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3 Hmar rebels killed in Cachar encounter

Three cops hurt in exchange of fire • Six-seven militants managed to flee: Police

SILCHAR, July 17: At least three suspected Hmar militants were killed and three police personnel were injured in a fierce encounter in Cachar district of Assam on Wednesday, officials said.

The deceased militants were part of a larger group, which was preparing to carry out "subversive activities" along the Assam-Manipur border areas, a senior police officer said.

"In an early morning operation, @cacharpolice killed 3 Hmar militants from Assam and neighbouring Manipur. Police also seized 2 AK rifles, 1 other rifle and 1 pistol," chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said in a post on X.

Addressing a press conference later, Cachar SP Numal Mahatta said police received an input regarding movement of suspected militants at Krishnapur road area.

"A police team rushed to the location. Three persons were arrested



along with sophisticated weapons near Ganganagar while on way towards Bhuban Hills in an autorickshaw," he said.

Mahatta said as per preliminary investigation, the apprehended trio were members of a Hmar extremist organisation and trained cadres.

Two of them were from Cachar and one was from Churachandpur

with a huge cache of arms," the SP said. Subsequently, a special operation was launched led by the district additional SP along with commandos on the Bhuban Hills side for apprehending more militants on the basis of inputs provided by the three arrested insurgents, who accompanied the security forces.

"The moment we reached there, they started indiscriminate firing. Six-seven militants were hiding at the spot. The police team immediately retaliated. There was heavy exchange of fire from both the sides," Mahatta said.

The apprehended militants, who were wearing bulletproof jackets and helmets, suffered grievous injuries during the encounter and were immediately shifted to Sonai Primary Health Centre and later to Silchar Medical College and Hospital, where the attending doctor declared (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Muslim population in Assam now 40%, demographic change big issue: Himanta



RANCHI, July 17: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday claimed that the Muslim population in his state has now risen to 40 per cent, contending that demographic change is a "big issue" in the northeastern state.

Sarma, who is also the BJP's Jharkhand election co-in charge, made the comments on the sidelines of a party meeting here.

"I come from Assam and demographic change is a big issue for me. Muslim population in my state is 40 per cent now, which was 12 per cent in 1951. It is not a political issue for me, but a matter of life and death," he told reporters.

Earlier, addressing party workers, he alleged that the number of Bangladeshi infiltrators is rising in tribal areas of Jharkhand.

The BJP would include a strong action plan against infiltrators in its manifesto for the upcoming Jharkhand assembly election, he said.

In a scathing attack on Jharkhand chief minister Hemant Soren, Sarma accused him of turning Jharkhand into a "mini-Bangladesh".

"The infiltrators come to Jharkhand and marry tribal girls to grab their land. I call for a law in Jharkhand that should have a provision that tribal girls cannot marry infiltrators," he said. He also alleged that no development took place during the regime of the JMM-led alliance government.

"In past five years, no university or engineering college opened in the state. Development work came to a halt. Youths were neither given jobs nor unemployment allowances," he claimed.

Sarma said that the NDA won nine out of 14 seats in Jharkhand, and took lead in 51 assembly segments in the Lok Sabha polls. (PTI)

HT BRIEFS

KAAC school

DIPHU: The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) has notified that all schools not having United District Information System for Education (UIDISE) Code in Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong will be considered illegal. The notification was issued on Wednesday. The notification said that "...approximately 200 numbers of schools under Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong districts do not bear UIDISE Code as per UIDISE survey 2023-24 which is mandatory as per RTE Act 2009. As a consequence, these schools will be treated as illegally functioning and the Department of School Education and Literacy, Government of India, is likely to close these schools for not adhering to the norms and standard conferred under the RTE Act 2009."

District Commissioner

DIPHU: District Press Club of Karbi Anglong (DPCK) led by advisors Sanju Bora, Dipen Bora and President Diganta Teron felicitated the new district commissioner of Karbi Anglong Nirala Phangchopi in her chamber here. The DC was felicitated with a Karbi turbanpo and a bouquet. On the occasion, a brief meeting was held during which it was decided that a cleanliness drive would be taken up by DC the office and DPCK shortly. The DPCK also aired the difficulties faced by journalists in Karbi Anglong.

Bhumi Pujan

GUWAHATI: The groundbreaking ceremony 'Bhumi Pujan' for the new Tata Group semiconductor unit is scheduled for August 3. The decision was taken during a meeting convened today at Janata Bhawan with officials from the Tata Group and the state government. Taking to micro-blogging site X, Assam minister Pijush Hazarika stated, "The Bhumi Pujan of upcoming Tata Group semiconductor unit will be held on August 3. Ahead of the ceremony, held a meeting with officials of the Tata Group & State govt today at Janata Bhawan."

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

NEW DELHI, July 17: The Supreme Court is scheduled to hear on Thursday a batch of petitions related to the controversy-ridden medical entrance exam NEET-UG 2024 which was held on May 5.

According to the cause list of July 18 uploaded on the apex court's website, a bench comprising Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud and justices J B Pardiwala and Manoj Misra would hear more than 40 pleas, including those filed by the National Testing Agency (NTA) seeking transfer of cases pending against it in various high courts on the NEET-UG row to the Supreme Court to avoid multiplicity of litigations.

India needs world class regulatory framework to become global leader in drugs regulation: Nadda



NEW DELHI, July 17: For India to become the global leader in drugs regulation and match its 'pharmacy of the world' reputation, there is a need to have a world class regulatory framework in tune with the scale of operations and international expectations, Union Health minister J P Nadda said on Wednesday.

Nadda said this while reviewing the regulation of drugs, cosmetics and medical devices here. Highlighting the global position of India as the leading producer

and exporter of drugs, he stressed on Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) to draw a roadmap with timelines of achieving global standards in its mandated activities. He stated that the upscaling needs to be systems-based focusing on highest standards of uniformity, technical upgrade and futuristic approach. For export of drugs and pharmaceuticals, the system should be designed for proper intervention to maintain the quality of drugs being exported, he emphasized. Nadda underscored the importance of transparency in the working of CDSCO.

"In order to achieve global standards, our focus needs to be on transparency of procedures at CDSCO and within the drugs and medical devices industry," he said.

"Both the drugs regulatory body and the industry should work on highest principles of transparency to ensure that the products manufactured and sold by India meet the highest indices of global quality standards," he said. The health minister stated that it is important for CDSCO to be in continuous dialogue with the drugs and medical devices industry to understand their issues and support them to fulfill the quality expectations and standards of CDSCO. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Tezpur Airport to be shut for 1.5 yrs for maintenance work

TEZPUR, July 17: Flight services will be shut at the Tezpur airport in Assam in October for one-and-half years for maintenance works, a senior official said on Wednesday.

Tezpur Airport director G Shiva Kumar said passenger flights will be suspended from October 1, 2024, to March 31, 2026.

"This is due to the resurfacing works of the runway along with other projects to improve the facilities at the terminal," he said.

The Tezpur Airport is adjacent to the Tezpur Base of the Indian Air Force, and the runway is used for both commercial and fighter aircraft. The Tezpur Air Force Base had earlier informed the Tezpur Salonbari Passenger Airport Authority about (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

CPI(M) accuses BJP of unleashing attacks on party members in Tripura ahead of panchayat polls

NEW DELHI, July 17: The CPI(M) accused the BJP on Wednesday of unleashing a "spate of violent attacks" on its workers in Tripura in the run-up to the August 8 panchayat polls in the northeastern state and claimed that its candidates have been forcibly prevented from filing nominations.

The Left party said since the announcement of the elections to the local bodies, the CPI(M), opposition candidates and their supporters have been under relentless attacks by goons allegedly owing allegiance to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

"The politburo of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) strongly condemns the spate of violent attacks that have been unleashed by the ruling BJP in the run-up to the three-tier panchayat elections in Tripura to be held on August 8, 2024," it said in a statement. "Candidates of the CPI(M) have been forcibly prevented from filing their nominations by resorting to savage assaults against them and their supporters," it added.

The Left party alleged that in one such incident on July 13, Badal Shil, a CPI(M) candidate for the South Tripura Zilla Parishad, was killed by "BJP goondas".

"Scores of leaders and workers of the party have been injured and hospitalised consequent to these brutal attacks. Opposition leaders were forcibly prevented from participating in all-party meetings called by election officials at various places," the CPI(M) said.



"BJP leaders have threatened to kill any opposition candidate trying to submit nomination, vehicles carrying opposition leaders have been attacked in the presence of police personnel, prominent leaders of the party have been waylaid and attacked in several places," it alleged.

Incidents of stone pelting on CPI(M) processions and hurling of bombs on the residences of its leaders have also been reported from the state, the party said.

"Ever since the BJP won the elections to the state Assembly, it has single-mindedly pursued its agenda of annihilating the opposition in the state. In these murderous attacks launched since 2018, 30 members and workers of the party have been killed," the CPI(M) alleged. "These intimidatory tactics have led to the creation of an atmosphere of terror in the entire state, casting aspersions (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Kejriwal challenges arrest by CBI in Delhi HC, terms it 'insurance arrest'

NEW DELHI, July 17: Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal challenged in the Delhi High Court on Wednesday his arrest by the CBI in a corruption case stemming from the alleged excise policy scam and contended that it was an "insurance arrest" to ensure that he stays in prison.

Justice Neena Bansal Krishna, who conducted the proceedings on a holiday on account of Muharram, heard the arguments advanced by the lawyers of Kejriwal and the CBI and reserved its order on the petitions challenging his arrest and seeking interim bail in the corruption case. The high court has listed his regular bail plea for further arguments on July 29.

The counsel for CBI opposed both pleas of Kejriwal and said that terming his arrest an "insurance ar-

Assam flood situation continues to improve

GUWAHATI, July 17: The flood situation in Assam continued to improve on Wednesday as water level across the state was receding, officials said.

The Regional Meteorological Centre (RMC) in Guwahati predicted no rains for the next two days, giving hope for faster enhancement in the condition.

Meanwhile, a report from the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) on Tuesday night said that the number of people reeling under the deluge decreased to around 4 lakh even as one more death was reported from Dhemaji. The number of inundated districts reduced to 16, while a few major rivers, including the Brahmaputra, continued to flow over the danger level at several places. Cachar remained the worst-hit district with 80,783 affected people, followed by Dhubri (80,544) and Nagaon (76,889). Altogether 84 relief camps with 15,476 inmates are now functional. Another (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Hands-on demonstration sessions were also conducted AAU hosts workshop on drudgery-reducing tools for rural women

JORHAT, July 17: A workshop on how to use drudgery-reducing tools for rural women was organised by the Department of Family Resource Management and Consumer Science, College of Community Science, Assam Agricultural University at the Extension Training Centre, SIPRD in Jorhat.

The event, held on Tuesday, was part of the ongoing project 'Drudgery reducing tools and techniques - an approach to foster scientific knowledge among rural women for better health and increased productivity,' funded by NCSTC Division, Department of Science & Technology, Government of India.

Women from various fields including Pashu Sakhi, Krishi Sakhi, Jeevika Sakhi, and Anganwadi



teachers attended the workshop. The workshop aimed to enhance the efficiency and well-being of women by introducing ergonomically designed, drudgery-reducing, women-friendly tools to ease their workload and boost productivity.

Dr Babita Sharma, assistant professor & PI, and Dr Mira Kalita, assistant professor & Co-PI of the

project, addressed the participants, stressing the importance of adopting such tools. They emphasised how these tools alleviate physical strain, save time, and improve efficiency in daily activities.

Dr Bijoylaxmi Bhuyan, associate professor & Resource Person, delivered an informative PowerPoint Presentation emphasising the necessity of drudgery-reducing tools for women. The presentation detailed various available tools and their potential benefits, providing participants with valuable insights. Hands-on demonstration sessions were also conducted, allowing participants to observe the tools and witness their effectiveness firsthand. To enhance understanding, a short documentary film showcasing real-life applications (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Congress slams govt over 'rising economic inequality'

NEW DELHI, July 17: The Congress on Wednesday hit out at the government over "growing economic inequalities" and claimed that every data points to a widening of gap between the rich and the poor.

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh shared on X a media report which claimed that the difference between the consumption expenditure of the rich with that of the poor is about 10 times.

"The Congress party has been constantly raising the issue that the gap between the rich and the poor is increasing in the country," he said.

Citing the media report, Ramesh pointed out that the monthly consumption expenditure of the poorest 5 per cent of the country's population in rural areas is just ₹ 1,373, while the monthly consumption expenditure of the top 5 per cent rich in urban areas is ₹ 20,824.

"This is new data. But no matter



what data you look at, all show evidence of a growing gap between the rich and the poor," Ramesh said in a post in Hindi on X.

He claimed that more than 40 per cent of the wealth created in the country from 2012 to 2021 has gone to just 1 per cent of the population.

"About 64 per cent of the total Goods and Services Tax (GST) in the country comes from the poor, lower middle class and middle class," he said. "Over the past ten years, most of the public assets and resources have been sold to one or two companies - economists have pointed out that growing monopolies in the economy have led to inflation," Ramesh said. Today, 21 billionaires together have more wealth than 70 crore Indians, he claimed. The Congress has been attacking the government over issues such as rising inequalities, inflation and unemployment, alleging that its policies are responsible for it. (PTI)

Bharti Airtel Foundation launches ambitious scholarship program

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, July 17: In celebration of its 25th anniversary, the Bharti Airtel Foundation, the philanthropic wing of Bharti Enterprises, has announced the launch of the prestigious 'Bharti Airtel Scholarship Program.' This merit-means-based initiative aims to support 4,000 deserving students annually, focusing on those from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, with a special emphasis on female students.

The scholarship targets students pursuing technology-based engi-

neering undergraduate and integrated programs at the top 50 institutions in the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), including renowned colleges such as IIT Guwahati and NIT Silchar. Starting in August 2024, the program will begin with 250 students and incrementally expand to its full capacity, backed by an annual outlay exceeding ₹100 crore.

Designed to break financial barriers, the fully funded scholarship is available to students with an annual family income not exceeding ₹8.5 lakh. It covers 100% of col-

lege fees, a laptop, and hostel and mess fees for eligible applicants. The scholarship is open to students in fields such as Electronics & Communication, Telecom, Information Technology, Computer Sciences, Data Sciences, and Emerging Technologies including AI, IoT, AR/VR, Machine Learning, and Robotics.

Rakesh Bharti Mittal, Vice Chairman of Bharti Enterprises and Co-Chairman of Bharti Airtel Foundation, expressed pride in the foundation's legacy of educational initiatives that have touched over

six million lives. "With this pioneering Bharti Airtel Scholarship Program, we are expanding our commitment to empower students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, particularly female students, to achieve academic excellence and pursue their dreams," said Mittal. "Education is the cornerstone of societal progress and economic empowerment. By partnering with top institutions, we aim to nurture professionals equipped to navigate the dynamic technological landscape of tomorrow."

Royal Enfield Unveils the Guerrilla 450

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, July 17: Royal Enfield has revolutionized the roadster landscape with the launch of its premium modern roadster, the Royal Enfield Guerrilla 450. This new addition to the storied Royal Enfield lineup is designed to rekindle the true spirit of roadsters – dynamic, intuitive, and primed for excitement across its power band. The Guerrilla 450 is a testament to Royal Enfield's engineering prowess, promising a raw and responsive riding experience. It is versatile and sophisticated, ideal for navigating weekday traffic, enjoying spirited weekend rides through winding roads, or embarking on long, leisurely journeys. The bike embodies the brand's ethos of character, substance, and defiance, standing out in a market often characterized by monotony. Siddhartha Lal, Managing Director of Eicher Motors Ltd., expressed his enthusiasm for the new model, saying, "The Guerrilla 450 is our take on modern roadsters, and we are thrilled with the outcome. This motorcycle is mechanically characterful, sophisticated, and combines performance with versatility. Built on the same platform as the Himalayan, it is tuned for roadster performance, offering an excitingly different ride. The Guerrilla 450 is responsive and delightful at everyday speeds and equally exhilarating when pushed to its limits." In Latin American markets, the Royal Enfield Guerrilla 450 will be branded as the Royal Enfield GRR 450. The lineup features three variants – Analogue, Dash, and Flash – available in five vibrant colorways. Bookings in India open on Wednesday at an introductory price of ₹2,39,000, with test rides and retail sales beginning on August 1, 2024.

Mercedes-Benz launches 'Wishbox' financial campaign

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, July 17: Mercedes-Benz, India's leading luxury carmaker, has announced the launch of its popular 'Wishbox' financial campaign, designed to make owning a Mercedes-Benz more accessible to aspiring customers. The campaign introduces a range of innovative and flexible financial solutions tailored to meet individual financial needs and preferences. The 'Wishbox' campaign offers several customized financial plans, including 'Step-up EMI,' 'Lower EMI with higher annual payout,' and 'EMI Holiday.' These options provide potential buyers with the flexibility to choose a plan that best suits their financial situation, making the dream of owning a Mercedes-Benz a reality for more customers. This initiative is part of Mercedes-Benz's broader commitment to offering innovative and personalized ownership solutions that align with the aspirations of its discerning clientele. By continuing to introduce novel financial products and services, Mercedes-Benz aims to enhance the overall car ownership experience.

ADB retains India's growth forecast at 7 pc for FY'25

NEW DELHI, July 17: The Asian Development Bank (ADB) on Wednesday maintained India's GDP growth forecast at 7 per cent for the current financial year, citing that a rebound in agriculture is expected given above-normal monsoon projections. The ADB forecast comes a day after the International Monetary Fund revised upward its GDP growth projections for India to 7 per cent compared to 6.8 per cent projected in April.

Last month, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) revised upward its growth forecast to 7.2 per cent, from 7 per cent estimated earlier.

The Indian economy is on track to grow by 7 per cent in FY2024 (ending 31 March 2025) and 7.2 per cent in FY2025 (next financial year), as projected in ADO April 2024, said the July edition of the Asian Development Outlook (ADO). The Indian economy logged a growth rate of 8.2 per cent for the financial year ended March 2024, as against 7 per cent in the previous fiscal year. Services continued to expand robustly in Q4 of FY24, and the forward-looking services PMI is well above its long-term average, it said, adding, industry is also expected to grow robustly, driven by manufacturing and strong demand for construction led by housing, it said.

"After muted growth in FY2023 (previous fiscal), a rebound in agriculture is expected given the above-normal monsoon projections. This is notwithstanding the slower advance of monsoon in June. A rebound in agriculture will be important to sustain growth momentum in rural areas," it said.

Investment demand continues to be strong, led by public investments and bank credit is fueling robust housing demand and improving private investment demand, it said. (PTI)

ENGINEERING WORKS AT LUMDING DIVISION

E-Tender Notice No. LMG/Engg/112 of 2024; Dated: 12-07-2024. E-tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following work: **SN. 1. Brief Description of Item:** BG TRR (S) of existing 52Kg rail by 52Kg (SH) (90 UTS) rail at Pamkhathi (L-1 & 4), Thakurkuchi (L-1 & 4), Panbari (L-1 & 4), Digaru (L-1), Tetelia (L-1), Kamrup Khetri (L-4), Barahu (L-4 & 5), Jagiroad (L-5), Aujari (L-4), Thekeraguri (L-1 & 4), Chaparmukh Junction (L-4), Kamrup (L-4), Lamsakhang YARD (L-1), Lumding YARD (L-1, 5, 6, SALOON SIDING & GOODS SIDING), Bar Langler S YARD (L-1 & 3), Habapur YARD (L-1), Dhalpukhuri YARD (L-1) & Jamunamukh YARD (L-4) (Total=24 901 km) in the section Guwahati-Lumding and Chaparmukh Jn. - Senchoa Jn. (SL) & Senchoa Jn. - Haibargaon (SL) -TRR (25.80 Km) under the jurisdiction of S: DEM/II/Lumding. **Tender Value:** ₹2,01,97,589/-; **Earnest Money:** ₹2,51,000/-; E-tenders will be closed at 15:00 hrs. on 06-08-2024 and opened at 15:00 hrs. on 07-08-2024. The complete information with tender documents of above e-tender will be available upto 15:00 hrs. of 06-08-2024 in website <http://www.irps.gov.in>.

DRM/Works, Lumding
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY
"Serving Customers with a smile"

Contd. from Page 1...

3 Hmar rebels killed in Cachar

them dead, he said. The SP also said that three police personnel got severely injured during the exchange of fire and were admitted at the SMCH. "On the other hand, the six-seven militants managed to flee, taking cover of the darkness and uneven terrain," Mahatta said.

The place was thoroughly searched and police recovered one more assault rifle along with live ammunition and a number of empty cases, he said. "The entire area has been cordoned off by security personnel and a search operation is being carried out to trace the fleeing militants," he added. (PTI)

SC to hear pleas related

by IIT-Madras which found there was neither any indication of "mass malpractice" nor a localised set of candidates benefiting from it and scoring abnormally high marks. The government's assertion assumes significance in view of the observations made by the top court on July 8 that it may order a re-test if there were large-scale malpractices in holding the exam.

