Golan said she came to protest the "devastating abandonment of our communities by our government." She added: "It's nine months today, to this black day, and still nobody in our government takes responsibility."

About 120 hostages remain captive after more than 100 hostages were released as part of a November cease-fire deal. Israel has already concluded that more than 40 of the remaining hostages are dead, and fears spread the number may grow as the war drags on.

The Israeli prime minister had previously said while he was open to pausing the war as part of a hostage deal, Israel would press on until it reached its goals of destroy-

ing Hamas' military and governing capabilities and bringing home all those held captive by Hamas.

Meanwhile, fighting in Gaza continued, with nine Palestinians reported dead from Israeli strikes overnight and into the early hours of Sunday.

Six Palestinians were killed in central Gaza after a strike hit a house in the town of Zawaida, according to the al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital. Another Israeli airstrike early Sunday hit a house west of Gaza City, killing another 3 people, the strip's Hamas-linked civil defense said.

The Gaza Health Ministry said Saturday an Israeli airstrike killed at least 16 people and wounded at least 50 others in a school-turned-

shelter in the Nuseirat refugee camp. The Israeli military said they were targeting Hamas militants and had taken "numerous steps" to reduce civilian casualties.

Also Sunday morning, the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah said it launched dozens of projectiles toward northern Israel in the north, targeting areas more than 30 kilometers (20 miles) from the border, deeper than most launches.

A 28-year-old Israeli man was seriously wounded in Kfar Zeitim, a small town near the city of Tiberias, Israel's national rescue service reported.

The barrage came after the Israeli military said in a statement an airstrike targeted a car and killed an engineer in Hezbollah's air defense unit Saturday. Hezbollah confirmed al-Attar's death but did not give information on his position.

Near-daily clashes between Hezbollah and Israeli forces over the past nine months have threatened to turn into an all-out regional war and have catastrophic consequences for people on both sides of the border.

Mediators from the United States, Egypt and Qatar have intensified their efforts in the past week to reach an agreement.

The compromise on Saturday by Hamas could deliver the first pause in fighting since November and set the stage for further talks, though all sides still warned that a deal is

not yet guaranteed.

Washington's phased deal would start with a "full and complete" six-week cease-fire during which older, sick and female hostages would be released in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. During those 42 days, Israeli forces would withdraw from densely populated areas of Gaza and allow the return of displaced people to their homes in northern Gaza, the officials said.

War-weary Palestinians in the Gaza Strip appeared pessimistic about the possibility of reaching a cease-fire as the Israel-Hamas war marked nine months on Sunday.

"We have lived nine months of suffering," Heba Radi, a displaced Palestinian woman, told the AP. "The cease-fire has become a distant dream."

The mother of six children spoke from her tent in the central city of Deir al-Balah where she sheltered after they fled their home in Gaza City.

"Every day, we tell ourselves tomorrow (there will be a cease-fire)," she said, "and tomorrow will be better. And when tomorrow comes, they say (the negotiations) were postponed."

Zakia Hasanein is an 80-year-old Palestinian woman, who also sheltered in Deir al-Balah, appealed to Netanyahu and Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh to agree on a cease-fire, saying they "lived like the dead." (AP)

New era of Pakistan & China cooperation has dawned, says PM Sharif



ISLAMABAD, July 7: Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has said a new era of Pakistan-China cooperation in the information technology (IT), communication, mining, and energy sectors has dawned and will lead to economic development and deepening of the time-tested bilateral relationship.

Sharif's remarks came as he chaired a review meeting in Islamabad on Saturday on the implementation of agreements and MOUs reached during his recent visit to China, Radio Pakistan reported.

The prime minister said that the promotion of Pakistan-China cooperation in these fields will lead to economic development, strengthening of regional ties, and deepening of the relations between the two countries.

Referring to the time-tested Pak-China friendship, he said that China had always supported Pakistan in difficult times. "China has emerged as the strongest economic power and Pakistan can emulate its development," he added.

The 72-year-old Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader said that no disruption will be tolerated in the implementation of agreements and memorandums of understanding (MoUs) signed during his visit to China, announcing to personally monitor the implementation of these agreements and MoUs.

The prime minister was also briefed about a delegation of Chinese shoemaking companies recently visiting Pakistan to shift their manufacturing units to the cash-strapped country and that the Chinese companies have the potential to invest USD 5-8 billion in this sector.