The Centre's fresh affidavit has said experts from IIT-Madras have found that the marks distribution follows the bell-shaped curve that is witnessed in any large-scale examination, indicating no abnormality. A bell curve describes the shape of data conforming to a normal distribution. The affidavit said for 2024-25, the counselling process for undergraduate seats will be conducted in four rounds starting from the third week of July.

The NTA has also filed a separate additional affidavit on the similar lines and said it has carried out an analysis of distribution of marks at the national, state and city level. "This analysis indicates that the distribution of marks is quite normal and there seems to be no extraneous factor, which would influence the distribution of marks," the NTA said in its affidavit, which also gave details of the system in place for ensuring confidential printing of question papers, their transportation and distribution. While hearing the pleas on July 8, the top court had observed that the sanctity of the NEET-UG 2024 has been "breached".

Saying that a re-test may be ordered if the entire process was affected, the bench had sought details from the NTA and the CBI, including the timing and manner of the alleged paper leak, besides the number of wrongdoers to understand the extent of irregularities claimed by the petitioners. More than 23.33 lakh students had taken the test on May 5 at 4,750 centres in 571 cities, including in 14 cities overseas.

The Centre and the NTA, in their earlier affidavits filed in the apex court, had said that scrapping the exam would be "counterproductive" and "seriously jeopardise" lakhs of honest candidates in the absence of any proof of large-scale breach of confidentiality. The National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test-Undergraduate (NEET-UG) is conducted by the NTA for admissions to MBBS, BDS, AYUSH and other related courses in government and private institutions across the country. (PTI)

CPI(M) accuses BJP of

on the free and fair conduct of the elections," it added. The party demanded that adequate measures be taken to ensure that all candidates are able to file nominations and the polls are held in a free and fair manner. The three-tier panchayat polls are scheduled to be held in Tripura on August 8 and the counting of votes will be taken up on August 12. A six-member delegation of the Left parties met the state election commissioner on Saturday and placed a four-point charter of demands before him to ensure free, fair and peaceful panchayat polls.

The Left parties' have demanded an extension of the duration for filing nomination papers by five more days, opening counters in each district headquarters for receiving nominations, providing security escort to the candidates for filing nominations and taking suo-motu (on its own) action against those preventing the nominees from submitting their documents. (PTI)

India needs world class

"Our focus should be on developing mechanisms that ensure easy of doing business for the drugs industry within the regulatory requirements. For this, CDSCO needs to be a user-friendly organisation with state-of-the-art facilities matching global standards," he said. On the topic of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector in drugs manufacturing and the issues faced by the small scale industries to meet quality standards, Nadda said, "Let us understand the issues faced by MSME sector and support them to strengthen their capacity and quality of products on the one hand, and encourage them to meet the regulatory requirements on the other."

Nadda was briefed about the mandated activities of CDSCO, its achievements, future plans and various issues and challenges faced by CDSCO. He was also updated on the progress of the scheme for strengthening state drug regulatory system with a budget of ₹ 850 crore which was launched in 2016 during his earlier tenure. Nadda was briefed on the roles and responsibilities of the central and state drugs regulatory bodies, and some of the challenges faced in alignment between them. Noting that the states are integral part of our regulatory value chain, he underscored the importance of working in tandem with the states so as to enhance their skills and capacities, and also encourage them to align with quality standards of the central government. "This is especially important in view of upgradation of good manufacturing practices to global level embarked upon by CDSCO," he added. (PTI)

Tezpur Airport to be shut

the maintenance work, for which passenger aircraft services will be temporarily halted. Kumar said that during this time, the authority is considering providing helicopter services from Tezpur to Guwahati, but it is yet to be finalised. At present, a 90-seater SpiceJet flight fly directly from Tezpur to Kolkata daily. In addition, two airlines operate daily flights to Kolkata via Guwahati, Pasighat and Tezpur.

The airport is located on the north bank of the Brahmaputra river and is 12 km from Tezpur town, the capital of Sonitpur district. Established at Salonbari in 1942, the airport terminal can accommodate a total of 400 passengers at a time. (PTI)

Kejriwal challenges arrest

the mandate of the law and he was entitled to bail. "It is a rarest of rare case. He (Kejriwal) is already in custody in the ED case and CBI does nothing for the last one year and then suddenly arrests him," he argued, adding that those who are doing this want him to remain in custody by "hook or crook".

Singhvi said Kejriwal's VIP status has made his situation worse than a common man and added that the chief minister's blood sugar levels were fluctuating. "It is a sham arrest, an insurance arrest, a non-necessity arrest which cannot be sustained," he argued and cited the case of Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan.

"We all read recently in the papers that in case after case, Khan was released but the day he comes out of jail, he is arrested in another case. Now they (Pakistan authorities) want to have a mega case against him. I don't want to see similar things happening in our country," Singhvi said.

Advocate D P Singh, representing the CBI, argued that multiple petitions and applications were being filed in several courts and till date, there have been no observations regarding any violations by the CBI or that the agency has been overzealous. On the issue of not providing Kejriwal a notice before his arrest, Singh contended that the Delhi Prison Rules mandate seeking a court's permission to interrogate someone who is in the custody of the court. He said the CBI did not have to provide Kejriwal a prior notice.

Singh said Kejriwal was examined by the CBI on June 24 but it did not arrest him and if this was an insurance arrest, it could have exercised its right to arrest in terms of Section 41 of the CrPC itself.

"But I (CBI) don't do that. We come back and assess his statement. And then we decided that we need to arrest him," he said, adding that the agency has the right to decide the timing of calling the accused.

He pointed out that Kejriwal's role was not evident at first as the excise policy fell under the purview of the excise minister. However, when his involvement became relevant, he was called by the CBI, he said. (PTI)

Assam flood situation

38 centres are providing relief to 15,607 affected people. Cropland of 19,724.05 hectare remained inundated, while six animals were washed away in the last 24 hours and another 2,08,119 were affected.

The Brahmaputra river is flowing above the danger level in Nimatighat, Tezpur and Dhubri, Disang in Nanglamuraghat and Kushiyara in Karimganj, the bulletin said. Embankments, roads, bridges, houses and other infrastructure have been damaged in different districts, it added. The traffic restrictions through the Kaziranga section of the national highway have been eased with improvement in the situation, though the speed limit remained imposed. (PTI)

AAU hosts workshop on

of the tools was also screened. Bijoy Boruah, principal, Extension Training Centre, SIPRD, and Jahnabi Borthakur, Faculty member of SIPRD, also delivered short speeches supporting the importance of drudgery-reducing, women-friendly tools in improving the quality of life and productivity of women.

The event was coordinated by Porineta Phukan & Eliza Upadhyaya, project assistants, Department of FRMCS.

GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM

OFFICE OF THE ASST. DIRECTOR OF AGRICULTURE (HORTI) KARBI ANGLONG:: DIPHU

No. KA/ADA(Horti)/Works/2024-25/

Dtd.

TENDER NOTICE

Separate scaled tenders affixing non-refundable Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council money receipt of Rs. 10.00 (Rupees Ten) only are hereby invited from the local contractors for the following mentioned works for the ear 2024-25 which the tender will be received up to 2.00 PM on 29/07/2024. and will be opened on same date, place and hour in presence of the contractor or their authorized person. In case, the last date of receiving tenders happen to be on holidays, the tender will be received and open at the next working day at same place and time.

SL. No.	Name of work/Location of the work	Tender Amount (Rs. in lakhs)	Earnest Money		Time for Completion of the works
			1% for SC/ST (Hills)	2% for General	
1	3	5	6	7	8
1	Installation of Transformer, Langmili Progeny Orchard, 1 No(one no)	10,00,000/-	10,000/-	20,000/-	30 days
2	Deep Tub well, Langmili Progeny Orchard, 1 No (one no)	10,00,000/-	10,000/-	20,000/-	30 days

The following documents required to be submitted alongwith bid paper.

- Earnest money 2 % for general & 1% ST/SC respectively over the value of works and should be deposited in form of Bank Draft from any recognized Bank of India pledged the undersigned should be accompanied with the tender.
- Documents to be enclosed with tender :-
 - Up to date Income Tax Clearance/GST registration copy from the competent authority must be accompanied with the tender.
 - Up to date Professional Tax Clearance/Trading licence from the authority of KAAC, Diphu.
 - GST clearance/cast certificate and PWD registration No. KAAC/Irrigation registration No.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS :-

- Rate of tender should be quoted clearly and distinctly both in figures and words against each group of works in (late percentage i.e. as per APWD Schedule Rate for the year 2013-14.
- No Construction materials will be supplied by the department.
- The tender received without fulfilling the above terms and conditions will be summarily be rejected.
- The successful tendered will have to sign a deed of agreement under APWD Form -2 before commencement of works.
- The department does not bind themselves to accept the lowest tendered rate and reserves rights to reject any or all tenders without assigning any reason thereof.
- Only valid license holder should submit tender for the work in his name/firm.
- Allotment of work of the successful tenders is subject to received of financial sanction from the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council Authority.
- Name in block letter should be written below the signature of the contractor with full address.
- Payment of royalty/price on forest produces and certificate.

Sd/-
Asstt. Director of Agril. (Horti),
Karbi Anglong

Memo No. KA/ADA(Horti)/Works/2024-25/321(A)

Dtd. 17/07/2024

SHORT NOTICE INVITING QUOTATION

Sealed quotation affixing court fee of Rs. 8.25 (Rupees Eight and Twenty Five Paise) only / Karbi angling Autonomous Council cash receipt of Rs. 10 (Rupees Ten) only are invited for supply of Laboratory Consumables including reagents for DPHL, IDSP and SRL, DMCH in Karbi Anglong district from Suppliers/Vendor/ Firm. The quotation will be received in the office of the District Surveillance Unit, IDSP, Karbi Anglong, Diphu upto 4:00 PM of 25th July '2024 and if the office is closed on this day due to Govt. holiday or any other Bandh, the next working day of the office will be the date of receiving and opening of quotation.

*For details contact DSU, IDSP at O/O The Jt. Director of Health Services, Karbi Anglong or browse the link

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qmVSRFS1i1BuoAYfUpx90BXCl0A1ht1/view?usp=drivesdk>
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qguxP1090kHJYqT3fvXtg-Lx4AoZQtOz/view?usp=drivesdk>

Sd/-
District Surveillance Officer
DSU, IDSP, Karbi Anglong

Sd/-
Joint Director of Health Services
Diphu, Karbi Anglong

Followers of Islam mark the solemn occasion with reverence and procession traditions

Muharram celebrated with grand Tazia processions



HT Correspondent
MARGHERITA, July 17: The holy festival of Muharram was celebrated by followers of Islam across the world, including in Margherita on Wednesday.

A grand Tazia procession was taken out from Margherita Masjid Patty and moved through the entire town of Margherita.

Muharram holds special impor-

ance for followers of Islam. It is noteworthy that Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar. People of Islam celebrate the festival of Muharram on the 10th day of the holy month. On this day, Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Hazrat Mohammad, the founder of Islam, was brutally murdered in the Battle of Karbala.

Followers of Islam commemo-

rate this tragic event in world history by celebrating Muharram every year, remembering the martyrdom of Hussain in the Battle of Karbala. Margherita experiences a tumultuous atmosphere on the occasion of Holy Muharram.

Hafiz Ragib ul Hussain stated that every year, Muharram is celebrated in Margherita with a grand Tazia procession starting from

Margherita Masjid Patty, moving peacefully through the town. With the cooperation of the Margherita police, the Muharram festival has been successfully celebrated every year in Margherita.

Our Hojai correspondent adds: Hundreds of Muslims gathered to celebrate Muharram in Hojai with deep religious fervour. A Tazia Procession was organised by the Muharram Tazia Committee Gandhi Maidan, held with solemnity on Wednesday. The procession traversed through the main thoroughfares of the town.

During the procession, Muslims participated by playing with sticks and chanting 'ya Hussain'. Police officials were present to ensure the smooth passage of the procession.

Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar, commemorates the martyrdom of Prophet Mohammad's grandson Hussein Ibn Ali, who was killed in the Battle of Karbala in present-day Iraq in the 7th century.

NFR GM interacts with passengers on Vande Bharat Express

Chetan Kumar Shrivastava ensures passenger comfort & safety during onboard inspection

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 17: Chetan Kumar Shrivastava, general manager of NF Railway, conducted a thorough onboard inspection of the Guwahati - New Jalpaiguri Vande Bharat Express on Wednesday. While traveling onboard the Guwahati - New Jalpaiguri Vande Bharat Express, GM/NFR interacted with the passengers and took their valuable feedback regarding passenger convenience and other related services. He also noted their suggestions to further improve the available services.

The GM discussed with the passengers the problems normally faced by them during the train journey and also took feedback about the cleanliness inside the coaches and toilets, as well as the behavior of the service providers. Several passengers mentioned that there has been a visible change in the experience of traveling in trains over the years. Passenger amenities have also improved significantly, including cleanliness inside trains, toilets, and AC. Shrivastava further added that he would like every passenger to have a good experience during their travel.



The general manager especially enquired from the passengers about the quality and quantity of onboard catering services of the Vande Bharat Express. He thanked passengers for sharing their feedback and assured them of Indian Railway's commitment to provide passenger-friendly menus with better services.

The general manager also conducted a footplate inspection in the Vande Bharat Express during his

journey from Guwahati to New Bongaigaon to check the alertness of the crew during the running of the semi-high-speed train. During the inspection, he noted all the safety precautions that are being followed by them. He also advised them to remain alert during the journey. He inspected toilets, checked the cooling system in all coaches, and instructed the staff to ensure proper pest control measures inside the coaches.

Kamrup Express engine detaches mid-journey in Dibrugarh

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, July 17: Hundreds of train passengers narrowly escaped a major train accident after the engine of a moving train detached in Dibrugarh on Tuesday evening.

The incident occurred at Chaulkhowa, Dibrugarh, around 7:30 pm. The engine and coaches of the 15960 Kamrup Express detached while the train was moving. The engine continued forward, leaving the coaches behind.

The Kamrup Express had departed from Dibrugarh's Banipur railway station for Howrah on Wednesday evening. Railway officials have reached the spot to inquire about the incident. An inquiry has been initiated by the Tinsukia DRM into the incident.

Recently, nine persons were killed and at least 40 injured after the Sealdah-bound Kanchanjunga Express from Agartala was hit by a goods train from the rear in West Bengal's Darjeeling district, 11 km from New Jalpaiguri station.

Wild elephants vandalise house in Niz Makum village

Residents in Margherita distressed as frequent elephant intrusions continue

HT Correspondent

MARGHERITA, July 17: Two wild elephants vandalised a house in Niz Makum village under the Margherita West Forest Range Office of the Digboi forest division in Tinsukia district.

The straying of wild elephants into residential areas under the Margherita sub-division of Tinsukia district is common.

Regular incidents of house vandalism and trampling of people have created fear among the residents. However, the Margherita sub-divisional administration, the divisional forest officer of Digboi forest division, and the Tinsukia district administration have failed to control the man-elephant conflict.

On Tuesday at midnight, two Adivasi couples, Choka Munda and Moni Munda, were sleeping when two wild elephants entered their area, vandalised their house completely, and ate all their grains.

Moni Munda stated that it has become common for wild elephants to enter their village, vandalise houses, and eat whatever they find.

Rohini Baruah, a local resident of Niz Makum village, mentioned that the Margherita west forest range officer and staff rarely come to the village to prevent wild elephants from entering residential areas and take necessary steps, resulting in wild elephants frequently entering nearby residential areas and vandalising houses, often causing fatalities due to trampling.

As of the time of this report, the Margherita west range forest officer and other staff have not visited the incident site where Choka Munda and Moni Munda's house was completely vandalised.



BSF and DRI joint operation nets smuggler with gold

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 17: In a significant achievement in the fight against trans-border crimes and smuggling along the Indo-Bangladesh International Border, Border Security Force (BSF) troops from the Guwahati Frontier, in collaboration with the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) team from Siliguri, apprehended an Indian smuggler in Coochbehar district, West Bengal. Acting on reliable information, the 90th Battalion BSF and the DRI team launched a special joint operation in Coochbehar, resulting in the capture of the smuggler with 10 gold biscuits weighing 1.194 kilograms and valued at ₹ 87,00,000.

Truck accident at Desang bridge

HT Correspondent

DEMOW, July 17: A road accident occurred on the Desang bridge at NH-37 on Tuesday night, resulting in two people being seriously injured. According to sources, a truck loaded with iron rods was traveling from Tinsukia to Jorhat when it hit the railing of the Desang bridge and fell into the Desang river.

The driver, Mukibur Rahman, and the handyman, Dildar Ali, were seriously injured but managed to escape. According to the information received, both the driver and handyman fell into the water but swam to the riverbank. They were taken to Joysagar Medical but were later referred to Jorhat for better treatment.

The Sivasagar Police reached the area and took stock of the situation. An SDRF team also arrived and began searching the Desang river. After the news spread, people gathered on the Desang bridge to witness the incident. As of the time of this report, the truck has not been found.

Indus Towers partners with ASDMA to aid flood victims



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 17: To provide rescue, relief, and support to the people of Assam amidst the ongoing floods affecting the state, Indus Towers, one of the world's largest telecom infrastructure companies, has partnered with the Assam Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) for the distribution of flood-relief materials.

Indus Towers' team is continuously working to ensure connectiv-

ity, with ground teams reaching difficult locations using boats. Fifty field employees and 378 technicians are working around the clock to restore digital access.

Fifty employees of Indus Towers Northeast are in the field to deliver relief packages across 18 campsites - Dhubri, Silchar, Karimganj, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Morigaon, Bokakhat, Hojai, Boko, and Nalbari. The relief packages include water, milk, ready-to-eat food items, instant

food, and torches with batteries.

Tejinder Kalra, chief operating officer of Indus Towers, said, "Our hearts are with those affected by the current situation in Assam, and together with ASDMA, we will extend our undying support to the people of the state. This is the time when everyone wants to stay connected with their families, and Indus Towers' endeavour is to help telecom operators recover network connectivity faster by restoring our towers."

Rajender Gurung, circle CEO of Indus Towers, said, "As Assam faces extensive damage from the ongoing floods, it's crucial to act quickly and provide essential resources. Indus Towers understands the gravity of the situation and is dedicated to supporting local communities during this tough time. We're committed to standing with Assam and providing assistance in any way possible."

Dhekiajuli Mahkuma Nagarik Mancha pushes for new railway

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, July 17: Dhekiajuli Mahkuma Nagarik Mancha has once again raised its voice in demand for a new railway line in the southern part of NH-15. A

team from the organisation met central DoNER minister Jyotiraditya Scindia at his government residence on Monday and highlighted the need for a new railway line connecting Tezpur to Guwahati via Bihaguri, Thelamara, Bagaripeta, Borsola, Dalgaoon, Kharupetia, Mangaldai, Sipajhar, and Agyathuri. This route would enhance connectivity for nearly twenty lakh people in the area. The team urged the minister to take necessary steps to fulfill this long standing demand and submitted a memorandum on behalf of the organisation.

The team also visited the government residence of central railway minister Ashwini Vaishnav and the chairman of the Railway Board, submitting a memo-

randum requesting the new railway line. The memorandum, signed by the office bearers of the organisation, highlights that the southern part of NH-15 in Sonitpur and Darrang districts lacks railway connectivity to the state capital of Guwahati. The existing highway fails to provide adequate transportation services and efficient communication for most residents in the area. Speaking to the media, Ripen Rabha and Narayan Phayel, secretary and organising secretary of the organisation, expressed hope that the longstanding rural communication issue would be resolved

with a positive response from the central government. Additionally, the team met with MP and deputy leader of the Opposition Gaurav Gogoi, MP Birendra Prasad Baishya, and central minister Sarbananda Sonowal, requesting their intervention to fulfill the demands of Dhekiajuli Mahkuma Nagarik Mancha.



Tezpur Mahila Samiti conducts training in water hyacinth products

Three-day programme teaches marketable skills, supported by Eco Roots Foundation and SIDBI

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, July 17: Tezpur District Mahila Samiti, in collaboration with Eco Roots Foundation, New Delhi, organised a three-day training programme recently aimed at teaching women to produce handmade marketable products branded as 'Jal Sparsh'. This initiative received financial support from the Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI).

The training programme aimed to empower 200 women from 10 villages in Sonitpur district, particularly targeting tribal women, by teaching them to create marketable products from water-extracted water hyacinth. This project, implemented in 5 states, has already conducted its first module training from April 27 to May 2 and concluded its second phase recently in Sonitpur district.

'Jal Sparsh' is a livelihood project focusing on transforming waste into wealth. It involves training rural women, including 20% indigenous women, to extract water hyacinth from local ponds. This not only helps clear invasive species from water bodies but also provides economic opportunities for marginalized women. Participants are trained to process the raw material—cutting, cleaning, and drying the hyacinth stems—and subsequently crafting



handmade products under the 'Jal Sparsh' brand. Eco Roots Foundation successfully piloted this project in 7 villages of Noida, supported by SIDBI, and is now scaling it to reach 2000 women across 100 villages in 5 states: Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Assam. Assam and Bihar will contribute 400 indigenous beneficiaries to the project.