Regarding the agriculture sector, he was apprised that 12 leading companies of China will participate in the Food and Agri Expo to be held in Pakistan this year.

Sharif also reviewed the progress regarding sending 1,000

students from Pakistan to China on government scholarships for advanced training in the agriculture sector.

He directed that students from all four provinces, including Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), should be sent to China on the basis of merit, while students from backward areas of Balochistan should be given special priority in the programme.

Sharif instructed to start sending students for modern agricultural training in China from the next academic semester.

Besides, the meeting was told that over 100 Chinese companies are in contact with Pakistani companies for business and investment.

The meeting was also briefed about the progress on the technical training of 3,00,000 students by Huawei, a one-stop operation to facilitate business, smart governance and smart city.

The prime minister was also apprised of the progress made by China on various communication, infrastructure, and electricity projects in Gwadar.

Sharif advised expediting measures for the development of Gwadar Seaport, Gwadar Airport, and Gwadar Industrial Zone to make Gwadar the hub of trade corridor in the region.

He also instructed to speed up the negotiations with Chinese solar panels and equipment manufacturing companies to move their factories to Pakistan.

The 72-year-old leader embarked on his first visit to China after he took over as prime minister for the second term after his PML-N party-led coalition government assumed power in March.

Addressing the Pakistan-China Business Forum last month, Sharif assured all-out facilitation to Chinese investors and the security of Chinese individuals, projects, and investments in Pakistan. (PTI)

Rafah is a dusty, rubble-strewn ghost town 2 months after Israel invaded to root out Hamas

RAFAH (GAZA STRIP), July 7: Two months ago, before Israeli troops invaded Rafah, the city sheltered most of Gaza's more than 2 million people. Today it is a dust-covered ghost town.

Abandoned, bullet-ridden apartment buildings have blasted out walls and shattered windows. Bedrooms and kitchens are visible from roads dotted with rubble piles that tower over the Israeli military vehicles passing by. Very few civilians remain.

Israel says it has nearly defeated Hamas forces in Rafah — an area identified earlier this year as the militant group's last stronghold in Gaza.

The Israeli military invited reporters into Rafah on Wednesday, the first time international media visited Gaza's southernmost city since it was invaded May 6. Israel has barred international journalists from entering Gaza independently since the Hamas attack on October 7 that sparked the war.

Before invading Rafah, Israel said Hamas' four remaining battalions had retreated there, an area of about 25 square miles (65 square kilometers) that borders Egypt. Israel says hundreds of militants have been killed in its Rafah offensive. Scores of women and children have also died from Israeli airstrikes and ground operations.

The military says it has been necessary to operate with such intensity because Hamas turned civilian areas into treacherous traps. Eight soldiers were killed last month by a single blast.

"Some of these tunnels are booby-trapped," the military's chief spokesman, Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, said during Wednesday's tour as he stood over a shaft that led underground. "Hamas built everything in a civilian neighbourhood among houses, among mosques, among the population, in order to create its terror ecosystem."

An estimated 1.4 million Palestinians crammed into Rafah after fleeing fight-

ing elsewhere in Gaza. The UN estimates that around 50,000 remain in Rafah, which had a pre-war population of about 275,000.

Most have moved to a nearby Israel-declared "humanitarian area" where conditions are grave. Many are clustering in squalid tent camps along the beach with scant access to clean water, food, bathrooms and medical care.

Efforts to bring aid into southern Gaza have stalled. Israel's incursion into Rafah closed down one of two major crossings into the south of Gaza. The UN says little aid can enter from the other main crossing — Kerem Shalom — because the route is too dangerous and convoys are vulnerable to attacks by armed groups searching for smuggled-in cigarettes.

On Wednesday, a line of trucks on the Gaza side of Kerem Shalom was visible, but the trucks were hardly moving — a sign of how Israel's pledge to keep the route safe in order to facilitate the delivery of aid inside Gaza has fallen flat.

UN officials say some commercial trucks have braved the route into Rafah, but not without hired armed guards riding atop their convoys.

Israel says it is close to dismantling the group as an organised military force in Rafah. In a reflection of that confidence, soldiers brought journalists in open-air military vehicles down the road that leads into the heart of the city.

Along the way, debris lying by the side of the road made clear the perils of aid delivery: carcasses of trucks lying baking in the hot sun; dashboards covered in fencing meant to protect drivers; aid pallets lying empty.

The longer the aid delivery is frozen, humanitarian groups say, the closer Gaza comes to running out of fuel, which is needed for hospitals, water desalination plants and vehicles. (AP)

Military leaders of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso rule out returning to ECOWAS regional bloc

NIAMEY (NIGER), July 7: Military junta leaders of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso on Saturday ruled out returning their nations to the West Africa regional bloc whose division could further jeopardise efforts to undo coups and curb violence spreading across the region.

The leaders of the three countries announced that position during their first summit in Niamey, the capital of Niger, after their withdrawal from the West Africa bloc known as ECOWAS in January. They also accused the bloc of failing its mandate and pledged to consolidate their own union — the Alliance of Sahel States — created last year amid fractured relations with neighbours. The nearly 50-year-old ECOWAS has become "a threat to our states", said Niger's military leader Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani.

"We are going to create an AES of the peoples, instead of an ECOWAS whose directives and instructions are dictated to it by powers that are foreign to Africa," he said. The meeting of the three countries that border one another came a day before an ECOWAS summit being held in Nigeria by other heads of state in the region.

Analysts said the two meetings show the deep division in ECOWAS, which had emerged as the top political authority for its 15 member states before the unprecedented decision of the three countries to withdraw their membership. Despite efforts by ECOWAS to keep its house united, the alliance between the three military junta-led countries will most likely remain outside the regional bloc as tensions continue to grow, said Karim Manuel, an analyst for the Middle East and Africa with the Economist Intelligence Unit.

"Attempts at mediation will likely continue nonetheless, notably led by Senegal's new administration, but it will not be fruitful anytime soon," said Manuel. (AP)

Tokyo's incumbent Guv Koike projected to win a 3rd term

TOKYO, July 7: Tokyo's incumbent governor, Yuriko Koike, is projected to win re-election as head of Japan's influential capital for a third four-year term, according to exit poll results by Japan's NHK national television. The vote on Sunday was also seen as a test for Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's governing party, which supports the first woman to lead the Tokyo city government.

Tokyo, a city of 13.5 million people with outsized political and cultural power and a budget equaling some nations, is one of Japan's most influential political posts. A record 55 candidates challenged Koike, and one of the top contenders was also a woman — a liberal-leaning former lawmaker who uses only her first name, Renho, and was backed by opposition parties.

Minutes after the exit poll projecting her victory, Koike showed up at her campaign headquarters in Tokyo and celebrated by thanking the voters who

chose her. "I believe the voters gave me a mandate for my accomplishment in the past eight years," Koike said. She pledged to push for more reforms and support for Tokyo residents.

"I'm fully aware of my heavy responsibility," she said. "I will tackle my third term with all my body and soul." A win by Koike is a relief for Kishida's conservative governing party, which she has long been affiliated with. Kishida's Liberal Democratic Party and its junior coalition partner, Komeito, unofficially backed her campaign.

Renho, running as an independent but supported by the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan and the Japanese Communist Party, criticised Koike's connection with Kishida's party, which has been hit by a widespread slush fund scandal. A victory for Renho would have been a major setback for Kishida's chances in the party's leadership vote in September. (AP)

Singapore warns of 'violent splinter cells' after dissolution of JI terror group in Indonesia

SINGAPORE, July 7: Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) on Saturday warned of the risk of emergence of "violent splinter cells" in the recent future following the dissolution of the terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia. The longer term impact of the outfit's dissolution, however, remains to be seen, the Channel News Asia reported, citing the MHA.

Multi-ethnic Singapore, a hub of global multinational, is always on alert and on guard against terrorism activities in Southeast Asia, the ministry said as it warned that the threat of terrorism to Singapore remains high and the country continues to be a prized target for terrorists.

The ministry urged the public to be vigilant and contact the police or the Internal Security Department promptly should they come across suspicious people or activities.

Indonesia's terror group JI is behind some of Southeast Asia's deadliest attacks, including the 2002 Bali bombings that killed over 200 people,

the ministry said.