The training programme is overseen by

Rangish Thakur, founder and chairman of Support Foundation, and master trainer Monica Kapoor, a trustee of Eco Roots Foundation, under the guidance of Rakesh Khatri, founder of Eco Roots Foundation.

Tezpur Mahila Samiti, the local partners in Assam, reported active participation from women beneficiaries, particularly from the Bodo tribe, who are committed to ensuring the project's success.

No. GBM/IEC/2023-24/41

SHORT NOTICE INVITING TENDERS

Dt.17/07/2024

Intending registered organization and financially sound firms /NGO/ Entrepreneurs having experience for executing similar works in BTR may submit their bids to the Mission Director of Green Bodoland Mission (GBM), Office of the WPT, BTC, Kokrajhar on or before 3.30 PM on 30th July 2024 for the following works under Green Bodoland Mission.

Details of works can be obtained from the office of the Mission Director, Office of the WPT, BTC, Kokrajhar during office hours. The notification can be seen in the Notice Board of the Mission Director, Office of the WPT, BTC, Kokrajhar during the office hours on or before 3.00 PM on 30th July 2024.

Sl. No.	Name of Scheme / work	Quantity	EMD	Estimated cost (in Lakh)
1	A. Developing IEC material- • Leaflet on GBM • Digital content (Short Animated Videos) • Display boards with biodegradable materials. B. Logo of the Mission	3000 Nos. 5 Nos. 10 Nos. 1 No.	2 % for General & 1% for reserved Category	8.00

Terms and conditions.

- Bids must be accompanied by Processing fees (Non-Refundable) in the form of Demand draft of Rs.500/- (Rupees five hundred) only in the name of Mission Director, Green Bodoland Mission, BTC, Kokrajhar.
- Bids must be accompanied by Bid Security /EMD (Refundable) of 2 % of the estimated amount in the form of Fixed Deposit / Demand Draft. Tenders with valid SC/ST/OBC categories may submit 1% EMD.
- The selected Vendor shall sign a contract with Mission.
- The Selected vendor shall complete the works within the limit of schematic provisions in each scheme.
- The authority reserves all the right to reject or accept the tender at any time without assigning any reason thereof.
- The intending parties will furnish the following documents along with the application in support / proof of their qualification within the date and time mentioned above.
 - Name of the Bidder.
 - Registered address.
 - Registration particulars & having its registered office in Bodoland Territorial Region.
 - Must submit a copy of PAN, GST, Trade Licence, IT Return of last 3 years.
 - Brief write up about the bidder, its objectives and activities, etc.
 - Must submit a copy of similar work experience in BTR such as related work experience / any person/ organization assisted in such similar works.
 - Familiar with local language with ready manpower and thorough knowledge of local community.

Sd/- Mission Director
Green Bodoland Mission.
BTC, Kokrajhar

IPR(BTC)/C/2024-25/147

QUOTE OF THE DAY

We will fail when we fail to try
— Rosa Parks

Escalation of terror attacks in Jammu & Kashmir

The recent terror attacks in Doda, Reasi, and Kathua have cast a harsh spotlight on the Union Home Ministry, helmed by Amit Shah. On July 16, four Indian Army soldiers, including an officer, were killed in Doda. The officer's mother's poignant words, "Ab woh wapas nahi ayega," resonate deeply, highlighting the profound human cost of these attacks. Amit Shah, known for orchestrating the abrogation of Article 370, seems conspicuously absent amid these crises. This absence fuels criticism that the Centre's claims of "normalisation" in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) are hollow. The situation on the ground suggests otherwise, with soldiers becoming frequent targets of terrorist ambushes. On June 16, Amit Shah chaired a high-level meeting to address the surge in terror attacks. Despite this, a new terror outfit, the Kashmir Tigers, has continued its deadly campaign, ambushing Indian soldiers with alarming regularity. The meeting, intended to bolster security, appears to have induced a false sense of complacency within the security apparatus, as terror attacks have intensified.

The recent Doda attack has intensified scrutiny on Shah. While Shah might be focusing on broader national security strategies, it is imperative to reassess the Union Home Ministry's response to these persistent threats. The failure to curb these attacks raises questions about the efficacy of the government's J&K policy. Despite Shah's assurances of "area domination" and "zero-terror" in the Jammu division, the continued violence suggests these strategies are faltering. The Agnipath scheme, already under intense scrutiny, now faces further criticism. The opposition INDI-Alliance is vocal in its censure, highlighting the growing discontent. Shah, while focusing on national security, must address the immediate crisis in J&K to restore confidence. Following the Doda attack, the Indian Army launched operations in the Desa forests with Rashtriya Rifles and the J&K Police's Special Operations Group. However, these measures seem reactive rather than proactive. The high-level meeting in June outlined steps to halt terror activities, yet the recent incidents in Jammu, Doda, and Reasi reflect a significant gap between policy and implementation.

The Kathua attack, lasting two hours and involving extensive resources, underscores the severity of the threat. Such incidents demand a robust and immediate response, yet the Union Home Ministry's actions seem inadequate. The clinical nature of official statements following these attacks fails to address the public's growing frustration and concern. Accountability at all levels, including the Union Home Ministry, is crucial. While the government's commitment to security is not in question, its execution certainly is. However, it is essential to reflect on whether this move has truly secured J&K from terror. Discussions of withdrawing the Army from J&K are incongruent with the rising terror attacks. Despite claims of reduced terrorism, the increasing infiltration along the Line of Control and internal attacks suggest otherwise. The bold declarations of "Ghar Mei Ghuske Maareng" now seem distant memories. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Amit Shah must revisit their strategies. Modi's directive to deploy the "full spectrum of counter-terror capabilities" must translate into tangible results. Shah's assertion that the fight against terrorism is in its decisive phase requires more than rhetoric. As the nation approaches another anniversary of the abrogation of Article 370, it is imperative to ask: Has it delivered the promised security? Can J&K host elections amidst such turmoil? These questions demand honest answers and decisive action from our leaders.

Crony capitalism allegations take a holiday



In a stunning display of solidarity against 'crony capitalism,' several esteemed leaders from the I.N.D.I. alliance graced the illustrious wedding of Mukesh Ambani's son, Anant. It was a heart-warming sight to see them set aside their grave concerns about the nexus between big business and politics for a day of celebration.

One cannot help but recall Shakespeare's immortal words, "Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none." Indeed, it seems our political leaders have taken this advice to heart, demonstrating their unwavering commitment to attending events hosted by those they accuse of corrupt practices.

The presence of West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee, SP Chief Akhilesh Yadav, and Shiv Sena's Uddhav Thackeray added a touch of irony to the affair. These champions of anti-cronyism gallantly brushed aside their allegations against Ambani and his peers, opting instead to enjoy the lavish festivities. How admirable!

But wait, the plot thickens with the arrival of the indefatigable Lalu Prasad Yadav, a man whose legal woes and health challenges have inspired sympathy from courts worldwide. Despite his convictions and ongoing legal tussles, Lalu managed to jet-set to Mumbai for the event, accompanied by a retinue that included his dear family members.

Lalu's saga reads like a Dickensian novel, where the protagonist defies all odds to attend glittering soirées while battling

accusations of corruption and misuse of bail privileges. One wonders if Orwell's Big Brother is watching over this theatrics with bemusement.

Let us not forget Lalu's courtroom drama, where his health issues have been both a shield and a sword in his legal battles. Much like a Greek tragedy, his claims of ill health are contradicted by sightings of him playing badminton and galvanizing political rallies with vigor that would make even the hardiest of Olympians blush.

In a stroke of irony worthy of Oscar Wilde, Lalu Prasad Yadav, who decries the current political climate as worse than the infamous Emergency era, continues to avail himself of judicial leniency. His theatrical performances on the legal stage are a testament to the enduring power of drama in Indian politics.

Indeed, politicians globally excel in the art of deflection and resilience in the face of adversity. Yet, Lalu's exploits might just warrant a chapter in Machiavelli's 'The Prince,' where cunning and circumstance intertwine in a dance as old as politics itself.

In conclusion, while the world reels from crises real and imagined, our leaders remind us that nothing brings unity quite like a good wedding. As the curtains draw on this affair, one can only wonder what the next act will hold in this theater of the absurd we call politics. *(The author can be reached at shashankadas007@gmail.com)*

EPIC AFFAIRS
SHASHANKA DAS

Saturday's shooting has given a further boost to Trump campaign

The narrow escape of the Republican candidate Donald Trump from the gunshot at the campaign meeting in Pennsylvania on Saturday has imparted a more confrontationalist dimension to the Presidential elections scheduled on November 5. The shooting incident just on the eve of the four day Republican convention beginning on July 15 has given further ammunition to aggressive Trump to galvanise his supporters against the Democratic nominee President Joe Biden.

Already after his disastrous performance in the debate on June 27, President Biden is under big pressure from the Democratic Party ranks including senior leaders for stepping down on his own as the American people are questioning his cognitive capability to head the nation for another four years, but Biden is sticking to his position that he is fit- the debate performance has nothing to do with his capability. His performance as the president in the current term is there for the electors to judge.

Even before the shooting incident, Donald Trump was ahead of Joe Biden in almost all opinion polls, particularly in all the swing states. In this atmosphere, Biden camp is facing a further hit due to the nationalistic upsurge among the white Americans following the shooting incident. It is apparent that the support base for Trump will further grow at the cost of Biden.

During the June 27 debate, Biden lost his train of thoughts and gave an incoherent answer to a question, often struggled to form proper responses and had to correct himself repeatedly. He spoke with a hoarse voice and seldom reacted when Trump was spewing lies after lies, often standing with a blank stare. His age was showing itself.

By the end of 90 minute debate, the Democratic Party was reportedly in panic mode, with operatives, lawmakers and donors privately discussing replacing Biden on the ticket. Left

leaning medias who have close relationships with Biden, from MSNBC's Joe Scarborough to the New York Times' Thomas Friedman publicly suggested he should bow out of the race in the wake of June 27 debate.

But the practicality of replacing Biden with another candidate mostly depends on Biden himself. Much of America locked into the classic "will he or won't he", Cliffhanger. Will Biden step aside himself and not run for re-election, as massive majority of voters (67%) have said they want him to do? Or will he persist in pursuing one of the most ill fated and ill advised presidential campaign ever carried out?

"The radical left Democratic Party is divided in chaos and having a full scale breakdown" - said Donald Trump during a rally in Miami on July 9. Republicans are naturally gleeful after the debate.

But instead of Biden, they ramp up attacks on Kamala Harris, the Vice President as talk of replacing Biden on 2024 ticket intensified.

Trump and his allies have even rolling out new attack lines against Harris, insulting her abilities, pointing her as Biden's chief enabler and accuses her of being part of a cover up of his health. Trump gave her a new nickname - Laffin' Kamala Harris.

There is a growing concern and dissent inside the Democratic Party over Biden's candidacy. So far one Senator, Peter Welch of Vermont dropped his support for Biden with possibility of some others to follow. On the same day Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer reportedly told donors, he is open to another nominee besides Biden. - while publicly insisting - I am with Joe.

About a dozen House Democrats have called Biden to abandon the race for re-election. Rep. Scott Peters (California),

Schneider (Illinois), Hillary Scholten (Michigan) and some other prominent House Representatives call Biden to leave the race. Stanton (Arizona) is the latest House Rep. saying "It's time to pass the torch to new leaders."

House minority leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) told his colleagues that he plans to relay the concerns to Biden himself though Jeffries has publicly backed Biden so far. But seeming doubt from former House speaker Nancy Pelosi prompted a fresh wave of outcry and concern. On her appearance on MNSBC she said - 'It is up to the President to decide if he is going to run'.

The public concerns and hits keep coming. Supporters and donors of the party are worried. Most recently Hollywood actor George Clooney, a personal friend of Barack Obama, who just hosted fundraiser for Biden in Los Angeles, wrote an op-ed in New York Times saying Democrats need to pick a different candidate, All America United Auto Workers' Union president Shawn Fain and Association of Flight Assistants' President Sara Nelson, two of the biggest union allies of President Biden, privately expressed serious concern about Biden's candidacy. Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer, a potential replacement for Biden, said Biden should take a cognitive test.

Despite Biden's effort to quell dissent and keep the party unified behind his candidacy, Congressional Democrats are saying both privately and publicly that the party is badly fractured on the issue and continuing to raise concerns that he will lose in November and take down the House and the Senate with him. A handful of Democrats, in the meantime, are still defending Biden. Senator John Fetterman (Da-PA), Chris Murphy (D-CONN) and Alexandria Ocasia

Cortez (D-Ny) are very much active and vocal in Biden's support. Senator Bernie Sanders' written remarks acknowledged that Biden 81 "may not be the ideal candidate", but added that "he will be the candidate and should be the candidate". - "It's time for the Democrats to stop the bickering and nit-picking."

Very recently Bernie Sanders wrote an op-ed in New York Times that President Biden is "the strongest candidate to defeat Donald Trump."

Facing a political crisis as Democrats question the viability of his campaign and mental fitness, Biden was put to test on his solo unscripted news conference on July 11. His press conference at the end of the NATO summit went better than his debate. He did some gaffes. He referred Zelensky of Ukraine at the summit as president Putin. He mixed up names, called his vice-president as vice-president Trump. Democrats are worried.

Some more Congressmen like Jim Hines (D-Conn) and Erik Soren (D-Illinois) gave statement calling Biden to drop out - "The President and his team will see this (news conference) as a huge success, while everyone else will see this as just another example that he is just too past his prime time to win." One pollster said- "I don't think he can withstand what is coming".

But President Biden answered tough questions in a better way on foreign policy - wars in Ukraine and Gaza Strip. On his mental fitness, he defended his decision to stay in the race, saying "we have got to finish this job because there's so much at stake". During an interview with ABC News Biden said that 'only the Lord Almighty would drive him out from the race.' Biden ties up with Trump despite the debate, while 67 % of the voters call for the president to drop out, - a recent poll by ABC news said.

Biden won the Democratic primaries earlier this year but would not officially become the

party's candidate for 2024 election until endorsed at 2024 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, which would take place on August 19 to 22. Any replacement is not that easy.

There is formal mechanism to replace him as a presumptive nominee and such a move would be the first time a US political party has attempted in modern times. During the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson rescued himself from contesting for the second term willingly and the Democratic Party had to put another candidate after much scramble and lost. But the situation then was different.

In effect Biden would have to agree to step aside and allow the delegates he won in the primaries - who vote to nominate a candidate at the Chicago convention - to choose someone else in his place. About 700 party insiders, who may not be united, would have the choice of picking a new candidate. They would then have only three months to unite behind and campaign for the new candidate for November 5 election, which is a very tough task.

According to the political observers, in case President Biden is not granted a second term at the August convention by the Democratic Party delegates, the five probable candidates are present vice president Kamala Harris, California Governor Newscom, Illinois Governor J B Pritzker, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer and Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro.

But the only candidate who could beat Trump hands down is Michelle Obama, wife of former president Barack Obama. Her polling rate with almost all the agencies is 57% against Trump's 37%. But she said repeatedly that she will never run for presidency and doesn't want the job. Now all focus will be on Chicago convention of Democratic Party which will decide the fate of President Biden's candidacy for the second term. *(IPA Service)*

INDIA bloc's sweep in bypolls sends ominous signal to NDA before assembly polls

By: Kalyani Shankar

The recent results of by-elections for 13 seats in seven states are essential for understanding what people think of the major political parties. More than a month after the 2024 elections, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi won a third term, the INDIA bloc's significant victory in securing ten of the 13 seats has shifted the country's politics. This positive result for the INDIA bloc could weaken the ruling coalition's power in the coming battles.

The BJP won 240 seats in 2024 Lok Sabha polls but fell short of the 272-majority mark. As a result, the party had to seek the support of NDA allies, which could influence its policy decisions and lead to compromises to maintain the coalition. This situation raises concerns about the government's stability. A boost to the Opposition could create unpredictability within the ruling coalition.

The dependence on allies could sway the BJP's policy decisions. The BJP may have to compromise on specific issues to maintain the coalition. There is also a shadow of uncertainty over the government's stability. A substantial boost to the Opposition can shift the balance of power and create a sense of unease and unpredictability in the ruling coalition.

The Election Commission conducts the by-polls when a legislative seat becomes vacant. There could be many reasons for a vacant seat. It could be death, resignation, disqualification, or expulsion of a sitting member.

Elections are held to fill empty seats when a Member of Parliament resigns or dies. Only voters from the area can vote, and there is no party vote. On Wednesday,



by-elections were held for 13 assembly seats in Punjab (1), Himachal Pradesh (3), Uttarakhand (2), West Bengal (4), Madhya Pradesh (1), Bihar (1), and Tamil Nadu (1). The Congress, TMC, AAP, and DMK are some of the parties that put forward candidates in the by-elections to test their strength.

The INDIA bloc's win significantly boosted the Opposition. They have been a crucial test for the INDIA bloc as it faced the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in the first electoral battle after the Lok Sabha Elections 2024. The regional chiefs in the Opposition performed exceptionally well. Trinamool Congress, a key player in the INDIA bloc, secured all four seats in Bengal, a significant victory.

At the same time, the surging Congress won two seats each in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, further strengthening its position in these states. The DMK won one seat, and AAP captured Jalandhar West. These diverse outcomes hint at potential shifts in power dynamics, adding a layer of

uncertainty to the current political scenario. Also, the BJP securing only two seats and an independent candidate winning in Bihar add a layer of complexity.

Typically, the party in power wins the bye-election seat. The TMC, DMK, Congress, and Aam Aadmi Party controlled their states. For the TMC, the results were a shot in the arm just a month after it had bagged 29 parliamentary seats, up from 22 in 2019. The TMC got three assembly seats in districts by defeating the BJP in the seats which the saffron won in 2021 assembly polls.

The TMC increased its vote share in all the seats thereby indicating that the party is surging further putting BJP far behind and marginalizing the CPI(M) which ruled Bengal for 34 years.

In Uttarakhand and Bihar, things were different. The candidates from the ruling parties - BJP and JD(U) - lost. Congress won two out of the three by-elections in Himachal. After the results, the party has 40 members again in the 68-member house. This will bring stability to our gov-

ernment.

Bye-elections are a crucial test for political parties and their popularity. Parties gauge public sentiment and assess their support base. They often use by-elections to test campaign strategies, influencing future elections. If the ruling party wins seats in the by-election, it could increase its overall number of seats and have more influence on the government's stability and decision-making.

The BJP still needs to improve its performance despite investigating the reasons for its low number of seats in the Lok Sabha elections. This raises questions and potential strains within the party. There are speculations about a possible strain between the RSS and the BJP, which could negatively affect the RSS's support for the party, adding to tension and uncertainty in the ruling coalition.

The strong performance of the INDIA bloc shows that power dynamics may be shifting. Despite their differences, this success is because the opposition parties continued to work together. Some analysts think that both factors led to their success. The Opposition's strong showing could weaken the ruling coalition's power and strengthen the Opposition's position.

The future is difficult to predict at this stage. Winning and losing are part of the game in a democracy. The impact of these events will be more precise in the upcoming assembly polls in Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand later this year. The INDIA bloc's strong showing in the by-elections could strengthen the Opposition's position in these forthcoming assembly polls. They will help determine whether the Opposition gains strength or weakens. *(IPA Service)*

POST BAG

Need for career awareness meetings in Assam

Sir/Ma'am

Since 2005, I have been answering various career-related questions from students every Saturday evening from 6 PM to 9 PM via phone (9435188630) and through career awareness meetings. From this experience, I have realized that there is a significant need for career awareness programs in Assam. There is a lack of information and guidance among the youth of Assam regarding various diverse employment opportunities.

Career awareness programs can help them become aware of different fields and provide proper guidance and training. In today's competitive environment, it is crucial to have proper advice and direction for choosing the right career.

Career awareness programs can fulfill this need. Many students and parents have misconceptions about the necessary education. Career awareness programs

can dispel these misconceptions and provide guidance for the right education. By choosing the appropriate field among various options, the younger generation can become self-reliant. Career awareness programs offer such guidance.

When students understand their career prospects through such programs, their confidence and self-esteem increase, motivating them to advance toward success. There is a lack of career awareness, especially in rural areas of Assam. These awareness programs can inform students in rural areas about career alternatives, thereby contributing to local development. For these reasons, career awareness programs are of immense importance in Assam.

Organizing career awareness programs online can reduce costs. Online programs allow experts to participate without geographical barriers, enabling participation from both local and international experts. Participants can join online meetings from their own

locations, saving travel costs and time. Various educational materials like videos, audio, presentations, and e-books can be easily presented on online platforms.

Online meetings facilitate easier participation for the general public, allowing more students and parents to join. This increases career awareness among a larger audience.

Additionally, online programs can be live-streamed and recorded for later access, allowing students to gain information at any time and place. All materials from online meetings can be digitally stored, ensuring complete access to information. Utilizing these benefits, career awareness programs in Assam can be conducted online to reduce costs and organize more effective sessions.

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Why Indian cities flood during monsoon rains

By: Amita Bhide

Mumbai is unique among coastal cities. It's not only surrounded by the Arabian Sea it also has four rivers - Mithi, Dahisar, Oshiwara and Poisar — passing through it. There are also four creeks - Malad, Mahim, Mahul and Thane. All these waterways make the city of 21 million especially prone to floods during monsoon season.

The tidal effects of the rivers and creeks have a direct impact on the city's drainage system, particularly when high tides coincide with heavy rainfall.

Take the Mithi River. It has been a crucial drainage channel and land reclamation around its flood plains was an important strategy in the development of the city's suburbs. The original reclamation plans included expansion of the water channels, providing holding ponds and drainage systems that have since become pointless.

The present development is such that the average width of the river is only 10 metres at most places along its length. There are no holding ponds while the land reclamation has gone ahead with added intensity due to pressure of commercial development in areas like the Bandra Kurla Complex. Consequently, when the monsoon rains come, Mithi's floodplains are inundated especially when heavy rains and high tide coincide.

Mumbai is not unique in transforming its landscape into a densely built up one. Many cities tend to expand, changing their original land and waterscapes so they become prone to flooding. Just look at the destruction of the traditional 'eris' or traditional tank system for water storage, in Chennai, the lakes in Bengaluru and the rock-lake formations in Hyderabad.

More recent developments also have a tendency to identify the poor and their settlements along water/rivers/drains as the cause for the floods and hence relocate them to enable the development of commercial infrastructure.

The construction of the Akshardham Temple complex and the Commonwealth Games village in the Yamuna River floodplains in Delhi after the eviction of several settlements is one such example. Such developments point to the piecemeal nature of adaptive efforts that make the poor more vulnerable. Once again, India is witnessing the arrival of the southwest monsoon, filling cities with an anticipation and anxiety about adequate rainfall on the one hand and the prospects of flooding, on the other.

This has been the case with cities across India's various climatic zones. Monsoon floods are accompanied by immense miseries, the activation of disaster management services and deployment of the security forces to manage casualties and damage.

Whenever there is monsoon flooding of cities, the narrative centres around the opposition accusing the party in power in the city and the state government of incompetence

while the latter defends itself citing excessive, unnatural rainfall or climate change.

There is both a generalised and highly localised analysis of the causes — unplanned development and incompleteness of annual desilting or drain-cleaning works.

This is followed by the announcement of grand mitigation projects in flood prone cities such as the construction of large underground tanks at various flooding hotspots (in Mumbai), integrated flood management project (in Chennai), a strategic drainage development programme (in Hyderabad) and a celebration of the resilience of the city and its citizens.

Such discourse tends to deviate from a real analysis of the relationship between the city's eco-environment and urban development plans. It identifies solutions that are far too compartmentalised and often do not address the city's vulnerabilities.

Floods can be predicted. The claim they occur due to exceptionally high rainfall, climate change and factors beyond human control is to underplay the responsibility of the state.

The veracity of the claim becomes questionable when seen along with statistics that in most cases show a pattern of gradual rather than sudden change in rainfall. Hence, the possibility of prediction, preparation and strategic preventive decisions.

Linked to this is the assertion that no disaster is a natural one. Hydraulic environments are actively and historically produced. Floods and their occurrence, the geographies that are flooded, the unevenness of their intensity across localities are all aspects linked to how the city's moisture and water systems are planned, engineered and re-designed at different points in time.

In several Indian cities, land reclamation, filling in of wetlands, encroachment over lakes and ponds and the building up of river channels are enabled by city planning and, in the Indian context, by unauthorised developments.

The cumulative impact of such developments over the years is that while the built-up areas in cities are rising considerably, natural areas are decreasing significantly. This adds considerable pressure to already burdened and incomplete drainage systems.

The urban planning maps of cities are systematically manipulated to record rivers as 'nalas' (natural drains) to deny the existence of pre-existing ponds or lakes and show them as land. The incorporation of citizen knowledge and practices has added to the number of flooding hotspots in Mumbai from 68 in 2021 to more than 120 in 2022. Such knowledge can also add to the understanding of historical land and waterscapes of local eco-histories, leading to better solutions.

Unless Indian city governments learn to engage in more nuanced, localised, comprehensively informed planning and development decisions, cities will continue to experience floods on a recurring basis. (Courtesy: The Wire)



Beyond the myths and fears, the world wide web of spiders — and why they matter

By: Laasya Shekhar

In northern Karnataka, there is a myth that the only way to avoid death from a fatal bite of a tarantula, a hairy-legged, nocturnal spider, is by stretching the spider's eight legs and placing a stone on it. While it is true that a tarantula's bite can be extremely painful, the chances of getting bitten by these spiders, that usually live in burrows, are rare.

Folklore from southern Andhra Pradesh says that if a house harbours spider webs the size of an elephant's head, it foretells the death of one of its members. In reality, however, spiders are known to offer vital housekeeping services, such as feeding on mosquitoes and cockroaches, preventing the spread of diseases.

In Gujarat, it is believed that a spider web in a home would lead to financial misfortune and the household will not prosper, says arachnologist Dhruv Prajapati, managing trustee of Web Of Nature Research foundation. "Spiders are perceived as evil creatures that bring bad luck. It is ironic because the state has Girnar hill, a famous pilgrim centre for Lord Dattatreya who named spider to be one of his gurus," Prajapati says.

Spiders are an order of arachnids that have been around on Earth for over 300 million years. These misunderstood creatures, may evoke mixed reactions, often fear and disgust, among people. And these fears manifest into myths and misinformed beliefs that could lead to misplaced efforts to eradicate spiders.

Some parts of Hindu mythology though, also deify spiders. In the same region of Andhra, in the Srikalahasti temple, the spider is worshipped for its committed devotion to the Hindu god Shiva. In another instance, it is believed that the fifth prakaram (corridor) of Trichy's Jambukeswara temple was built by Shiva himself, who took the form of a spider.

Prominent Chola king,

Kochengot Chola, who built the temple, claimed he was a spider in his previous life. Similarly, in another myth from coastal Karnataka, removing cobwebs during the festival period of Navratri is believed to attract a curse to the household.

"Even though it is not true, it at least helps in the conservation of spiders as the month of October [when Navaratri is observed] is when they breed," says Abhijit APC, founder of Saaliga, a Karnataka-based group that works on documenting new spider species and busting spider myths. "In the Proto-Dravidian languages, 'sali,' which means spider, is used to describe weaving communities. Even today, many weaving communities, such as the Padmasalis, retain this name," says arachnologist Samuel John, co-founder of Spiders and The Sea, a social enterprise.

So, why have these arachnids, once revered, now become objects of fear? "That's because people generally lived in close association with nature back then. There is a disconnect now, leading to unfamiliarity. Over time, this unfamiliarity can lead to fear or curiosity," John explained. Misunderstood

Research says that globally, arachnophobia (fear of arachnids especially spiders) is likely the most widespread fear related to animals with an estimated prevalence between 3.5%-11.4% of the population. These fears are further amplified by the spreading of unproven theories.

"Once every few years, a popular fake report of a spider species lurking under toilet seats of aeroplanes surfaces on social media. Few media houses published the news without any solid information and verification," Vena Kapoor, an independent consultant who currently heads the Nature Classrooms Programme at Nature Conservation Foundation.

Such myths contribute to the killing of spiders, which in turn have impacts on the ecosystem.

Spiders are insectivores that control populations of their prey insects. "For example, crab spiders catch insects that prey on flowers. Just like a tiger has control over herbivores, spiders can have control over the arthropod population," says Madhumita Rajkumar, Senior Research Fellow, Advanced Institute of Wildlife Conservation.

Out of thousands of spider species in India, so far, only the bite of spiders belonging to six genera — Chilobrachys, Loxosceles, Latrodectus, Macrothele, Poecilotheria and Cheiracanthium (comprising less than 2% of their population in India) — has been recorded to require treatment beyond first aid, says says Ayan Mondal, an arachnologist and assistant professor at Government General Degree College in West Bengal. He is currently writing a book on medically important spiders in India.

To conserve these arachnids, experts suggest a two-pronged approach: more research to understand spider behaviour and involving citizens to create awareness and reduce fear.

Understudied Earlier this year, researchers from the Centre for Animal Taxonomy and Ecology, affiliated to the Department of Zoology, Christ College, Kerala, discovered four new species of spiders from the Western Ghats of India.

With this, the number of spider species discovered in India till date is about 1,988, says Gautam Kadam, an arachnologist from the Centre for Animal Taxonomy and Ecology, who was one of the members that discovered the four new spider species in the Western Ghats. Some estimates also list more than 2,000 species of spiders in India.

This discovery, as well as a few similar others in the past years, are important for arachnology because spiders are one of the least studied taxa in India. While traditional taxonomists documented many species in the distant past, lack of funds make it challenging to document diverse areas and



species now, says Madhumita Rajkumar of the Advanced Institute of Wildlife Conservation.

Even within the current research on spiders, there is more focus on a particular spider group — jumping spiders.

"Researchers in India are currently focussed on describing jumping spiders (of the Salticidae family). A huge opportunity awaits those studying other families. The Zoological Survey of India along with other reputed institutes are better placed to make a difference by funding and collaborating with scientists to take the research on spiders forward," says Prasanna Parab, a nature photographer who conducts spider walks in Goa and North Karnataka.

Inadequate research on spiders is an international problem. According to a study published in Frontiers, "the known diversity of spiders, around 51,000 species, represents but a fraction of their actual diversity that may be as great as 150-200,000 species".

Across India, less than 25 researchers are working on studying spiders. "That's because there is lack of funds from institutions," Madhumita Rajkumar says. At least six researchers Mongabay India spoke to says that they did not receive funds from Indian institutions for research on spiders, leaving them no choice but to fund themselves.

"I had no luck with Indian funding agencies. However, the US-based International Society of Arachnology funded my research on spiders," says

Tornadoes follow a superstar storm chaser — obsession with extreme weather has a deep underlying psychology

By: Simon Dickinson

At first glance, the 2024 remake movie Twisters contains many of the ingredients of the 1996 original, which starred Helen Hunt and Bill Paxton: a catastrophic and rare weather event, the urgency to use new technology to understand it, and central characters battling personality clashes.

However, Twisters (on general release from July 17) does more than confirm Hollywood's interest in money-making sequels. It suggests movie financiers are convinced that people are fascinated by extreme weather and the devastation it can cause. And they're right. Twisters stars Daisy Edgar-Jones and Glen Powell.

To make the film contemporary, Twisters adds the dimension of a social media superstar storm chaser (Tyler Owens, played by Glen Powell). Storm chasers like Owens have long been cult figures in the public imagination, and have even been the focus of a popular US TV series called Storm Chasers.

The idea of a celebrity whose popularity comes from uploading weather content accurately reflects the interest (and financial value) in posting weather footage online. Now, during any significant event, it's easy to find not just professional footage from news channels, storm chasers or weather-focused social media channels, but also thousands of videos from people experiencing that catastrophe.

Extreme weather videos are hugely popular. Videos of dramatic events on YouTube and TikTok frequently attract tens of millions of views. During both Hurricane Irma (2017) and Hurricane Ian (2022), some YouTube channels streaming beach webcam footage had over 100,000 live viewers.

Content recorded in the lead up to events also appear to capture the public imagination: popular social media accounts have begun to document seemingly mundane activities like packing tornado preparation bags.

What compels us to watch these kinds of videos? What are the psychological drivers of online rubbernecking? And, in a world where many will experience more extreme events, are there any benefits in watching videos of disastrous events?

A deeper social psychology

Research shows that our fascination with extreme weather videos — particularly live ones — is complex. While inevitably, some people want to watch things crash and burn, evidence is beginning to suggest that our captivation is driven by a deeper underlying social psychology: people often watch these videos because they connect us to people, places and ideas.

Sometimes, this is about being able to visualise concepts we've heard about but never seen with our own eyes. In a recent study, I examined why people were watching live footage of hurricanes and storms on YouTube.

I found people wanting to see things they'd repeatedly heard reference to, such as the eye of the storm or the exact moment a hurricane made landfall. In one discussion in the comments, people wanted the wind to stop because they were only there to see if they could witness an "eye".

For these people, videos of extreme moments helped connect what they've been told with what they could see (even if only through a screen).

Extreme weather footage can also generate spaces that become important information sources and networks. Livestreams of all kinds often generate communities that are more valued than the content itself.

My study of the 2022 UK storms as well as Hurricanes Ian and Irma found the comment spaces around these videos mattered, because they connected people with different proximities to the event.

During Irma, people used comment sections to compare government advice they'd received about whether to evacuate. Some watchers also became information conduits by connecting people to news

reports and government websites.

Perhaps counterintuitively, people sometimes watch live videos hoping nothing will happen. I've come across numerous people watching livestreams of developing hurricanes for more than 12 hours. For these people — often on the other side of the world from the event — watching, hoping and commenting are the only things they could do to support the situation.

The giving up of time is considered an act of solidarity — one person said they had taken a day off work to watch because their childhood town was affected. Adapting a phrase used by one of these watchers, I termed these people "committed viewers".

But for some people, it's not about weather at all. Other researchers have written about how the watching of livestreams can be driven by desire to be part of a culturally or historically significant moment.

Tens of thousands of people watched Aberdeen airport's live webcams after the death of Queen Elizabeth II, for example, to catch a glimpse of planes landing as other members of the royal family flew in.

Currently, little is known about the effects of watching extreme weather footage on human behaviour. My ongoing research is trying to understand how hazard-focused social media influencers shape their followers' future preparations, such as having an emergency plan or kit. What is already clear is that representations of disasters in films create misunderstandings about hazards and their aftermaths.

In Twisters, storm chaser Owens embodies the idea that people place a value (entertainment, support or otherwise) in watching spectacular situations — and that social media has created new ways to document experiences and engage increasing numbers of people with them. The challenge for scientists is harnessing this fascination in a way that stimulates knowledge and behavioural change beyond the small window of the event itself. (Courtesy: Down To Earth)

is currently using his own money for his research on spiders.

Illegal trade of spiders is also rampant says Prajapati. Some spiders are not even protected under the Wildlife Protection Act, and with limited resources for spider research, discovery of species is slow, and many are disappearing before we can even discover and protect them, he says.

Prajapati adds that research on invertebrates is in its nascent stage in India. Prajapati says, "Authorities working in funding institutions are not even aware of the basic facts about the importance of spiders. While the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change is funding studies for invertebrates, it is confined to professors and scientists from government institutions."

Mongabay India wrote to a few funding agencies including WWF-India, West Bengal Department of Science and Technology and Biotechnology, and Zoological Survey of India on the limitations of funding spider studies. At the time of publication, no response was received.

Citizen awareness

Besides facilitating further scientific research, another effective way to debunk spider misinformation is by involving citizens in awareness programmes and fostering a healthier relationship with spiders.

In Karnataka, for instance, Saaliga, a club for spider enthusiasts, has been working with school students and citizens to raise awareness about spiders. Abhijith APC, founder of the club, along with four other members, trained 150 people (forming a sub-team called the Karnataka Spider Club) from various walks of life in documenting spiders.

Some of them have gone on to write in various science journals on the discovery of new spider species. Through regular interactions with school students and by conducting spider watching sessions, they also work to change the narrative that spiders are a

bad omen. "The goal is to popularise spider watching, much like bird watching," Abhijith explains.

In Bengaluru, a women's group has also been fostering a growing interest in observing spiders on their monthly nature walks since September 2023. The group of about 20-30 women, observes nature in the urban setting, including spiders and insects, on their walks. "Discussions revolve around natural history and the fascinating behaviours of these creatures," says Mittal Gala, founder of All Women Nature Walk.

Social enterprise Spiders and The Sea has also been bridging the awareness gap through urban nature walks and other outdoor programs for all age groups, delivering nature-based learning programs to about 500 young people in 20 educational institutions over the past four years.

Citizen science initiatives can also enable better documentation of spiders across the country, says Parab. In recent years, several genera of crab spiders (of the family Thomisidae), previously unreported in India but of significant interest to researchers across Southeast Asia, have been documented in the country (usually on biodiversity portals) by citizen scientists, Parab says.

Institutes like Azim Premji University in Bengaluru have an elective course called "Bugs in the System" for non-biology majors, who explore arachnids and insects in the campus. Besides evoking curiosity, the course also tries to change the perspective of students on urbanisation disgust, where negative attitudes towards such creatures manifest as the emotion disgust.

Spiders are fascinating creatures that don't deserve your shoe. They are microhabitat specialists that help humans by feeding on insect pests, like mosquitoes. "They are sensitive to sudden changes in their habitat, which makes them the ideal indicators of ecosystem function," Sanap says. (Courtesy: Scroll.in)

Britain's new Labour Party government says it will calm the country's febrile politics and ease its cost-of-living crisis

UK's new government announces legislation for 'national renewal' as Parliament opens with royal pomp

LONDON, July 17: Britain's new Labour Party government promised to calm the country's febrile politics and ease its cost-of-living crisis as it set out its plans for "national renewal" at the grand State Opening of Parliament on Wednesday.

Stabilising the UK's public finances and spurring economic growth were at the center of Prime Minister Keir Starmer's legislative agenda, announced in a speech delivered by King Charles III.

"My government will seek a new partnership with both business and working people and help the country move on from the recent cost of living challenges by prioritising wealth creation for all communities," the king said in a speech to hundreds of lawmakers and scarlet-robed members of the House of Lords.

Starmer campaigned on a promise to bring bold change to Britain at modest cost to taxpayers. He aims to be both pro-worker and pro-business, in favour of vast new construction projects and protective of the environment. The risk is he may end up pleasing no one.

In a written introduction to the speech, Starmer urged patience, saying change would require "determined, patient work and serious solutions" rather than easy answers and "the snake oil charm of populism."



The King's Speech is the centrepiece of the State Opening, an occasion where royal pomp meets hard-nosed politics, as the king donned a diamond-studded crown, sat on a gilded throne and announced the laws his government intends to pass in the coming year.

Labour won a landslide election victory on July 4 as voters turned on the Conservatives after years of high inflation, ethics scandals and a revolving door of prime ministers.

Starmer has promised to patch up the country's aging infrastructure and frayed public services, but says he won't raise personal taxes and insists change must be bound by "unbreakable fiscal rules."

Wednesday's speech included 40 bills – the Conservatives' last speech had just 21 – ranging from housebuilding to nationalising Britain's railways and decarbonising the nation's power supply with

a publicly-owned green energy firm, Great British Energy.

The government said it would "get Britain building," setting up a National Wealth Fund and rewriting planning rules that stop new homes and infrastructure being built.

Economic measures included tighter rules governing corporations and a law to ensure all government budgets get advance independent scrutiny.

That aims to avoid a repetition of the chaos sparked in 2022 by then-Prime Minister Liz Truss, whose package of uncensored tax cuts rocked the British economy and ended her brief term in office.

The government promised stronger protections for workers, with a ban on some "zero-hours" contracts and a higher minimum wage for many employees.

Also announced were protections for renters against shoddy housing, sudden eviction and landlords who won't let them have

a pet.

The government promised more power for local governments and better bus and railway services – keys to the "levelling up" of Britain's London-centric economy that former Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson promised but largely failed to deliver.

Though Starmer eschewed large-scale nationalization of industries, the government plans to take the delay-plagued train operators into public ownership.

The speech said the government "recognises the urgency of the global climate challenge" – a change in tone from the Conservative government's emphasis on oil and gas exploration.

As well as increasing renewable energy, it pledged tougher penalties for water companies that dump sewage into rivers, lakes and seas.

The speech included new measures to strengthen border security, creating a beefed-up Border Security Command with counter-terrorism powers to tackle people-smuggling gangs.

It follows Starmer's decision to scrap the Conservatives' contentious and unrealised plan to send people arriving in the UK across the English Channel on a one-way trip to Rwanda.

The speech also tackled an issue that has foxed previous governments: reforming the House of

Lords. The unelected upper chamber of Parliament is packed with almost 800 members – largely lifetime political appointees, with a smattering of judges, bishops and almost 100 hereditary aristocrats.

The government said it would remove the hereditary nobles, though there was no mention of Starmer's past proposal of setting a Lords retirement age of 80.

There was no mention of lowering the voting age from 18 to 16, though that was one of Labour's election promises.

While much of Starmer's agenda marks a break with the defeated Conservative government of former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Starmer revived Sunak's plan to stop future generations from smoking by gradually raising the minimum age for buying tobacco.

The speech confirmed that the government wants to "reset the relationship with European partners" roiled by Britain's exit from the European Union in 2020.

It said there would be no change to Britain's strong support for Ukraine and promised to "play a leading role in providing Ukraine with a clear path to NATO membership."

Wednesday's address was the second such speech delivered by Charles since the death of his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, in September 2022. (AP)

Nepal PM Oli to seek vote of confidence on Sunday

KATHMANDU, July 17: Nepal's newly appointed Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli will take a vote of confidence in Parliament on July 21, a senior official announced on Wednesday, nearly a week after he was sworn in.