"For example, the JI's radical ideologies, including the goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia through armed struggle, will likely continue to have appeal among some groups and individuals," it added.

JI leaders in Indonesia had announced the group's dissolution at a June 30 event organised by Indonesia's national police counter-terrorism squad. Welcoming the development, the Singapore government had said the dissolution of JI in Indonesia is a "significant development and a major accomplishment" for Indonesian authorities.

A video of the announcement, uploaded on the YouTube account of headline Islamic website Arrahmah on Jul 3, showed 16 JI officials standing on a stage. They included Abu Rusdan, a militant cleric and former JI leader arrested in Bekasi in September 2021, and Para Wijayanto, who was arrested in 2019 for recruiting militants and raising funds for Syria. Both are still

in detention.

The dissolution was agreed upon by the assembly of seniors and leaders of Islamic boarding schools affiliated with JI, said Abu Rusdan.

The JI members agreed to return to the fold of the Republic of Indonesia and make changes to the curriculum of the JI-affiliated schools so that there are no more materials that teach extremism. The group was formed in 1993 by Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Bashir with the mission of building an Islamic state in Southeast Asia.

Abdullah died in 1999 while Abu Bakar was sentenced to 15 years in prison in 2011 on charges of funding militant training in Aceh. The 83-year-old was released in 2021 on humanitarian grounds.

Allegedly affiliated with Al-Qaeda, the group was designated a banned organisation by the Jakarta District Court in 2008 after several terror attacks by individuals acting on behalf of the group. (PTI)

France voting in a key election that could force Macron to share power with the far right

PARIS, July 7: Voting is underway in mainland France on Sunday in pivotal runoff elections that could hand a historic victory to Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally and its inward-looking, anti-immigrant vision — or produce a hung parliament and political deadlock.

French President Emmanuel Macron took a huge gamble in dissolving parliament and calling for the elections after his centrists were trounced in European elections on June 9. The snap elections in this nuclear-armed nation will influence the war in Ukraine, global diplomacy and Europe's economic stability, and they're almost certain to undercut Macron for the remaining three years of his presidency.

The first round on June 30 saw the largest gains ever for the anti-immigration, nationalist National Rally, led by Marine Le Pen.

A bit over 49 million people are registered to vote in the elections, which will determine which party controls the 577-member National Assembly, France's influential lower house of parliament, and who will be prime minister. If support is further eroded for Macron's weak centrist majority, he will be forced

to share power with parties opposed to most of his pro-business, pro-European Union policies.

Voters at a Paris polling station were acutely aware of the far-reaching consequences for France and beyond.

"The individual freedoms, tolerance and respect for others is what at stake today," said Thomas Bertrand, a 45-year-old voter who works in advertising.

Racism and antisemitism have marred the electoral campaign, along with Russian cyberattacks, and more than 50 candidates reported being physically attacked — highly unusual for France. The government is deploying 30,000 police on voting day.

The heightened tensions come while France is celebrating a very special summer: Paris is about to host exceptionally ambitious Olympic Games, the national soccer team reached the semifinal of the Euro 2024 championship, and the Tour de France is racing around the country alongside the Olympic torch.

As of noon local time, turnout was at 26.63 per cent, according to France's Interior Ministry, slightly



higher than the 25.90 per cent reported at the same time during the first round last Sunday.

During the first round, the nearly 67 per cent turnout was the highest since 1997, ending nearly three decades of deepening voter apathy for legislative elections and, for a growing number of French people, politics in general.

Macron cast his ballot in the seaside resort town of La Touquet, along with his wife Brigitte. Prime Minister Gabriel Attal voted earlier in the Paris suburb of Vanves.

Le Pen is not voting, because her district in northern France is not holding a second round after she

won the seat outright last week. Across France, 76 other candidates secured seats in the first round, including 39 from her National Rally and 32 from the leftist New Popular Front alliance. Two candidates from Macron's centrists list also won their seats in the first round.

The elections wrap up Sunday at 8 pm (1800 GMT) in mainland France and on the island of Corsica. Initial polling projections are expected Sunday night, with early official results expected late Sunday and early Monday.

Voters residing in the Americas and in France's overseas territories of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, Saint-

Barthélemy, Saint-Martin, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyana and French Polynesia voted on Saturday.