The 72-year-old veteran Communist leader was sworn in on Monday as the Himalayan nation's prime minister for the fourth time. He was administered the oath of office and secrecy along with 21 other members of the Cabinet.

Prime Minister Oli decided to take a vote of confidence on Sunday, said Dasharath Dhamala, Information Officer at the House of Representatives (HoR). According to Nepal's Constitution, Oli needs to secure a vote of confidence from Parliament within 30 days of appointment, which he is likely to secure easily, as the minimum number to form a government in the 275-strong HoR is just 138.

The Chairman of the CPN-UML, Nepal's largest communist party was appointed as prime minister on Sunday by President Ram Chandra Paudel to lead the coalition government with the Nepali Congress (NC), the largest party in Parliament, apart from other smaller parties.

Nepali Congress and Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) have a combined strength of 167, and two other ruling parties, Janata Samajwadi Party and Lokatantrik Samajwadi Party, have seven and four seats, respectively. With this, the ruling alliance has a strength of 178 in the 275-member HoR.

Apart from the ruling alliance, Oli

is also likely to get votes from the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), Janata Samajwadi Party Nepal (JSP), Nagarik Unmukti Party (NUP) and Janamat Party.

The RPP has 14 seats, JSP Nepal has five, NUP has four, and Janamat has six seats.

Therefore, the alliance is likely to secure more than 200 votes in the floor test, according to sources close to CPN-UML.

Oli succeeds Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda,' who lost the vote of confidence in the HoR last week, leading to the formation of the new government. The CPN-UML Chairman now leads the new coalition government that faces the daunting challenge of providing political stability in the Himalayan nation.

Nepal has faced frequent political turmoil as the country has seen 14 governments in the past 16 years after the introduction of the Republican system.

Within hours of Oli's swearing-in, three advocates – Deepak Adhikari, Khagendra Prasad Chhapagain and Shailendra Kumar Gupta – filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court of Nepal challenging his appointment arguing that it was unconstitutional and sought its annulment.

The advocates argued that the president should call for forming a new government under Article 76 (3) if a government formed as per Article 76 (2) fails the floor test in the House of Representatives.

The apex court has set July 21 as the date for a preliminary hearing in the case – the same day Oli will take the floor test in the Parliament. (PTI)

China suspends arms control talks with US; blames Washington for supplying arms to Taiwan



BEIJING, July 17: China on Wednesday said it has suspended the crucial arms control and non-proliferation talks with the US, accusing Washington of continuing arms sales to Taiwan.

Announcing this, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Lin Jian said the US continued sales of weapons to self-ruled Taiwan, which China claims as a rebel province that must be reunified with the mainland, even by force.

He said that despite Beijing's opposition, the US actions had "severely damaged the political atmosphere necessary for continued arms control consultations between the two sides".

"China has decided to suspend talks with the US on holding a new round of arms control and non-proliferation consultations," Lin told a media briefing here.

"The responsibility for this situation lies

entirely with the US," he said, squarely blaming Washington for the disruption of the talks.

China was willing to maintain communication with the US on the issue but only on the condition that "the US must respect China's core interests and create the necessary conditions for dialogue and exchange between the two sides", he said.

China and the US resumed their talks on arms control and nuclear non-proliferation less than a year ago following the end of COVID restrictions.

The two countries held their first meeting in four years last November in Washington where both agreed on the importance of maintaining such communication under the conditions of respect and trust, according to the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

In addition to Taiwan tensions over trade, the South China Sea, and technology also reportedly made China call off the crucial talks.

The US in recent years kept up its high-tech arms sales to Taiwan ignoring Beijing's repeated objections as successive American administrations backed Taiwan's autonomous status though Washington is committed to the One China policy.

The US passed a USD 95 billion foreign aid package in April which included arms supplies to Taiwan. Later Washington approved USD 300 million tactical systems for Taiwan. (PTI)

European Commission didn't provide enough information about COVID-19 vaccine deals, EU court says

BRUSSELS, July 17: The European Commission did not allow the public enough access to information about COVID-19 vaccine purchase agreements it secured with pharmaceutical companies during the pandemic, the EU general court said on Wednesday.

The decision came a day ahead of a vote at the European Parliament at which European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is seeking reelection.

A group of EU lawmakers had taken legal action after the Commission refused to grant them complete access to COVID-19 vaccine contracts secured between the EU's executive arm and manufacturers.

The pandemic shed light on the issue of transparency surrounding the negotiations for vaccines between the EU and big pharmaceutical groups.

According to the court, the procurement of vaccines on behalf of all 27 member states allowed the bloc to quickly gather 2.7 billion euros (\$2.95 billion) to place an order for more than a billion doses of vaccines.

In 2021, some members of the European Parliament asked for the full details of the agreements, but the Commission only agreed to provide partial access to certain contracts and documents, which were placed online in redacted versions.

It also refused to say how much it paid for the billions of doses it secured, arguing that contracts were protected for confidentiality reasons.

In a statement, the court said that "the Commission did not take sufficient account of all the relevant circumstances in order to weigh up correctly the interests at issue." (AP)

Dhaka University closed indefinitely; students asked to vacate dorms amid violence over job quota

DHAKA, July 17: Authorities at the premier Dhaka University on Wednesday announced an indefinite closure of the institution after ongoing protests demanding reforms in the quota system in government jobs turned violent and left at least six people, including three students, dead across the country. The students have been asked to vacate their dormitories by 6 pm on Wednesday.

This decision was taken at an emergency syndicate meeting at the office of Vice Chancellor ASM Maksud Kamal, Pro-VC (Academic) Prof Sitesh C Bachar was quoted as saying by the Dhaka Tribune. "Considering the security of the students, we have decided to close the university indefinitely and evacuate the halls," Bachar told The Daily Star.

However, students of the university are protesting the decision, and they have thronged the VC's residence, the report added. At least six people, including three students, were killed and more than 100 others injured on Tuesday after protesters demanded quota reforms in public service and clashed with police in major cities across Bangladesh, forcing the closure of schools and colleges.

The High Court on June 5 declared illegal a 2018 government circular that abolished quotas in government jobs, and on July 10, the Supreme Court issued a status quo on the High Court judgement. The University Grants Commission (UGC) directed all universities to suspend academic activities until

further notice and instructed students to leave residential halls.

In response, an urgent meeting of Dhaka University's highest policy making body, the syndicate, was convened on Wednesday. The UGC's directive followed a series of clashes that erupted during the quota reform protests. The clashes, however, erupted on Monday as activists of ruling Awami League's student front confronted the protesters who insist the existing quota system was largely debarring the enrolment of meritorious students in government services. Demonstrators accused the ruling party's student wing, Bangladesh Chhatra League of attacking their "peaceful protests" with backing from police.

The protesters blockaded highways and railway routes in four major cities: central Dhaka, northwestern Rajshahi, southwestern Khulna, and the major port city Chittagong. Police fired tear gas canisters and rubber bullets as university students battled with counter-protesters armed with sticks and bricks.

Rival student groups marched in several key locations around the capital Dhaka, some throwing bricks at each other, with traffic in the city of 20 million almost ground to a halt. Students of the premier Dhaka University took the lead in the latest one-week protests for recruitment in first- and second-class government jobs, demanding seats to be filled based on talent reforming the existing quota system. (PTI)



Indian national among 6 people killed in Oman mosque shooting

DUBAI/MUSCAT, July 17: An Indian national was among six people killed in a rare shooting attack by Islamic State militant group near a Shia Muslim mosque in Oman's capital.

The shooting on Monday night near the Imam Ali Mosque also claimed the lives of one policeman and four Pakistan nationals, while injuring 28 others.

"Following the shooting incident reported in Muscat city on July 15,



Foreign Ministry of Sultanate of Oman has informed that one Indian

national has lost his life & another is injured," Embassy of India in Muscat posted on X on Tuesday.

"Embassy offers its sincere condolences & stands ready to offer all assistance to the families," it said.

The three attackers were also killed by security forces during the incident in the al-Wadi al-Kabir area on Monday night, according to a statement.

Pakistan said four Pakistanis were among those killed in a "ter-

rorist attack" on the Imam Ali Mosque. India also said one of its citizens was killed.

The Islamic State (ISIS) militant group claimed responsibility for the attack.

The ISIS has repeatedly targeted Shia ceremonies, processions and worshippers in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. But it has never before claimed an attack in Oman, where the Shia are a minority. (PTI)

At least 40 die after heavy rains pound eastern Afghanistan, destroying houses and cutting power

ISLAMABAD, July 17: Heavy rains in eastern Afghanistan have killed at least 40 people and injured nearly 350 others, Taliban officials said on Tuesday.

Among the dead in Monday's storm were five members of the same family when the roof of their house collapsed in Surkh Rod district, according to provincial spokesperson Sediquallah Quraishi. Four other family members were injured.

Sharafat Zaman Amar, a spokesperson for the Public Health Ministry, said the 347 injured people had been brought for treatment to the regional hospital in Nangarhar from Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar province, and nearby districts.

About 400 houses and 60 electricity poles were destroyed across Nangarhar, Quraishi said. Power was cut in many areas and there were limited communications in Jalalabad city, he said. The damage was still being assessed.

Abdul Wali, 43, said much of the damage oc-

curred within an hour. "The winds were so strong that they blew everything into the air. That was followed by heavy rain," he said. His 4-year-old daughter received minor injuries, he said.

Aid organizations rushed supplies and mobile teams. International Rescue Committee Afghanistan Director Salma ben Aissa said her group was conducting assessments and providing emergency health services.

"The continuation of climate-induced disasters in Afghanistan ought to be cause for grave concern: decades of conflict and economic crisis has meant that the country has faced setback after setback as it tries to find its feet.

The sad reality is that without a massive increase in support from donors and the international community, many more will lose their lives," she said in a statement.

In May, exceptionally heavy rains killed more than 300 people and destroyed thousands of houses, mostly in the northern province of Baghlan, according to the World Food Program. (AP)



Islamic State attacks on track to double in Iraq and Syria compared to last year, US military says

BAGHDAD, July 17: The US Central Command said on Wednesday that the Islamic State group is trying "to reconstitute" as the number of attacks in Syria and Iraq is on track to double those of the previous year. IS has claimed 153 attacks in both countries in the first six months of 2024, CENTCOM said in a statement.

According to a US defence official, who spoke on condition of anonymity as he wasn't allowed to speak publicly on the matter, the group was behind 121 attacks in Syria and Iraq in 2023. "The increase in attacks indicates ISIS is attempting to reconstitute following several years of decreased capability," CENTCOM said.

The announcement comes just after the 10-year mark since the militant group declared its caliphate in large parts of Iraq and Syria. At its peak, the group ruled an area half the size of the United Kingdom where it attempted to enforce its extreme interpretation of Islam, which included attacks on religious minority groups and harsh punishment of Muslims deemed to



be apostates. Militants also killed thousands of members of the Yazidi religious minority and kidnapped thousands of women and children, many of whom were subjected to sexual abuse and human trafficking. A coalition of more than 80 countries, led by the United States, was formed to fight IS, which lost its hold

on the territory it controlled in Iraq and 2017 and in Syria in 2019, although sleeper cells remain in both countries and abroad.

Iraqi officials say that they can keep the IS threat under control with their own forces and have entered into talks with the US aimed at winding down the mission of the US-led military coalition in Iraq.

The talks come at a time of increased domestic tensions over the U.S. military presence. From October to February, an umbrella group of Iran-backed militias calling itself the Islamic Resistance in Iraq launched regular drone attacks on bases housing U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria, which they said was in retaliation for Washing-

ton's support of Israel in the ongoing war in Gaza and were aimed at forcing U.S. forces to withdraw from Iraq.

Those attacks largely halted after three U.S. soldiers were killed in a strike on a base in Jordan, near the Syrian border in late January, prompting U.S. retaliatory strikes in Iraq.

On Tuesday, two Iraqi militia officials said they had launched a new drone attack targeting the Ain al-Asad air base in Iraq.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly.

It was unclear whether the attack had hit its target. US officials did not immediately respond to requests for comment. (AP)

Tripura: Illegally-built community club demolished

AGARTALA, July 17: The building of a community club at Ushabazar in West Tripura district was demolished on Wednesday as it was built on government land, officials said. The secretary of the club, Bharat Ratna Sangha, Durga Prasanna Deb alias Vikki was allegedly shot dead on April 30 over a feud for government contracts, and during the course of the investigation, it was found that some club members were involved in it, they said.

It was also found that the building of the club was built on government land, they said.

"Accordingly, the administration issued a notice to the club asking why the building will not be demolished as it was constructed on government land. As we did not receive a satisfactory reply from the club within the stipulated time, which was July 15, the illegal structure was bulldozed," District Magistrate Vishal Kumar said.

He said the government has adopted a zero-tolerance policy towards land mafia, smuggling and fighting over government contracts across the state.

Kumar said the government was planning to build a public health centre at the spot, located a few km away from the Agartala airport.

The prime suspect in the murder, Raju Barman, was the former secretary of the club. He was arrested recently from Guwahati. (PTI)

ZPM urges Lokayukta to handover three pending corruption cases to CBI

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 17: Ruling Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) on Tuesday urged the state Lokayukta to hand over three pending corruption cases to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) for probe.

Three corruption cases- irregularities in the construction of Ropeway and Skywalk projects in northern Aizawl (2021), misappropriation of NABARD loan for renovation of schools in Mizoram (2022) and mismanagement in the renovation works of Lengpui airport (2022)- are now pending with the state corruption ombudsman and state Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB), the party said in a statement.

Leaders of ZPM's legal department met Lokayukta chairman Lalmasawa and urged him to hand over the three corruption cases to the CBI for probe at the earliest.

The party said that irregularities in the construction of ropeway and skywalk projects, which were registered in 2021 and misappropriation



of the NABARD loan for the renovation of schools in Mizoram registered in 2022 are pending with the ACB, while mismanagement in the renovation works of Lengpui airport registered in 2022 is pending with the state Lokayukta.

It said that the case of the ropeway project between Chaltlang and Durtlang and the skywalk project in Sakawrhmutualtlang near Aizawl was referred to the ACB by the Lokayukta in May last year and the misappropriation of the NABARD loan case was also referred to the ACB in February this year.

According to sub-section 5 of section 19 of the Mizoram Lokayukta Act, 2014, the investigation of any corruption case should be completed within 6 months from the date of the probing order issued by the anti-corruption ombudsman.

The investigation period can be extended up to three months if it is not completed within six months.

ZPM alleged that no proper investigation has been initiated on the three corruption cases till now.

"We fear that the three corruption cases, which involve misappropriation of public money amounting to crores of rupees, may become neglected if proper investigations are not taken up by Central agencies. We want the three pending cases to be handed over to the CBI," the party said in the statement.

The party hoped that the state government would be willing to issue consent to the Central investigating agency to probe the three corruption cases.

Officials of the tourism department said that ₹ 485 lakh was sanctioned for the construction of a skywalk at Sakawrhmutualtlang while ₹ 2,482.58 lakh was sanctioned for the construction of a cable-car/ropeway between Durtlang and Chaltlang in Aizawl.

From the money sanctioned for the more expensive of these two projects—the ropeway—almost 54 per cent (or ₹ 1,317.8 lakh) had already been disbursed to the contractor, they said.

Normalcy returning to violence-hit Tripura locality

Govt releasing relief to affected families



AGARTALA, July 17: With normalcy returning to violence-hit Gandatwisa in Tripura's Dhalai district following the death of a tribal youth in a group clash, the administration has started releasing interim relief to the affected families, an official said on Wednesday.

The state government has already sanctioned ₹ 1.54 crore for 165 families whose houses were burnt in arson attacks and are now staying in a temporary shelter, Sub-Divisional Magistrate of Gandatwisa, Chandrayoj Reang, told PTI.

Absence of daily flight operations hampers ease of access for visitors

Khandu urges Centre to increase flight connectivity from Donyi Polo Airport



ditional night in New Delhi or Kolkata.

The layover while travelling from Itanagar to Ahmedabad is 5 hours 25 minutes and the layover while travelling from Itanagar to Bengaluru is 6 hours, he said.

The chief minister also lamented the discontinuation of flight services between Itanagar and Guwahati operated by FlyBig under the UDAN scheme since November 2023.

He appealed to the Union minister to increase flight services from Itanagar to New Delhi and Kolkata and reinstate flight services between Itanagar and Guwahati under the RCS-UDAN scheme.

Meanwhile, in another letter to Rahul Bhatia, Group Managing Director of IndiGo, Khandu sought an increase in the number of flights to Delhi, preferably a morning departure flight from Itanagar.

He also requested direct flight connectivity from Itanagar to other major metros such as Bengaluru, Chennai, Mumbai and Hyderabad.

Expressing gratitude to IndiGo for operating the first flight from the Donyi Polo Airport and for connecting Itanagar to Kolkata and New Delhi through regular flights, Khandu said that the initiative has been of immense comfort and convenience to the people of Arunachal Pradesh.

He said that the state's civil aviation department has already been instructed to provide all necessary support to IndiGo for enhancing and extending flight services.

IndiGo has announced it will operate flight services between Itanagar and Kolkata seven days a week from July 31. Currently, there is no flight service on the route on Wednesdays. (PTI)

KSU to intensify checking of migrant workers' documents



SHILLONG, July 17: The Khasi Students' Union (KSU) has decided to intensify checking of documents of migrant workers despite police action against its members.

"We can see the government is trying to harass our members by calling them everyday to the police stations but we want to send a clear message to the government that we will also continue to intensify checking of documents of migrant workers to ensure that inner line permit (ILP) and Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act (MRSSA), 2016 are immediately implemented in the state," KSU vice president Biangbor Paliar told reporters.

Members of the KSU including Malki Circle president Iashan Mukhim and assistant general secretary Mavian Jyruwa were summoned to the Sadar police station following a suo motu FIR filed against them for allegedly being involved in assaulting labourers recently.

Iashan Mukhim informed that the FIR was based on unfounded allegations levelled against them. "The action taken is seen as an attempt to discourage and threaten us. We will not be threatened but this will only encourage us to continue our demand to the Centre for implementation of ILP and the state government for implementation of the MRSSA to check unabated influx into the state," he said. (NNN)

Manipur Guv briefed on prevailing Manipur situation

IMPHAL, July 17: Top security officials briefed the Manipur Governor on Wednesday on the prevailing security situation in Manipur.

Lt Gen Pradeep Chandran Nair, Director General of Assam Rifles, along with Maj. Gen. Ravroop Singh, IGAR (South) called on Governor of Manipur Anusuiya Uikey on Wednesday at Raj Bhavan in Imphal and briefed about the prevailing security situation in the state, a Raj Bhavan source said.

The officers informed the Governor about the deployments of Assam Rifles personnel in the state in the wake of the "ethnic conflict which has been continuing since May last year," it also said.

The top Assam Rifles officials also informed the Governor about the preparedness of the force to face any eventualities at any point in time in the state. This is the farewell visit of Gen. Nair as the Director General of Assam Rifles to Manipur, the Raj Bhavan added.

The Governor appreciated the efforts made by the Assam Rifles to restore peace and normalcy in the state and asked them to continue their efforts too.

Meanwhile, Govind Prasad Uniyal, Commandant, 109 Bn, CRPF called on Governor of Manipur Anusuiya Uikey today at Raj Bhavan in Imphal today.

It is the first meeting of Govind Prasad Uniyal with the Governor after assuming office as the Commandant of the battalion recently. The 109 Bn CRPF is looking after the security of the Governor and the Raj Bhavan in Imphal, the source also said. (NNN)

'Muharram marks struggle against oppression, injustice'

ITANAGAR, July 17: Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu on Wednesday said Muharram marks the struggle against oppression and injustice.

He said it is also a day of fasting and gratitude and a time for spiritual renewal, remembrance, and reaffirmation of faith. "A symbol of struggle against oppression and injustice, the holy day inspires deep reflection and mourning," Khandu posted in X.

"On the solemn occasion of #Muharram, I bow in reverence to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, in the Battle of Karbala," the chief minister said in another social media post. (PTI)

'Arunachal to constitute committee for drafting new industrial policy'

ITANAGAR, July 17: Arunachal Pradesh will soon constitute a committee to draft a new industrial policy aimed at attracting investments to the state, Industries Minister Nyato Dukam said.

The minister made the announcement during a review meeting with senior officers of the Industries, IPR and Printing, Trade and Commerce, Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Labour and Employment, Textile and Handicrafts, and Sericulture departments on Tuesday.

Dukam said inputs will be taken from stakeholders to ensure the policy fully realises the state's industrial potential while maintaining investor-friendly measures. He also called for robust coordination among departments to explore and capitalise on opportunities that will enhance the dynamism and success of these departments.

During the meeting, officials from each department made presentations, detailing various challenges, opportunities, and strategies moving forward. (PTI)

Nagaland BJP appeals for early solution to Naga political issue

KOHIMA, July 17: The BJP's Nagaland unit appealed to the Centre and the Naga groups to expedite the process of finalising the Naga political solution for lasting peace and all-round development of the state.

A resolution in this regard was adopted on Tuesday at the party's extended state executive meeting held in Dimapur in the presence of Union shipping minister Sarbananda Sonowal.

Supporting an early, inclusive and honourable solution to the decades-old Naga political issue, the state BJP appealed to the Centre and the negotiating parties "to expedite the process of finalisation so that there can be lasting peace in Nagaland which will positively facilitate the process of all-round development and economic upliftment of the state in the near future".

The Centre inked the Framework Agreement with NSCN-IM in 2015 and also signed the Agreed



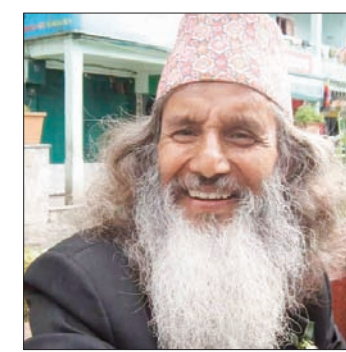
Position with the Working Committee of Naga National Political Groups in 2017.

However, with NSCN-IM remaining adamant on its demand for a separate flag and constitution for the Nagas, the final solution could not be arrived at.

The BJP state executive also resolved to support the demand for appointment of deputy chairpersons in urban local bodies in the state.

To strengthen the party at the grassroots level, it resolved to complete the formation of booth-level committees in the state before the next executive meeting in Tuensang district in November. (PTI)

Body of former Sikkim minister found in West Bengal canal



GANGTOK, July 17: The body of former Sikkim minister RC Poudyal was found in a canal near Siliyuri in West Bengal nine days after he went missing, police said on Wednesday.

The body of Poudyal, 80, was found floating in the Teesta Canal at Fulbari on Tuesday, they said.

"Prima facie, it is suspected that the body might have been brought down by the Teesta river from upstream. The identification was made through the watch and the clothes he was wearing," a police officer said.

A Special Investigation Team (SIT) was constituted to search for the veteran politician after he went missing on July 7 from his hometown of Chota Singtam in Pakyong district, police said.

"The investigation into the death will continue," the officer said.

Poudyal was the deputy speaker in the first Sikkim assembly and later became the state's forest minister.

He was considered a pivotal figure in the Himalayan state's political landscape during the late '70s and '80s, founding the Rising Sun Party. He was also known for his profound understanding of Sikkim's cultural and social dynamics.

"I am deeply saddened by the sudden demise of the Late Shri RC Poudyal Jyu, a statesman and distinguished senior political leader who had served the Sikkim Government in various capacities, including as a minister, and was the leader of the Jhulke Gham Party," Chief Minister PS Tamang said. (PTI)

Gunshots fired at newspaper editor's residence in Imphal

IMPHAL, July 17: Unknown person(s) fired a few rounds at the residence of a newspaper editor in Imphal. Khoirom Loyalakpa, the editor of the vernacular daily newspaper, Naharolgi Thoudang, lives in Kontha Khabam Lai Haraopham in Imphal East district. The incident happened around 12.25 am recently.

There were few bullet marks at the gate. On learning about the incident, a team of Heingang Police came to the spot and recovered six empty cartridges, the reports said. However, no one was injured in the incident. Loyalakpa was at his office while the rest of

the family members were sleeping at the time of the incident.

Meanwhile, All Manipur Working Journalists' Union (AMWJU) and Editors' Guild, Manipur (EGM) have strongly condemned the incident.

A joint press release issued by AMWJU and EGM stated that an emergency meeting of the two journalists' bodies was held today at Manipur Press Club, Imphal.

It said that the meeting resolved to urge the concerned government authorities to book the culprits involved in the attack and award befitting punishment at the earliest. (NNN)

SITUATION VACANT

FOR EX-SERVICEMEN OF ASSAM (ARMY, NAVY & AIR FORCE)

- Following vacant post in the Directorate of Sainik Welfare, Assam is being filled up:
Lower Division Assistant (Grade-III) - 04 (Four)
- The eligibility criteria is as under :-

Eligibility Criteria	Qualitative requirements	Remarks
Ex-Servicemen.	(a) Ex-Servicemen Clerk (GD)/ Clerk (SD) only. (b) Should be in possession of proficiency certificate for office management. (c) Sound knowledge in computers (MS Office) (d) Medical Category - SHAPE-1 (e) Willing to work in any districts of the State.	1. Age: Not more than 50 years as on 01 Oct 2024.
Pay Band	Basic Pay 14,000-70,000/- + Grade Pay 6,200/-	
Place of posting	Appointment will be against the vacant post at Directorate of Sainik Welfare, Assam. All posts are transferable within the rules. The selected individual may be transferred to any district in the interest of organisation, which will be binding.	
Submission of Application.	1. Bio-data forms are available with all ZSWOs. 2. Personal Application alongwith Bio-Data duly completed in all respect together with copies of Identity card, Discharge Book, PPO & Proficiency Certificates including latest mobile No & email ID to be submitted to the following address:- The Director Directorate of Sainik Welfare House No 74, Sainik Bhawan, P.O. Lachit Nagar, Guwahati - 781007 (Assam) Tele-0361-2522229, email ID- rsassam@gmail.com	
Last date of Application	Applications should reach this Office on or before 10 Aug 2024.	
Rejection of applications	Applications of ineligible candidates or incomplete Bio-Data forms will be rejected without intimation to the applicant.	
Date of Interview.	Date, Time and venue for Selection Test / Interview will be intimated separately to the eligible candidates only. No TA/DA will be admissible for attending the selection test/interview.	

Sd/-

Brig Dinesh Chandra Mazumdar (Retd),
Director,
Directorate of Sainik Welfare Assam, Guwahati

Janasanyog ID/2645/24/18-Jul-24

Delhi govt must take blame for granting permission to fell 422 trees: SC

The apex court was hearing suo motu (on its own) contempt proceedings against the VC of the DDA

NEW DELHI, July 17: The Delhi government has shown lack of sensitivity over protecting the environment, the Supreme Court said while rapping it for granting permission to the Delhi Development Authority to chop 422 trees in the Southern Ridge's reserve forest area for the construction of a road.

A bench of justices Abhay S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan said it is an admitted position as reflected in the statement made by the tree officer that for felling 422 trees, the officer did not grant any permission.

The apex court was hearing suo motu (on its own) contempt proceedings against the vice chairman of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) over alleged cutting of 1,100 trees in the ridge forest for a road widening project.

"The Delhi government must take the blame for granting permission to fell 422 trees, though there was no statutory power vesting in the Delhi government to grant such permission," the bench said in an order dated July 12.

"Thus, apart from the trees in the ridge area, the government facilitated cutting and felling the trees outside the ridge area without permission under the Delhi Preservation of Trees Act, 1994," it said.

The top court said, like the DDA, the Delhi government has shown a lack of sensitivity over protecting the environment.

The bench said the Delhi government has not even provided the



tree officer and the Tree Authority an office or basic infrastructure. The Delhi government must come before the court and tell "how it will compensate for the damage caused to the environment due to its illegal acts", the bench said.

"The affidavit of the Delhi government also shows that this is not the only instance where the forest department of the Delhi government purported to grant permission for the felling of trees. They had done it earlier also," it said.

The Delhi government's stand is that "the DDA has accepted that they misread the notifications issued by the Delhi government", the bench said.

"That will not absolve the Delhi government of its responsibility of passing orders permitting the felling of trees, though no statutory

power is vested in the Delhi government," it said.

The top court said the Delhi government must also come out with an action taken report, if any, against the erring officers who are alleged to have granted permissions for the felling of trees.

"Apart from a statement on oath which we expect the Delhi government to make about compensating the loss caused to the environment, we hope and trust that the Delhi government will immediately stop exercising the non-existent power of granting permissions for the felling of trees," it said.

The bench said, "While we do so, we direct the Delhi government to ascertain how many such permissions have been granted by the Delhi government in the last five years and place all those permissions on record."

During the hearing, the apex court expressed anguish over continuous "cover up" by authorities over the role of Delhi Lieutenant Governor V K Saxena in tree felling in the ridge area and directed the DDA to inform it whether the order to cut trees was passed on basis of the LG's oral permission or the DDA independently took the decision.

Senior advocate Aditya Sondhi, appearing for the Delhi government, assured the court that office infrastructure, staff and necessary hardware and software will be made available to the Tree Authority and the tree officer within six weeks.

The bench said, "The Delhi government shall also ensure that the Tree Authority is properly constituted before the next date. Regarding the forest department of the state government, the entire infrastructure must be put in place within two months from today."

"The Delhi government must file an affidavit indicating what measures the forest department is taking to prevent environmental damage, including keeping vigil to stop the illegal felling of trees," it said.

The court had earlier issued a notice of criminal contempt against DDA vice chairman Subhasish Panda for allowing large-scale felling of trees in the Southern Ridge's Sabari area to construct a road from Chhattarpur to the South Asian University. (PTI)

Karnataka job quota bill

Ministers defend move; Industry calls it 'fascist,' 'short-sighted'



BENGALURU, July 17: The Congress government in Karnataka on Wednesday defended its move to reserve jobs in private sector for Kannadigas in the state, even as industry veterans objected to the proposed quota, calling it 'fascist,' and 'short-sighted.'

The government also sought to reach out to the private sector, saying its interests will be protected.

The state cabinet on Monday cleared the Karnataka State Employment of Local Candidates in the Industries, Factories and Other Establishments Bill, 2024, making it compulsory for private firms to reserve jobs for Kannadigas in their establishments. It is likely to be tabled in the Assembly on Thursday.

"Any industry, factory or other establishments shall appoint fifty percent of local candidates in management categories and seventy percent in non-management categories," the bill read.

If the candidates do not possess secondary school certificate with Kannada as a language, they should then pass a Kannada proficiency test as specified by the 'Nodal Agency', it added.

The nodal agency will have powers to call for any records, information or documents in the possession of an employer or occupier or manager of an establishment for the purpose of verifying the report.

The Government may appoint an officer not below the rank of

Assistant Labour Commissioner as the authorised officer regarding compliance of the provisions of the Act.

Any Employer or Occupier or Manager of an Establishment, who contravenes the provisions of this Act should be liable for a penalty between Rs 10,000 to Rs 25,000.

Hailing the bill, Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar said: "The Congress came to power in Karnataka to uphold the dignity of the Kannadigas--be it the issue of signboards of private establishments, the Kannada flag, Kannada language, culture, documents or specific percentage of reservation in jobs for Kannadigas."

Minister for Infrastructure Development, Medium and Heavy Industries M B Patil also backed the bill saying there is no doubt that Kannadigas should get jobs in Karnataka.

He, however, underlined that the interests of the industries will also be safeguarded.

"In private sector, certain ranks of posts will be reserved 100 percent for Kannadigas. The interests of industries will also be protected."

In a statement issued by his office, the Minister was quoted as saying that he will discuss with Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, IT-BT, Law and Labour Ministers in the event of any confusion in the bill.

No need for 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas', we will support those who support us: Suvendu

KOLKATA, July 17: Senior BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari on Tuesday attributed the party's poor performance in Lok Sabha polls in West Bengal to lack of support from the minority community, asserting that 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' was unnecessary and proposing instead 'Hum unke saath jo humare saath' ('we are with those who are with us').

Addressing the extended session of the BJP's state executive committee, Adhikari dismissed the need for a Minority Morcha of the party.

Later, he clarified that his comments had been taken out of context and asserted that he embodies in letter and spirit Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas'.

While addressing the session, Adhikari said, "I have spoken for nationalist Muslims as well. We all used to say 'Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas', but I would not say this anymore because I think it should be 'Hum unke saath jo humare saath' ('we are with those who are with us')... no need for Minority Morcha."

The minorities in West Bengal, constituting nearly 30 per cent of the electorate, helped TMC sweep minority-dominated pockets in southern West Bengal in the Lok Sabha polls, whereas the division of the community's vote between the Left-Congress alliance and the TMC in north Bengal helped the BJP score in several seats in the region, according to political observers.

In 2014, the BJP's slogan was 'Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas', and in 2019, it was 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas'.

Adhikari claimed that during the Lok Sabha polls, "Hindus were not allowed to vote by Jihadi goons of the TMC in many areas."

"In West Bengal, free and fair elections are not possible. The Jihadi goons of the TMC will not allow it. Free and fair elections are only possible by implementing the Disturbed Areas Act in the state. We don't want to capture power in the state through backdoor implementation

of the President's Rule.

"We will come to power when we win elections with the people's mandate. But for that, free and fair elections have to be ensured," he said.

Later, when his remarks triggered a controversy, Adhikari, in a post on X, said he doesn't believe in dividing people on the basis of majority and minority.

"My statement is being taken out of context. I am clear that those who are nationalists stand for this nation and West Bengal, we should be with them. Those who don't stand with us, work against the interest of the nation and West Bengal, we need to expose them."

"Also, like Mamata Banerjee, we shouldn't divide people into majority and minority and see them as Indians. I embody in letter and spirit, the Prime Minister's call for 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas'," he posted on X.

While talking to reporters, Adhikari said his comments were not against any community.

"My comments were not against any community. In this Lok Sabha election, there are few realisations, one that despite not having a level playing ground as TMC has unleashed a reign of terror, the BJP has emerged as its main challenger. The second realisation is that Muslims in West Bengal don't vote for the BJP," he said.

"The third realisation is that the CPI (M) has helped the TMC in splitting the Hindu votes. So the Hindus in West Bengal should be aware that if they don't unite they won't exist in West Bengal in future," he said. When asked about his remarks that the party should do away with 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' slogan, Adhikari said his remarks were meant for "political reasons".

"My comments were not meant for administrative purposes but for political reasons. I believe that administratively, it should be 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas'. In West Bengal, during the 2021 assembly polls, 91 per cent of the Muslims had voted for the TMC and in 2024, that percentage went up to 95," he said. (PTI)

Bengal BJP holds brainstorming session after LS poll debacle

KOLKATA, July 17: The West Bengal BJP on Wednesday kicked off a two-day brainstorming session to discuss the reasons behind the party's dismal performance in Lok Sabha elections in the state.

The extended session of the state executive committee comes after the party lost three assembly seats to the TMC in last week's by-polls, marking another disappointment for the BJP following its poor performance in the parliamentary elections, in which its tally fell to 12 from 18 in 2019.

Addressing the opening session of the meeting, BJP state president and Union minister Sukanta Majumdar said, "The results of the Lok Sabha polls cannot be an indicator of the party's prospects in the state."

"We will be discussing the way forward. It is true that our seat tally has dropped to 12 from 18. We need to identify what did not work. However, these results cannot be the end of the road for the West Bengal BJP. We must work hard and fight back against the onslaught and misrule of the TMC," he added. (PTI)

SP's performance in UP bypolls to be better than LS elections: Akhilesh

LUCKNOW, July 17: The Samajwadi Party's performance in the bypolls in Uttar Pradesh will be better than that of the Lok Sabha elections, its chief Akhilesh Yadav said on Wednesday. The Election Commission is yet to announce the schedule for the bypolls to 10 assembly seats in BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh.

"We will have a better outcome in the upcoming by-elections than the Lok Sabha polls," Yadav said while talking to reporters at the Samajwadi Party's (SP) headquarters here. In the recent Lok Sabha elections, the SP won 37 of the 80 seats in Uttar Pradesh, up from five in 2019. The BJP was got 33 seats, down from 62.

Claiming that there was "infighting in the BJP in Uttar Pradesh", Yadav said, "Because of a fight for power, the people are suffering." Of the 10 assembly seats in the state were by-poll is due, nine fell vacant after the MLAs were elected to the LS in the recent polls. (PTI)

India locked into cycle of low investment since 2014, needs new liberalised approach: Cong

NEW DELHI, July 17: The Congress on Wednesday claimed that India has been locked into a cycle of low investment since 2014 due to a combination of "erratic policy, rampant cronyism, and the ED/IT/CBI raid raj", and asserted that the country needs a new liberalised approach to political economy. Ahead of the presentation of the Union Budget next week, Congress general secretary in charge of communications Jairam Ramesh said the single most important statistic that explains India's inability to grow faster since 2014 is the "sluggish investment rate".

"India has been locked into a cycle of low investment since 2014, due to a combination of erratic policy, rampant cronyism, and the ED/IT/CBI raid raj," Ramesh said in a statement.

Low investment drags down the medium and long-term GDP growth rates, which in turn drags down wages and consumption growth, he said.

"The biggest component of investment - private domestic investment - has been in the doldrums since 2014. It was solidly in the 25-30% of GDP range during Dr. Manmohan Singh's tenure. Under the self-declared divinity, it has been squarely in the 20-25% of GDP range," Ramesh said.

He said gross FDI as a percentage of GDP has also more or less stayed constant since 2014.

"This is, however, only part of the story. Since at least 2016, multinational companies across the world have been looking to divest from China and invest in other developing countries. "India, with a large and growing labour pool, was at the right place at the right time but this generational opportunity to garner FDI and become a manufacturing and export-oriented economy has been squandered," Ramesh said. (PTI)

Cong to launch stir against 'growing' terror activities, unbridled powers to LG in J-K

JAMMU, July 17: The Jammu and Kashmir Congress will on Friday launch an agitation against the alleged failure of the BJP-led government to check growing terror activities and its decision to give unbridled powers to the Lt Governor ahead of the assembly polls in the Union Territory.

Jammu and Kashmir Congress chief Vikar Rasool Wani on Wednesday said, "The agitation will start at the state level and be taken to the district and block levels in the coming days."

"We will also press for the restoration of statehood before the Supreme Court's September 30 deadline for the holding of Assembly elections," Wani told reporters here.

Criticising the BJP for "destroying the historic state" over the last 10 years of its rule at the Centre, Wani said Jammu was cleared of militancy during the Congress-led UPA government but the BJP has completely failed to provide security to the people who are gripped by fear due to the revival of terrorism.

"When they (BJP) were out of power before 2014, they were asking Congress that you have an army, paramilitary and police and why you are not able to wipe out terrorism. Today, I am asking the same question as terrorism is back in Jammu region," he said.

While campaigning for the Lok Sabha polls that concluded recently, the BJP made tall claims about ending terrorism to mislead the people and get their votes, he said, adding that "nearly a dozen terror attacks have taken place in the Jammu region this year."

Congress wants terrorism to end so that the people of Jammu and Kashmir can live in peace, he added.

The Congress leader also slammed the central government for giving more powers to the Lt Governor and said the BJP wants to continue its proxy rule even after the much-awaited assembly elections.

"Giving powers to Lt Governor means rendering an elected government powerless. BJP has already destroyed this historic state by snatching our statehood, special status and other rights. They have failed to curb terrorism and are aware of losing the next assembly elections," he said.

Senior AICC leader and in-charge of Jammu and Kashmir Bharat Singh Solanki said the Congress wants restoration of full statehood before the holding of assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir in accordance with the Supreme Court set deadline.



"There is a difference between saying and doing in BJP. They are utilising power to remain in power so that they can exploit the people and the resources of Jammu and Kashmir," he said.

Solanki said 11 terror attacks in the past 78 days and the killing of over 50 soldiers since October 2021 across the Jammu region have created a fear psychosis among the people.

"We are concerned about the prevailing security situation. The prime minister, home minister and defence minister have no words to express grief over the loss of lives including that of civilians and pilgrims," he said.

He said all the claims of wiping out terrorism by the BJP after coming to power in 2014 have fallen flat as it has completely failed to tackle the security situation.

"Prime minister, home minister and defence minister made a beeline to J&K to address public rallies in parliament elections which were held in a peaceful atmosphere. As the days for assembly elections come near, there is a spurt in terror activities creating doubts in the minds of the people," he said.

"We appeal to the government to end terrorism and create a conducive atmosphere for the coming elections," he said. Solanki also criticised the BJP government for giving unbridled powers to Lt Governor ahead of the assembly elections and said such an elected government would be like a municipality with the chief minister having virtually no powers.

"The Delhi government is a glaring example of this. It used to be the case in British rule... Congress will fight for the restoration of statehood, snatched powers and peaceful atmosphere," he said. (PTI)

After a failed anti-Chinese uprising in 1959, the 14th Dalai Lama fled Tibet US' rivalry with China primary driver for 'Resolve Tibet Act': Shivshankar Menon

NEW DELHI, July 17: The primary driver for the US recently passing the 'Resolve Tibet Act' is its "rivalry with China", not any concern for Tibet, claimed former national security adviser (NSA) Shivshankar Menon.

Speaking at the launch of former diplomat Dilip Sinha's book "Imperial Games in Tibet: The Struggle for Statehood and Sovereignty" on Tuesday, Menon argued that there are "clear limits" to America's commitment to Tibet and they are waving the flag of Tibet today in its own interest.

"I would be very careful to say 'Oh! the world is changed, they (the US) have passed an act'. I think you need to look at the basic correlation of forces and the balance of forces, and the actual strength of the people and what is the interest of the great powers and how they see it at this time."