The elections could leave France with its first far-right government since the Nazi occupation in World War II if the National Rally wins an absolute majority and its 28-year-old leader Jordan Bardella becomes prime minister. The party came out on top in the previous week's first-round voting, followed by a coalition of centre-left, hard-left and Green parties, and Macron's centrist alliance.

Pierre Lubin, a 45-year-old business manager, was worried about whether the elections would produce an effective government.

"This is a concern for us," Lubin said. "Will it be a technical government or a coalition government made up of (various) political forces?"

The outcome remains highly uncertain. Polls between the two rounds suggest that the National Rally may win the most seats in the 577-seat National Assembly but fall short of the 289 seats needed for a majority. That would still make history, if a party with historic links to xenophobia and downplaying the

Holocaust, and long seen as a pariah, becomes France's biggest political force.

If it wins the majority, Macron would be forced to share power with a prime minister who deeply disagrees with the president's domestic and foreign policies, in an awkward arrangement known in France as "cohabitation."

Another possibility is that no party has a majority, resulting in a hung parliament. That could prompt Macron to pursue coalition negotiations with the centre-left or name a technocratic government with no political affiliations.

No matter what happens, Macron's centrist camp will be forced to share power. Many of his alliances' candidates lost in the first round or withdrew, meaning it doesn't have enough people running to come anywhere close to the majority he had in 2017 when he was first elected president, or the plurality he got in the 2022 legislative vote. Both would be unprecedented for modern France, and make it more difficult for the European Union's No. 2 economy to make bold decisions on arming Ukraine, reforming labour laws or reducing

its huge deficit. Financial markets have been jittery since Macron surprised even his closest allies in June by announcing snap elections after the National Rally won the most seats for France in European Parliament elections.

Regardless of what happens, Macron said he won't step down and will stay president until his term ends in 2027.

Many French voters, especially in small towns and rural areas, are frustrated with low incomes and a Paris political leadership seen as elitist and unconcerned with workers' day-to-day struggles. National Rally has connected with those voters, often by blaming immigration for France's problems, and has built up broad and deep support over the past decade.

Le Pen has softened many of the party's positions — she no longer calls for quitting NATO and the EU — to make it more electable. But the party's core far-right values remain. It wants a referendum on whether being born in France is enough to merit citizenship, to curb rights of dual citizens, and give police more freedom to use weapons. (AP)

Uruguay beat Brazil 4-2 on penalties after scoreless draw, advance to Copa America semifinals

LAS VEGAS, July 7: Marcelo Bielsa knew what the world's reaction would be after Uruguay and Brazil grinded, scrapped and shoved their way through a Copa America quarterfinal match with 41 fouls, four shots on target and no goals in open play.

Bielsa knows the beautiful game wasn't so attractive Saturday night, but the famously inventive coach now running Uruguay's bench only cared about the celebrations back home and in the Vegas stands when La Celeste picked up a landmark win.

Manuel Ugarte scored the decisive goal in the fifth round of the shootout and Uruguay advanced to the Copa America

semifinals with a 4-2 penalty kick victory after the teams played to a scoreless draw.

Uruguay and Brazil played a bruising, choppy match with plenty of rough stuff, but little of the impressive soccer for which both South American powerhouses are known. Uruguay's Nahitan Nández was sent off after a red card in the 74th minute for a dangerous tackle on Rodrygo, but Brazil still couldn't break through its 10-man opponent in the ensuing 21 minutes.

"I (prefer) offensive football, but in this match, we created more opportunities and we defended well," Bielsa said through an interpreter. "We did the things necessary to succeed at this level."

Uruguay led 3-1 after three rounds of the shootout when goalkeeper Sergio Rochet stopped Éder Militão and Douglas Luiz hit the post. Alisson Becker saved José María Giménez's shot in the fourth round to keep Brazil alive, but Ugarte banged home the clincher. "If you ask me if I'm happy that we only created three goal-scoring opportunities, then no," Bielsa said. "But our opponent only had two goal-scoring opportunities. We had to work hard to create our opportunities ... but that was satisfactory to us." After the third penalty shootout in four Copa America quarterfinal matches, Uruguay advanced to face Colombia in the semifinals on Wednesday

night in Charlotte, North Carolina. Colombia routed Panama 5-0 earlier Saturday, extending its unbeaten streak to 27 consecutive matches.