"Today, the Americans see it as their interest to at least wave the flag



of Tibet but this doesn't extend to recognising Tibet... It is driven not by the concern for Tibet, the primary driver here is the rivalry with China," said Menon, who has also served as the foreign secretary from 2006-09.

US President Joe Biden has recently signed into law a bill that enhances American support for Tibet

and promotes dialogue between China and the Dalai Lama towards a peaceful resolution of the dispute over the status and governance of the remote Himalayan region.

China, on the other hand, had opposed the 'Resolve Tibet Act', describing it as a "destabilising" Act. The Act enhances US support for Tibet empowering State Depart-

ment officials to actively and directly counter disinformation about Tibet from the Chinese government.

Though clear that Tibet cannot rely on great power rivalry to solve their problems, Menon, 75, lauded India's effort in ensuring that the Tibetan culture, civilization and identity "stays strong".

He said the Tibetans, too, like Armenians, could have been another "lost people". "They are not lost. Part of it because of His Holiness, his personality and what he has done. But also because I think of what India provided, and that we shouldn't forget and should never give up on," he added.

After a failed anti-Chinese uprising in 1959, the 14th Dalai Lama fled Tibet and came to India where he set up the government-in-exile at Dharamshala in Himachal Pradesh. From 2002 to 2010, the Dalai Lama's representatives and the Chinese government held nine rounds of dialogue that did not produce any

concrete outcome.

Praising the book, Menon said it is an "honest account" of what happened -- be it the great power rivalry, how it affected Tibet or how it affected India.

"The nice thing in the book is that this is not a partisan historical account. It is a straightforward account based on what actually happened," he added.

"Imperial Games in Tibet" claims to offer a thorough exploration of Tibet's historical and contemporary geopolitical significance.

It also sheds light on the 14th Dalai Lama's escape to India and the resultant Sino-Indian tensions, critically examining the ongoing impact of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet amidst persistent citizen protests and global calls for freedom.

The book, published by Pan Macmillan India and priced at Rs 599, is currently available for purchase across online and offline stores. (PTI)

Over 14,000 child marriages prevented across 265 districts in 17 states and UTs: NGO report

NEW DELHI, July 17: More than 14,000 child marriages have been prevented across 265 districts in 17 states and Union Territories by civil society, a report by an NGO said.

According to the report by the India Child Protection (ICP) research team which was released by child rights body the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), 59,364 child marriages were prevented with the help of panchayats in 2023-24.

The report said the Rajasthan High Court, in one of its judgments, held panchayats accountable for child marriage, which resulted in a significant decline in child marriage cases reported on Akshaya Tritiya.

"Across India, 161 civil society organisations in 265 districts throughout 17 states and Union Territories successfully prevented 14,137 child marriages in 2023-2024 by using legal interventions and prevented 59,364 child marriages with the help of panchayats," the report said.

The total number of child marriage cases registered during the last five years (3,863) is less than the number of girl child marriages taking place in a single day (4,442). On average, only one case



of child marriage per district was registered for prosecution in 2022.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data shows that out of 63,513 children who were kidnapped or abducted and recovered in 2022, 15,748 (25 per cent) were kidnapped or abducted for the purpose of either 'marriage' or 'intercourse'. Of this, 15,142 children recovered in 2022 were kidnapped solely for the purpose of marriage.

In 2022, 13,981 cases were reported for the offence of kidnapping of minor girls to compel them for marriage, compared to 11,236 in 2020. This highlights a 24 per cent increase in the number of minor girls being kidnapped or ab-

ducted for the purpose of marriage during 2020-22.

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

This "slow" disposal rate has resulted in a persistently high pendency rate, which stands at 92 per cent. Despite the fact that there are only 3,365 cases pending, with the current rate of disposal, the country may take 19 years to clear the backlogs as of 2022, it said.

The conviction rate in cases filed under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act is an area of concern, given its "disheartening" statistics.

In 2022, merely 11 per cent of these cases resulted in convictions, contrasting sharply with the overall conviction rate of 34 per cent for all crimes committed against children in that year, the report said. The ICP research team collected primary data from a sample of 1,132 random villages across 20 districts of Assam, encompassing a total population of 21 lakh and a child population of eight lakh.

The report said there was 81 per cent reduction in the instances of child marriage between 2021-22 and 2023-24. In absolute numbers, the incidents of child marriages in the study villages declined from 3,225 cases in 2021-22 to 627 cases in 2023-24.

In 30 per cent of the villages surveyed in Assam, child marriage has been completely eradicated. Additionally, 40 per cent of villages reported a significant decline in child marriages. About 98 per cent of the respondents believed that the Assam government's strict law enforcement initiatives in 2023 had a substantial and striking influence on the reduction of child marriages within their communities. The overwhelming majority of respondents acknowledged the effectiveness of stringent enforcement measures in curbing child marriages.

In 12 districts, out of 20, over 90 per cent of respondents believe that taking legal action such as arresting individuals and filing FIRs in cases related to child marriage can effectively address this issue.

Overall, the same percentage for all 20 districts stands at 72 per cent. This community validation reinforces the need for sustained and rigorous prosecution strategies to address and eliminate child marriage completely.

The report recommended fast track special courts to be created to clear the backlog of child marriage cases. In situations where parents, guardians, or panchayats have provided an undertaking, the punishment should be doubled and treated as equivalent to criminal conspiracy for rape, it said.

A specific provision should be made for the rehabilitation of victims and survivors of child marriage, treating them on par with survivors of child sexual abuse, the report suggested.

A special scheme should be introduced focusing on skill development and economic stability for women who choose to leave child marriages and central portal run by the Ministry of Home Affairs to report child marriages with an urgent "Rapid Action Response Protocol", it recommended. (PTI)

84,119 children rescued in last seven years under 'Operation Nanhe Farishtey': Railways



NEW DELHI, July 17: The RPF has during last seven years rescued 84,119 children, who were at risk in stations and trains, preventing them from falling into wrong hands, a press statement from the Railway Ministry said.

The Railway Protection Force (RPF) has over the past seven years been at the forefront of an operation named "Nanhe Farishtey" - a mission dedicated to rescuing children in need of care and protection across various Indian Railway Zones, according to the ministry.

"During last seven years (2018- May 2024), the RPF has rescued 84,119 children who were at risk in stations and trains, preventing them from falling into harm's way," the ministry said.

"Nanhe Farishtey is more than just an operation; it is a lifeline for thousands of children who find themselves in precarious situations. The data from 2018 to 2024 illustrates a story of unwavering dedication, adaptability, and resilience. Each rescue is a testament to the RPF's commitment to safeguarding the most vulnerable members of society," it added.

Giving year wise data, the ministry said the year 2018 marked a significant start for "Operation Nanhe Farishtey" and in this year, the RPF rescued a total of 17,112 children, including both boys and girls.

"Out of 17,112 children rescued, 13,187 were identified as runaway children, an alarming number of 2105 were found to be missing, 1091 children as left behind, 400 as destitute, 87 as kidnapped, 78 as mentally challenged and 131 as street children. This year 2018 set a strong foundation for the operation, highlighting the urgent need for such an initiative," the ministry said.

"During 2019, the RPF's efforts continued to bear fruit, with a total of 15,932 children, including both boys and girls were rescued. Out of 15,932 children rescued, 12,708 as runaway children, 1454 as missing, 1036 children as left behind, 350 as destitute, 56 as kidnapped, 123 as mentally challenged and 171 as street children. The consistent numbers showcased the persistent issue of children running away and needing protection," it added.

According to the ministry, the year 2020 was challenging due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted normal life and significantly impacted the operations.

Despite these challenges, the RPF managed to rescue 5,011 children, it added.

"During 2021, the RPF saw resurgence in their rescue operations, saving 11,907 children. This year saw a notable increase in the number of children found and protected, with 9601 children identified as runaways, 961 as missing, 648 as left behind, 370 as destitute, 78 as kidnapped, 82 as mentally challenged and 123 as street children," the ministry said.

Lauding the RPF, the ministry stated that during 2022, the RPF's unwavering commitment was evident as they rescued 17,756 children, the highest in the recorded period.

It said, "This year saw a significant number of runaways and missing children being found and given the necessary care and protection. 14,603 children were identified as runaways, 1156 as missing, 1035 as left behind, 384 as destitute, 161 as kidnapped, 86 as mentally challenged and 212 as street children. The efforts were bolstered by increased awareness and more coordinated operations across the railway zones."

"During the year 2023, RPF managed to rescue 11,794 children. With 8916 children rescued as runaways, 986 as missing, 1055 as left behind, 236 as destitute, 156 as kidnapped, 112 as mentally challenged and 237 children as street children, the RPF continued to play a crucial role in ensuring the safety and well-being of vulnerable children," it added.

Highlighting the persistent issues of child runaways and the dedicated efforts of the RPF to address them, the ministry maintained that in the first five months of 2024, the RPF has already rescued 4,607 children.

"With 3430 children rescued as runaways, the early trends suggest a continued commitment to the operation "Nanhe Farishtey", the ministry said. It added, "Through their efforts, the RPF has not only rescued children but also raised awareness about the plight of runaway and missing children, prompting further action and support from various stakeholders. The operation continues to evolve, adapting to new challenges and striving to create a safer environment for children across India's vast railway network."

Informing the initiatives of the Indian Railways, the ministry said, "Track Child Portal contains comprehensive details about aggrieved children. Indian Railway has established child helpdesks at over 135 railway stations. When a child is rescued by the Railway Protection Force (RPF), they are handed over to the District Child Welfare Committee which hands over the child to parents." (PTI)

IAF tells SC it has deposited compensation to HIV positive veteran

NEW DELHI, July 17: An Indian Air Force (IAF) soldier, who contracted AIDS due to transfusion of contaminated blood at a military hospital in Jammu and Kashmir's Samba in 2002, has received ₹ 18 lakh and the residual amount of over ₹ 1.41 crore awarded to him as compensation has been deposited with the apex court registry, the IAF has informed the Supreme Court.

The apex court, in a judgement delivered on September 26 last year on a plea by the veteran, had directed the IAF to pay him around ₹ 1.5 crore as compensation.

The former soldier had taken ill during "Operation Parakram", launched in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001, and was admitted to the hospital where he had to be administered one unit of blood. The top court had in April this year dismissed a plea seeking review of its September 2023 judgement in the matter.

The veteran's petition alleging contempt of the directions issued by the top court in its 2023 verdict came up for hearing before the bench on Tuesday.

Additional Solicitor General (ASG) Vikramjit Banerjee said they have filed a compliance affidavit in the matter. The bench, also comprising Justices Sanjay Karol and K V Viswanathan, observed that the amount deposited in the court registry be released to the veteran. An advocate, who is assisting the top court as an amicus curiae in the matter, spoke about the soldier's regular medical check-up and said the bench can consider referring him to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi, for it.

The bench said since the man resides in Ajmer, a good medical facility can be found in Jaipur to ensure he is not inconvenienced. It asked the amicus to discuss the issue with the ASG so that it can be sorted out and posted the matter for hearing after two weeks. On March 5, the apex court had directed that an amount of ₹ 18 lakh towards attendant expenses be paid to the man and the remainder be deposited in the court's registry within two weeks. (PTI)

Not only dismissal, ex-LBSNAA chief for stern action against civil servants for faking disability

NEW DELHI, July 17: Amid the controversy surrounding probationary IAS officer Pujja Khedkar, former LBSNAA chief Sanjeev Chopra on Wednesday said those found using fake caste and disability certificates to join the civil services should not only be dismissed but training cost and salary paid to them should also be recovered from them.

After Khedkar's case of misusing power and privileges came to fore, social media is abuzz with claims and counter-claims on use of fake certificates by serving Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and Indian Police Service (IPS) officers among others.

Social media users have shared names, pictures and other details of a few IAS and IPS officers, claiming they used bogus certificates to claim benefits available for those belonging to Other Backward Class (non-creamy layer) and Economically Weaker Sections (EWS).

"This is a serious malaise in the system. Anyone found doing this has not only deprived a deserving candidate, but engaged in a willing criminal conspiracy. They are not juvenile delinquents to be let off with a warning," Chopra told PTI.

He said apart from dismissal and recovery of training costs and salary paid so far, "they must serve their sentence" so that a loud and clear signal is given to all concerned.

"A deeper investigation into whoever helped them in the process should be undertaken and all those involved in this subterfuge should be punished as per the provisions of law," said Chopra, a 1985 batch IAS (retired) officer of the West Bengal cadre.

He served as the Director of Mussoorie-based Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA) from January 1, 2019 and March 31, 2021.

Claiming that certain EWS and OBC category candidates could not secure selection despite getting good ranks in the civil services examination, certain social media users have also raised questions over the verification process being followed for checking the authen-



ticity of reservation and disability quotas.

The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) conducts the civil services examination annually in three stages-- preliminary, main and interview -- to select officers of the IAS, Indian Foreign Service (IFS) and IPS among others.

Chopra also suggested use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) besides tougher checks while issuing OBC and disability quota certificates among others.

To a question involving Khedkar, who is accused of manipulating disability and OBC certificates, Chopra said the Centre's single-member fact finding committee should look deeper into the whole matter.

"There are three aspects to this whole issue. The issue of misconduct by her during her training-cum-attachment in Pune is being dealt with by the state government concerned. She has been transferred from there. Though the transfer is not a punishment, her alleged conduct is being looked into," Chopra said.

Another aspect is related to the use of fake disability and OBC (non-creamy layer) certificates, for which the probe panel has also been formed by the Union Personnel Ministry and the committee will delve into it, he said.

"The third and crucial aspect is whether there are leakages in the system or involvement of government officials, mainly lower level, working in testing and recruitment organisation. This is a larger issue that needs to be thoroughly in-

vestigated to ensure sanctity and credibility of the system," Chopra said.

The LBSNAA -- the country's premier training academy for civil servants -- on Tuesday called back Khedkar from Maharashtra by putting on hold her district training program for "further necessary action".

Khedkar is a 2023 batch IAS officer of the Maharashtra cadre. Her case came to notice when she allegedly started demanding certain perks and benefits, which she is not entitled for, while her posting in Pune.

She was accused of bullying everyone around and of placing a red-bull beacon (indicating high-ranking official) atop a private Audi (a luxury sedan) car used by her that also had "Maharashtra Government" written on it. Khedkar was transferred to Washim District Collectorate in the Vidarbha region following a complaint against her by the Pune district magistrate.

She got 821 rank in the civil services examination 2022, under OBC category as a person with multiple disabilities, according to UPSC records. She was allocated to the IAS based on her ranking, caste and disability category.

Meanwhile, the single-member probe committee of Manoj Kumar Dwivedi, Additional Secretary in the Department of Personnel and Training, formed on July 11 has been asked to submit its report within two weeks on misuse of disability and OBC quotas by Khedkar to secure her candidature in the service.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 has a provision to reserve at least four per cent of total seats in government recruitment/department.

Candidates with benchmark disabilities (including multiple disabilities) besides those under OBC (non-creamy layer) get benefits like age-relaxation and earmarking of vacancies to be filled by them only in the civil services exam conducted by the UPSC.

OBC candidates, whose annual household income is less than Rs eight lakh, are eligible to take benefits of non-creamy layer reservation in certain government jobs recruitment. (PTI)

ED makes fresh arrest in Rajasthan's JJM case

JAIPUR, July 17: The Enforcement Directorate has made a fresh arrest in connection with its money laundering investigation into alleged irregularities in the Jal Jeevan Mission scheme being implemented in Rajasthan, officials said on Wednesday.

Sanjay Badaya, an alleged middleman, was taken into custody on Tuesday after questioning at the agency office here, they said. The central government's Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) aims to provide safe and adequate drinking water through household tap connections and is being implemented in Rajasthan by the state's Public Health Engineering (PHE) Department. This is the fourth arrest in the case.

The central agency had earlier arrested three people

-- Mahesh Mittal, proprietor of Shree Ganpati Tubewell Company, Padamchand Jain, proprietor of Shree Shyam Tubewell Company, and Piyush Jain.

The agency's investigation found that Padamchand Jain, Mittal and others were involved in giving bribes to public servants to obtain illegal protection, tenders, getting bills sanctioned and covering up irregularities in works executed by them in respect of various tenders they received from the PHED.

The suspects were also involved in the purchase of stolen goods from Haryana for using them in their tenders and had also submitted "fake" work completion letters from IRCON to get PHED contracts, the agency claimed. (PTI)

No takers for 18 lakh jobs in financial services sector in India: FBSB India CEO

AHMEDABAD, July 17: A top official of the FPSB India (Financial Planning Standards Board) here on Wednesday said India is facing the issue of unemployment in the financial services sector because there were no takers for nearly 18 lakhs jobs last year.

GIFT City in Gandhinagar, which employs nearly 6,000 people in the financial services sector, will generate nearly 1.5 lakh jobs in this sector in the next five years, FPSB India CEO Krishan Mishra told PTI here on Wednesday.

"Last year, as per the data provided by the National Career Services portal of the central government, India created 46.86 lakh jobs in financial services. Of those, only 27.5 lakh jobs were filled. It shows that there were no takers for 18 lakh jobs. This is because of unemployment. Jobs are there, but people are not capable enough to take them up," said Mishra.

"Banks, insurance companies, brokerage houses and mutual fund companies are always in need of trained people. If you conduct an online job search, you will find that there are about 40 times as many jobs as the number of Certified Financial Planner (CFP) professionals available," he said.

FPSB India is the Indian subsidiary of Financial Planning Standards Board Ltd (FPSB Ltd) -- the global standards-setting body for the financial planning profession and owner of the international Certified Financial Planner (CFP) certification programme.

At present, there are 2,731 CFP professionals in India against 2.23 lakh worldwide. By 2030, there will be around 10,000 CFPs in India as against the requirement of 1,00,000 due to huge demand, said Mishra.

"Personal finance was ignored in India. People thought financial planning is for the elite. But, in reality, wealth management is for the elite while financial planning is for everyone. We need to be financially educated," said Mishra.

He announced that FPSB India and the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad (IIMA) had on Tuesday signed a strategic MoU to launch a series of



capacity-building initiatives, targeted for professionals in financial planning and investment advisory services. Under the framework, IIMA and FPSB India will initiate training programmes, conduct applied research, and organise focused workshops for professionals on contemporary themes, he said.

In May, FPSB India had signed a pact with the International Financial Services Centres Authority (IFSCA), GIFT City, to promote GIFT IFSC as a 'Global Finance Hub', to enhance the financial market ecosystem and nurture skilled professionals for GIFT City's expanding financial workforce, he said.

"We had signed an MoU recently with the IFSCA at GIFT City to help them in getting the right talent, which is a challenge for them because majority of the talent in financial service is based in Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad. They are not willing to relocate to Gandhinagar due to various reasons," he said.

"We are expecting a huge growth in GIFT City because available talent is very less. There are nearly 628 firms in the banking and financial services sector having offices in GIFT City today.

"In the next five years, nearly 1.5 lakh people will be needed there, mostly into the field of distribution and management. This will create a huge demand for CFP professionals," he added. (PTI)

Zero-dose children comparison flawed, India's population not considered: Sources on WHO-UNICEF data

NEW DELHI, July 17: India's population, which is many times more than several nations, has not been taken into account while comparing children's vaccination data with 19 other countries in the latest WHO and UNICEF estimates of national immunisation coverage (WUENIC), official sources have said.

They asserted that India is steadfast in its commitment to reduce the number of zero-dose children. "Even though India has the second highest (number of) zero-dose children in the world, it accounts for 0.11 per cent of the country's total population," Union health ministry sources said on Tuesday.

The sources were reacting to the WUENIC data released on Monday which stated that India had the second highest number of children, nearly 16 lakh, who did not receive any vaccine in 2023, just after Nigeria with 21 lakh zero-dose children. "The comparison is flawed as the base population has not been taken into consideration," a source said. The WUENIC data showed that India's rank improved from 2021 when the country had recorded the highest



number of zero-dose children globally at 27.3 lakh. The sources said India's antigen-wise coverage is better than that of the world average for all antigens for 2023. They said India's DPT 1 (Diphtheria-Tetanus-Pertussis Vaccine) -- proxy for zero-dose -- is 93 per cent whereas the global average is 89 per cent. "Thus, India is 4 per cent better than the world," the source said.

India's DPT3 -- proxy for under-vaccinated -- is 91 per cent whereas the global average is 84 per cent. Thus, India is 7 per cent better than the world. Besides, India's MCV1 (Measles zero dose) is 92 per cent whereas the global average

is 83 per cent. "Thus, India is 10 per cent better than the world," the source said.

All efforts are being made to reach these zero-dose children. A special zero-dose plan has been made and it is under implementation, the health ministry sources stated.

In the WUENIC data, India is followed by Ethiopia, Congo, Sudan, Indonesia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Angola, Pakistan, Somalia, Vietnam, Madagascar, Mexico, South Africa, Mali, DPRK, China, Guinea and Myanmar.