"We believe we're in good shape to play against any opponent," Bielsa said.

Defending champion Argentina faces Canada in the other semifinal Tuesday in East Rutherford, New Jersey. The final is July 14 in Miami Gardens. Brazil played without Real Madrid star Vinicius Júnior, who watched from the stands under suspension after accumulating two yellow cards. The Seleção already are without Neymar, who hasn't played since tearing a knee ligament last fall during Brazil's loss to Uruguay in a

World Cup qualifier.

That victory was Uruguay's first over Brazil in 13 meetings since 2001, but Bielsa's group has now beaten Brazil in back-to-back matches for the first time since 1992.

Endrick made his first career start in place of Vinicius Júnior, but the 17-year-old phenomenon headed to Real Madrid later this month couldn't shake Brazil from its offensive funk. Except for a 4-1 win over overmatched Paraguay, Brazil scored one combined goal and earned just one victory in its other three Copa America matches — and the Seleção is headed home despite never trailing in the tournament. "There were positives in every match," coach Dorival

Júnior said through an interpreter. "It's only natural after a match like this one that something we'd consider positive is ruled out. I'm aware of that. We didn't perform at a high technical level, but I don't throw out any of the matches. There was dedication, fighting spirit. It was always a courageous team. I believe we had more positives than negatives. The fact we didn't seize (the opportunity) despite outnumbering (Uruguay) will be analyzed."

Uruguay advanced to the Copa America semifinals for the first time since winning the tournament in 2011, and it knocked Brazil out for the first time in four tries since 1995.

Both teams played cautiously

and contentiously from the start. During a stoppage in the 17th minute, Ronald Araújo shoulder-checked Endrick to the ground from behind while the teenager complained about an earlier non-call. Raphinha responded by knocking down Araújo, but order was restored.

Araújo, the oft-injured Barcelona defender, left the game with an apparent injury to his right leg in the 31st minute. Bielsa later called it a muscle injury. After 35 minutes with few scoring opportunities, the teams traded their best chances 35 seconds apart. Right after Darwin Núñez botched an unobstructed header deep in Brazil's box, Raphinha was stopped at close range by Rochet. (AP)

TON-UP ABHISHEK STARS IN INDIA'S SERIES-LEVELLING WIN

HARARE, July 7: Young Abhishek Sharma announced his arrival on the big stage with a breathtaking 46-ball century as India pummelled Zimbabwe by a whopping 100 runs in the second T20I to restore parity in a resounding fashion here Sunday. This is India's biggest margin of victory in terms of runs against Zimbabwe in T20Is.

The young Indian side didn't carry the baggage of a shock-13-run defeat in the series-opener as left-handed opener Abhishek blended power with grace for a scintillating 100-run knock that propelled India to a massive 234 for two on a track where batting wasn't exactly easy. The ask was already stiff and Indian bowlers got breakthroughs at regular intervals to bowl out Zimbabwe for 134 in 18.4 overs to set the record straight.

Pacers Mukesh Kumar (3/37) and Avesh Khan (3/15) removed the top-order inside the Powerplay to kill the contest which became a formality after that.

The day certainly belonged to Abhishek, who mixed grace and power in equal measure in an innings, embellished with eight sixes and seven fours.

It made a normally stylish Rituraj Gaikwad (77 not out off



47 balls) look pale in comparison during their 137-run stand for the second wicket.

His innings would also increase the headache for skipper Shubman Gill and stand-in coach VVS Laxman, who would

need to take a tough call when Yashasvi Jaiswal is available from the third game.

After his century, there is no way that the Sunrisers Hyderabad opener can be dropped from the playing XI.

Having endured the disappointment of a four-ball duck on debut, Abhishek never looked under pressure on a track which his senior partner and current CSK partner Gaikwad found "difficult to feel set".

The hallmark of his innings was fearlessness as he took calculated risks which paid off and allowed Gaikwad at the other end to get into the groove after playing and missing for the better part of his innings. (PTI)

For Fiji legend Waisale Serevi creating rugby awareness is No. 1 goal as India coach

MUMBAI, July 7: For the 'King of The Sevens' Waisale Serevi, who knew a very little of India before embarking on the challenge of effecting a change in the rugby landscape in the country, the primary objective is to raise awareness about the sport. The 56-year-old 'Hall of Famer' Serevi has taken over as the head coach of India's men's and women's teams in rugby sevens, a format he championed for in terms of its inclusion in the Olympics.

"For me, normally I don't follow rugby on this side of the world, in Asia. But I've seen teams playing rugby on this side of the world," Serevi told PTI in an exclusive interaction.

"Yes, rugby in India is like maybe five per cent of the population knows (about) — that is exactly what we are trying to build at the moment — we're trying to get rugby awareness," he said. Serevi added, "You cannot go to (point) number 12 when you forget about number 2, 3, 4, 5. The most important thing for me is to do rugby awareness."

The result will come anyway. Every big thing starts with a small thing," he said. While he has not had any experience of India before he arrived here, Serevi was quick in determining the talent that is already there in the national teams but also emphasised on reaching out to the untapped ones.

"In terms of both men and women's team. The coaches have done a lot of good work. I've seen a couple of good teams. I have seen forwards, big forwards. I

have seen backs, the halfbacks. In all positions on the rugby field, they have it here," he said.

"I am excited to have them in the camp and then to try and help them understand the game, help them play what kind of rugby that I want them to play in other competitions," said Serevi.

He added, "We have the players that's needed in each position, like the forwards, what we call it in rugby, the forwards and the backs. We have wingers which are fast players. We have centres who are creating the space for the wingers. We have the halfbacks with the connection between the forwards and the backs and we have some forwards, quite big boys," he added. Serevi, who was a player-coach of the Fiji team which reached the final of the World Series in 2005-06, said a lot of people might have been surprised about him taking over the Indian coaching job after stints in Russia, USA and Jamaica.

"A lot of people in the world, they are surprised that I'm in India. But like I said, I'm so excited given this opportunity of trying to help, give a hand to the country that needs help, the rugby India program," he said.

Coaching both the national teams in men's and women's could be difficult in terms of workload but Serevi is clear about how he would go.

"The good thing is we already have the HPU, which is the high performance (centre) and we have assistant coaches that are here that will look after the team. It's not only me alone," he said. (PTI)

Zimbabwe will look to exploit the home conditions against India: Masakadza

NEW DELHI, July 7: Having hurt the Shubman Gill-led India hard in the opening T20I in Harare, Zimbabwe spinner Wellington Masakadza said the tourists should take the home side lightly at their own risk, and added that they will exploit the home conditions to the maximum to win the five-match series.

A new-look India team suffered a 13-run loss to an inexperienced yet spirited Zimbabwe side in an upset of massive proportion.

India, who were recently crowned champions in the T20 World Cup albeit with a different set of players, were expected to blow away the Zimbabwean challenge when they restricted the home side to 115 for nine.

But Zimbabwe wrote their own script, reducing India to 28 for four in the Powerplay and then eventually bowling them out for 102 in 19.5 overs.

It was India's first loss in T20Is in 2024 and first against Zimbabwe in eight years.

Masakadza, who finished with figures of 1/15 in three overs, said: "We are trying to use our own conditions as much as we can against this Indian side. It's a second-string Indian side, but there are a lot of good players in there. So, we are looking forward to this series," Masakadza said in an interview with PTI Videos facilitated by broadcasters Sony Sports Network.

"We've had a few plans in place. We needed them to work and obviously, we are trying to use our own conditions as much as we can against this Indian side," Masakadza, who dismissed



tail-ender Avesh Khan on Saturday, said he was eyeing captain Shubman Gill's wicket now.

"I'll be looking to take Shubman Gill's big wicket and some of the right-handers, (Riyen) Parag and some of the other guys in the side. It will be a very good challenge. They're (Ravi Bishnoi and Washington Sundar) very good spinners. Bishnoi has just had a very good tournament in the IPL and also Sundar. So it's always a very good challenge to have Asian spinners."

With Harare enjoying a winter season as it is in the Southern Hemisphere, the left-arm spinner said the home team pacers, due to their familiarity with the pitch, will likely trouble the Indian batters. "It's winter here and at times it's a bit difficult for batters as the pitch is slowish, with a bit of turn. The seam is always a very big challenge in Harare during winter. So, I think the ball will move a bit

and it will spin also," said Masakadza, a veteran of 90 T20Is. He added that a series win will be a shot in the arm for Zimbabwe cricket, which has been on the decline for several years.

"This series will mean a lot to us. If we manage to win the series, it will be a very big thing in our future." "We're starting a new chapter, we have had our ups and downs in the past. We've just had a new coaching staff. So I just think from now on, this is a big thing for us and we'll be looking forward to making a few plans to get ourselves across the line," said the 30-year-old, who, like his skipper Sikandar Raza, wants to play in the IPL.

Pakistan-born Raza played for Punjab Kings this IPL season, scoring 43 runs in two games. On Saturday, he was adjudged 'Player of the Match' for taking three wickets and scoring 17 runs. (PTI)



GLENDAL (ARIZONA), July 7: Jhon Córdoba, James Rodríguez and Luis Díaz scored goals during a dominant first half to spark Colombia to a 5-0 win over Panama in the quarterfinals of the Copa America on Saturday.

Colombia — which came into Saturday on a 26-match unbeaten streak — wasted little time on No. 27 when Córdoba's well-placed header in the eighth minute found the bottom corner of the net following a corner kick from Rodríguez.

Los Cafeteros pushed ahead 2-0 less than 10 minutes later on Rodríguez's powerful penalty kick. Colombia was awarded the penalty after Panama goalie Orlando Mosquera tripped up Colombia's Jhon Arias, who was sprinting to save the ball from going out of bounds near the post. It was the 32-year-old Rodríguez's 28th goal in international play and his all-around excellence was on full display against Panama.

"He's a good player, there's nothing to explain," said Colombia coach Néstor Lorenzo. "He's a player who is happy inside the field."

Colombia made it 3-0 in the

41st minute when Díaz lobbed a shot over Mosquera, who had charged forward during the breakaway. The goal was set up by another good pass from Rodríguez.

Panama had a few decent chances to score in the first half, including a header that bounced off the post before being swatted out of danger by Colombia goalie Camilo Vargas.

But Los Cafeteros could never make a dent in the lead.

"Perhaps that could have brought us back in the game," Panama manager Thomas Christiansen said. "But the mistakes we had — that's not possible against teams like Colombia with their quality, speed and intensity. It's not the result we wanted, not the result we deserved, but we have to learn from it."

Colombia scored its fourth goal in the 70th minute when Richard Ríos blasted a long right-footed shot past Mosquera into the bottom left corner of the net. The final goal came in stoppage time when Miguel Borja converted a penalty kick.

Los Cafeteros had a slight advantage in time of possession at 52%, but the quality of their possessions was far superior. (AP)

Expecting India to win both CT and WTC final under Rohit's captaincy: BCCI Secy Shah

NEW DELHI, July 7: T20 World Cup-winning skipper Rohit Sharma will continue to lead India in the ODI and Test formats BCCI secretary Jay Shah said on Sunday, exuding confidence that the country will win next year's Champions Trophy and World Test Championship under his captaincy. The 37-year-old Rohit, who became the third Indian captain after legendary Kapil Dev and Mahendra Singh Dhoni to win a global trophy, has announced his retirement from the T20 format.

"The next stage is the WTC final and the Champions Trophy. I have full faith in Rohit Sharma's captaincy, that we will be the champions in both these tournaments," secretary Shah said in a video message.

The Champions Trophy, scheduled in Pakistan next year, will be held after eight years (since 2017 in UK), and even though the draft schedule has been submitted to the ICC, the BCCI hasn't yet given its green

light to it. It is understood BCCI will again push for the 'Hybrid Model' like 2023 ODI Asia Cup where India played all its matches, including the ones against Pakistan, in Sri Lanka.

Shah's message, in a way, has put to rest speculations about whether Rohit would quit leadership role in other formats.

Till Rohit calls it quits, India will once again have split captaincy with Rohit leading in ODIs and Tests while Hardik Pandya is expected to take charge of the T20 outfit. Rohit had also led India to the finals of the WTC and ODI World Cup last year, where India lost the summit clash after winning 10 straight games.

Shah dedicated India's T20 World Cup triumph to the three cricketers, who quit the format after the title victory and outgoing coach Rahul Dravid.

"I want to dedicate this victory to coach Rahul Dravid, captain Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli and Ravindra Jadeja. (PTI)