These 20 countries were prioritised in the context of the Immunisation Agenda 2030 (IA2030), based on their number of zero-dose children in 2021. China is 18th in the list of the top 20 zero-dose countries while Pakistan is at the 10th position. Among the countries ranked by the number of zero-dose children, ROSA, 2021-2023, India was the first among eight countries with 1,592,000 zero-dose children.

The World Health Organisation on Tuesday called on countries in the Southeast Asia region to further strengthen efforts at all levels, with tailored approaches at sub-national levels. (PTI)

Alfonso Cuaron to receive lifetime achievement award at Locarno Film Festival



LOS ANGELES, July 17: Oscar winner Alfonso Cuaron, known for films such as "Gravity", "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban", "Y tu mamá también" and "Roma", will be honoured with the lifetime achievement award at the 77th edition of the Locarno Film Festival.

The film gala is set to commence on August 7 in Switzerland's Locarno. It will come to a close on August 17.

Cuaron will receive the award, touted to be a tribute to "film personalities with extraordinary careers", on August 11.

The event will be held in the Swiss town's Piazza Grande after audiences can catch a panel conversation with him earlier in the day, according to the festival's official website. Giona A Nazzaro, artistic director of the Locarno Film Festival, described Cuaron as a "visionary author of agile and liberated imaginaries". "Combining an experimental spirit with the sweep of great popular writers, he has managed to capture the imagination and hearts of millions of viewers, passing on the same wonder that he himself experienced as a child and teenager basking in the glow of classic Mexican cinema.

"From coming-of-age novels to science fiction, from melodrama to grand sagas like 'Harry Potter', Alfonso Cuaron has reinvented himself as an artist with each new film, always in the service of the pleasure of cinema, and has thus created a truly multifaceted body of work," Nazzaro said in a statement. The filmmaker has won two Academy Awards for the 2013 sci-fi thriller "Gravity" and three for 2018's "Roma", his black-and-white semi-autobiographical take on his upbringing in Mexico City. He earned the best director Academy Award for both the films. Cuaron's upcoming project is the Apple TV series "Disclaimer", a seven-part psychological thriller. It stars Cate Blanchett, Sacha Baron Cohen, and Kevin Kline.

Director Jane Campion, Indian superstar Shah Rukh Khan, producer Stacey Sher and Ben Burt, the man behind the voices of iconic characters R2-D2, E.T. and WALL-E will also be feted at the Locarno Film Festival. (PTI)

Chidambaram of 'Manjummel Boys' fame to make Hindi directorial debut



NEW DELHI, July 17: Filmmaker Chidambaram, best known for the superhit Malayalam film "Manjummel Boys", is set to make his Hindi directorial debut in collaboration with Phantom Studios.

Chidambaram shot to nationwide fame after "Manjummel Boys", mounted on a reported budget of ₹ 20 crore, became the first Malayalam film to cross the ₹ 200 crore-mark at the box office and also emerged as one of the highest grossing Indian films of 2024.

Srishi Behl, Phantom Studios CEO, said they are delighted to have Chidambaram on board.

"We are delighted to welcome Chidambaram to the Phantom family. We have always been a creative oriented company empowering directors to do some of their best work with Phantom. In this new world where language no longer restricts film makers, we intend to bring unique voices from diverse regions into Hindi cinema to craft narratives that transcend linguistic boundaries.

"Chidambaram is the ideal person for us to collaborate with. His unique vision and storytelling prowess align perfectly with our creative ethos at Phantom Studios. We are excited to bring his vision to Hindi film audiences," Behl said in a statement.

Chidambaram, who made his debut with the 2021 Malayalam movie "Jan.E.Man", said he is excited to take a step forward into Hindi mainstream cinema.

"Although 'Manjummel Boys' will always remain special, I am honored and excited to collaborate with Phantom Studios for my first Hindi feature film. It's an opportunity to explore new narratives and reach out to a wider audience, while staying true to the essence of storytelling that defines my work," the filmmaker added.

Details about his Hindi directorial debut are scarce.

Based on a true incident and produced by Parava Films, "Manjummel Boys" revolves around a group of friends from a small town called Manjummel near Kochi who decide to have a vacation in Kodaikanal.

The film hit the theatres on February 22 in Kerala and Tamil Nadu and received widespread acclaim from audience and critics. It is streaming on Disney+ Hotstar. (PTI)

Not hurt by musician Ramesh Narayan's actions: Asif Ali

KOCHI, July 17: Malayalam actor Asif Ali on Wednesday said he was not hurt by the alleged snub from classical vocalist, composer and music producer Ramesh Narayan during an event in Kochi recently, and urged everyone to stop the hate campaign against the musician over the incident. Narayan has been criticised by netizens since Tuesday after a video went viral in which Narayan seems uninterested when Ali presents him with a memento during the trailer release of an anthology based on nine stories written by the eminent writer M T Vasudevan Nair, on July 15. The video shows Ali coming on to the stage to present the memento, but Narayan appears to accept it without acknowledging him. Then, Narayan calls Film Director Jayaraj to the stage and hands him the memento, which Jayaraj returns to the composer after photos are clicked.

Speaking to reporters here, Ali thanked those who came out in his support, but urged everyone to stop the hate campaign against the veteran musician.

"We all do live events. Some mistakes happen during that. That is all that happened there. I was not hurt by what happened. I



did not feel insulted or disrespected by his (Narayan) actions. I do not believe that someone of his stature would do something like that deliberately," Ali said. He said he had not been well for the past couple of days and came to know about the issue only on Tuesday afternoon.

"People, including mediapersons, were calling me to seek my response. I did not know how to respond to it. It took me some time to understand what hap-

pened. So my phone was switched off.

"When I switched it on, I saw his (Narayan) message asking me to call him. I called him today morning and while speaking to him I realised how sad he was over what happened. His voice broke several times," the actor said. Ali said he did not want someone so senior in the industry and who was also older than him to be sad because of him.

"Please end the hate campaign against him. I hope and wish the issue ends here," he said.

Earlier in the day, the Film Employees Federation of Kerala (FEFKA) said that what happened was "avoidable". "If he (Narayan) wanted Jayaraj to give him the memento, he should have said so to the organisers or even Asif Ali. What he did would cause problems for Asif Ali in his public and professional life. It was an avoidable incident," FEFKA General Secretary Unnikrishnan B told a TV channel. (PTI)

Just went with the vibe: Lee Isaac Chung on evoking nostalgia of favourite films in 'Twisters'

NEW DELHI, July 17: The first movie he saw in a theatre as a child was Steven Spielberg's "E.T." and now to work on "Twisters", which has the master filmmaker on board as one of the producers, is a surreal feeling, says director Lee Isaac Chung.

The filmmaker, whose 2021's "Minari" earned critical acclaim as well as best supporting actress Oscar for Youn Yuh-jung, is exploring a new territory with his latest, a sequel to the 1996 disaster film "Twister", starring Bill Paxton and Helen Hunt. Both the films have Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment attached as one of the producers.

Chung said the original Jan de Bont-directed "Twister", about a couple on the brink of divorce who must come together to survive a tornado, was probably the last movie he saw in a theatre with family before starting college.

"The first movie that I saw in a

movie theatre was E.T. I really grew up on those Amblin movies that were coming out during the '80s and the '90s. Like Back to the Future and Twister."

"And now to be able to make an Amblin movie that comes from one of those films that I loved, it's really surreal and wonderful... Essentially, I just went with the vibe (of those films)," Chung told PTI in a Zoom interview.

Twisters, releasing on July 18 in India, features Glen Powell as Tyler Owens, a storm-chasing YouTube influencer, Daisy Edgar-Jones as Kate Cooper, a meteorologist haunted by past trauma, and Anthony Ramos as her friend Javi.

The film is also produced by Universal Pictures, Warner Bros. Pictures, and The Kennedy/Marshall Company. Warner Bros are also internationally distributing the movie.

The Korean-American filmmaker

said he studied some of the movies that he grew up with to understand the nuances essential to a summer blockbuster. "There is a blend of fear, fun, humour and thrill within those movies that I remember and I kept thinking about how to do that in this one. How do I have moments of fear but then suddenly shift to humour and things like that. It was the feeling (of those films) that I was after," he said.

Chung, 45, was born in Denver, Colorado and moved to Lincoln, Arkansas when his family bought a farm there. He shot Minari, a family drama based on the immigrant experience of his Korean parents in the US, near those places.

And that experience helped him on Twisters though the two projects couldn't have been more different.

"All of the work I did on Minari was done in Oklahoma on the ground in actual farm locations and I wanted to

bring this ('Twisters') production out of the studios and out of the stages and into those fields of Oklahoma. I felt like I was able to do this based on something that I already learned from 'Minari', which is that the landscape is special and speaks for itself. This place is cinematic." It is not easy to make a sequel to a film that has been well loved and Chung said while he recognised the challenge, it also gave him a chance to express his love for the original by making a film that "speaks to our world today".

"Hopefully, we have done that with this one... I am excited that there is already so much interest in this one. I've been floored by just how many fans are cheering for us and our actors who they already love. I hope we do well and really meet that excitement." Chung said he is surprised that "it took so long" for viewers to discover Powell, Edgar-Jones and Ramos. (PTI)



US women's soccer team play to a draw against Costa Rica in final Olympic tune-up

WASHINGTON, July 17: The heat was on for the U.S. women's soccer team's final exhibition tune-up game before the Paris Olympics, with sweltering temperatures in the air and plenty of chances to score.

The goals did not come in a 0-0 draw against Costa Rica on Tuesday night, just the second time — and first since 2015 — the U.S. did not win its last game before a major tournament. But the match showed the Americans could handle the kind of high temperatures that could await later this month.

"The last two games have been insane," defender Casey Krueger said, referring to back-to-back exhibition games before the team's cross-Atlantic flight. "I feel like this is going to be even hotter, so if we can play in this, it gives us confidence going into France, for sure."

It was 98 degrees Fahrenheit (37 Celsius) at kickoff after Washington tied the hottest day on record in the nation's capital at 104 (40C) hours earlier. It was still 94 (35C) when the match was over. Coach Emma Hayes figured it would be a nice test for her players, given the forecast for nearly this level of heat during upcoming games in Marseille later this month.

"That's added value," Hayes said Monday. "It's perfect preparation. It's pretty hot down there, so this is a great opportunity for us to experience what we're going to face."

It played a role in Rose Lavelle being a precautionary late scratch because of leg tightness in warmups.

"No risks," Hayes said afterward. "She was a bit tight in her



groin and I took no risks. ... I want to go into the Olympics with everybody available."

Korbin Albert replaced Lavelle in the starting lineup in the game taking place on a worn down field torn up by recent football, soccer and rugby matches and attended by 18,972 fans. Players either criticized the field or offered up no comment.

"The corners, there's no secret that it was definitely like I was kicking into dirt," forward Mal-

lory Swanson said. "It was fine. Sometimes that's just the way it is going to be, and I think this team has always overcome adversity."

The U.S. generated plenty of chances throughout — 26 shots total and 12 on goal — and was repeatedly denied by Costa Rica goalkeeper Noelia Bermúdez, who was arguably one of the best players on the field.

Costa Rica, which did not qualify for the Olympics, sat back often and had no shots on goal

with just two attempts while the U.S. was consistently on the attack. After a ceremony involving friends and family members following the Americans' "Send-Off Match," they are set to fly to Paris on Wednesday and play their Olympic opener on July 25 against Zambia in Nice. Games in Marseille on July 28 against Germany and July 31 in Australia wrap up group play as the Americans look to improve on their bronze medal result in Tokyo

three years ago.

Hayes, who has only been coaching the U.S. since late May, was proud of the possession domination in a 1-0 victory Sunday against Mexico in New Jersey, but said Monday it was about "doing more with it." Much of the same followed Tuesday versus Costa Rica, including a couple of would-be goals called off for offside and a few missed opportunities on corners and off the rush. (AP)

Scottie Scheffler is adjusting to links golf and his role as best player in the world



TROON (SCOTLAND), July 17: The first stage of Scottie Scheffler's rise to the top of golf felt like warp speed. He went from No. 15 in the world to No. 1 in the span of five tournaments, and that was before he won the Masters for the first time.

Now he's on a level not seen since Tiger Woods was in his prime.

Scheffler is not the biggest draw at the British Open, not with Woods in the field. Rory McIlroy remains a big attraction, especially in the U.K., and he comes into Royal Troon as a sentimental favorite from his sad collapse in the U.S. Open and going 10 years without a major.

But any conversation at the final major of the year starts with Scheffler, a heavy favorite as he has been in every major this year. And that has taken him time to fully appreciate his status in the game.

"I never really thought of myself as anything but a golfer," Scheffler said Tuesday. "I was never trying to be famous. I didn't want to be a celebrity or whatever. I just wanted to become a good golfer and get the most out of myself. It's brought me this far, so I continue to just try to keep my head down and put in the work that got me here and just continue to practice and hopefully continue to get better."

His six PGA Tour victories before the calendar turned to July are the most since Arnold Palmer in 1962. Someone pointed out to Scheffler that Palmer's seventh victory that year was a claret jug he won at Royal Troon.

He wasn't sure how to react to that except to shrug his shoulders and say, "Yeah, that would be great." "I love the history of the game, and there's certain things that I know and certain things that I don't. That was something that for some reason I just never stumbled across," he said, searching for the right answer. "So I had no idea that that was a thing."

The British Open figures to present his biggest test.

Scheffler is still relatively new to links golf — everything about his rise to No. 1 is new — having played this style in 2021 for the first time. He has learned to adjust the flight of his ball since links turf creates a little more spin on certain shots. The greens can be slower. Bunkers are to be avoided. He is a two-time Masters champion, missed a U.S. Open playoff by one shot at The

Country Club and was runner-up in the PGA Championship at Oak Hill. But he has never seriously contended in golf's oldest championship.

Even so, the love of the links is there.

He went to the J.P. McManus Pro-Am in Ireland a few years ago and took side trips to Lahinch and Ballybunion. He began this trip across the Atlantic Ocean by skipping the Scottish Open at The Renaissance Club — links style, but not links turf — and going to Turnberry with Sam Burns for a match with their caddies, both good players.

"A tremendous amount of fun," he said.

And then it was time for work at Royal Troon, the links renowned for having the longest hole (the 623-yard sixth) and shortest hole (the 123-yard eighth) in the British Open rotation. Most peculiar about Troon is that the outward nine — typically with at least a wee breeze at the players' back — has two par 5s and measures 3,539 yards. The inward nine with the wind in the face has one par 5 and is 3,846 yards.

"It's basically a tale of two nines on this course," McIlroy said. "You feel like you have to make your score on the way out and then sort of hang on coming in."

McIlroy has far more experience on links golf — and a claret jug to show for it from his victory at Royal Liverpool in 2014 — but it still takes time to adjust because "you play 11 months of your golf every year in very different conditions."

Players also are preparing for weather described as "mixed," a gentle way of saying it probably won't be terribly pleasant for most of the week. Sunshine gave way to spells of rain on Tuesday, and that was before lunch was served.

PGA champion Xander Schauffele might be the second-most consistent player in golf behind Scheffler — nothing but top 20s in his last 10 starts and 51 cuts in a row — and has acquired a taste for less-than-pleasant conditions, particularly in the Open.

"If the weather gets really bad, you just have to take the bunkers out of play and really try and plot your way around," he said. "It doesn't have to be super pretty. Just kind of place the ball around the property and really just try and get it in the hole in as few shots as possible." (AP)

French federation files complaint after 'racist and discriminatory remarks' by Argentina players

PARIS, July 17: The French soccer federation pledged to file a complaint with FIFA over "racist and discriminatory remarks" by Argentina players in post-match chants about France's team after their Copa America title win.

Argentina beat Colombia 1-0 on Sunday at Miami Gardens, Florida. A video posted on Instagram by Argentina midfielder Enzo Fernandez, who plays for Chelsea, and widely viewed on X showed Argentina players appearing to sing about French players with African heritage.

One of Fernandez's Chelsea teammates, France defender Wesley Fofana, posted the Argentina team video on his social media accounts Tuesday and called it "uninhibited racism."

Fofana, who has family ties to Ivory Coast, is among several French players who are Black in the Chelsea first-team squad.

The same chants — by some Argentina fans — emerged before France and Argentina met in the World Cup final two years ago, which Argentina won.

"Given the seriousness of these shocking remarks, which are contrary to the values of sport and human rights, the FFF president has decided to contact its Argentinian counterpart and FIFA directly to file a legal complaint for racist and discriminatory remarks," the French soccer federation said in a statement on Tuesday.

The derogatory chants single out France players of African heritage, from several countries, and holding a French passport.

"The president of the French Football Federation, Philippe Diallo, condemns in the strongest terms the unacceptable racist and discriminatory remarks made against the players of the France team as part of a song sung by players and supporters of the Argentina team," the FFF added.

Diallo is a member of the executive committee of European soccer body UEFA with a growing reputation in the game's politics.

FIFA could not immediately confirm Tuesday if the French complaint had been filed.

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

IOA chief chides WFI ad-hoc panel for exclusion of Antim's coaches in long list

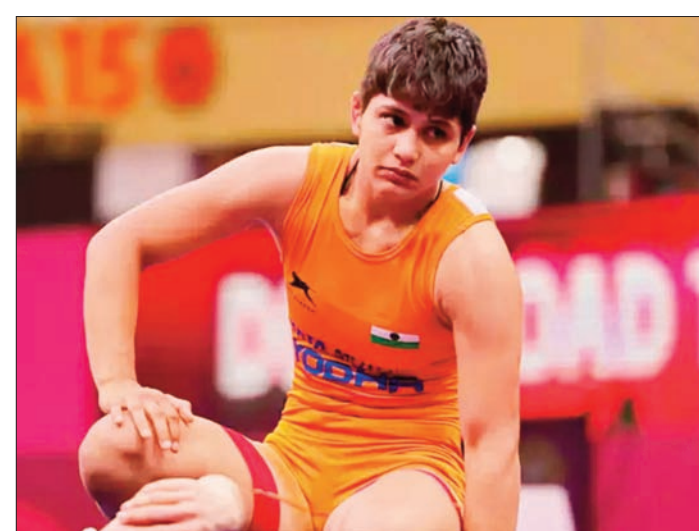
NEW DELHI, July 17: IOA President P.T. Usha on Wednesday came down heavily on the ad-hoc panel that managed the suspended WFI, saying the committee did not do due diligence and missed out on giving the names of wrestler Antim Panghal's coaches in the long list, sent to the Paris Olympic Games organisers.

The Indian Olympic Association's reaction came in the wake of delay in visa clearance for Panghal's preferred coaches for the Games.

The 19-year-old Panghal, who trains in Hisar, was the first Indian wrestler to qualify for the Paris Games when she won a bronze at the World Championship in 2023.

She wants her coaches Bhagat Singh and Vikas to travel with her along with physiotherapist Heera. The IOA has cleared all the names but the support staff members attached with Panghal are still awaiting visa clearance.

"Antim won India an Olympic quota as early as in September 2023 by claiming a bronze medal in the World Wrestling Championships in Belgrade. In its wis-



dom the Ad Hoc Committee, administering wrestling, chose not to include the names of Antim's coach or physiotherapist in the long list of names sent to the Olympic Games Organising Committee," Usha said in a statement. The wrestlers are supposed to reach Paris on August 3 and the support staff members have got appointment for bio-metrics for August 2.

IOA had, in December 2023,

named its EC member Bhupendra Singh Bajwa as the head of the ad-hoc panel and made MM Somaya and Manjusha Kanwar as the other members.

The IOA President also took an indirect dig at SAI for not being attentive enough.

"It is strange that the responsible authorities, who approved the long list of athletes, coaching and support staff, did not deem it fit to recommend the inclusion of

Bhagat Singh or Heera or Vikas.

"It was only after Antim's father came to IOA a few days ago that I stepped in to have them cleared by the Ministry," Usha said. Meanwhile, an IOA source told PTI that Panghal instead of going to VFS (Visa Facilitation Services), should have approached IOA for intervention.

"If they had come to us, we would have requested the French Embassy and it would have been done easily since the embassy is very supportive. We would have intervened and sought a solution but I think they were being misled by someone," the official said.

The IOA chief appreciated the French Embassy for its support.

"Many athletes will vouch that IOA has been proactive in getting their coaches and support personnel accreditations or visas from the Embassy of France in India.

"The Embassy in Delhi and its consulates elsewhere have extended the greatest support in processing visa requests not only from such personnel but also from journalists who do not have accreditation," she said. (PTI)

HURDLES OF LIFE

Jyothi Yarraji ready to put end to his mother's enormous struggles

NEW DELHI, July 17: When Jyothi Yarraji leaps past each hurdle in her bid to reach the finish line, it feels like she is trying to put behind all the struggles that her mother Kumari underwent while working in double shifts as a domestic help and a cleaner at a local hospital in Visakhapatnam.

It is her gutsy mother's positive mindset while struggling for sustenance that Yarraji would like to carry when she gets on the starting blocks of her 100m hurdles heats during the Paris Olympics.

Yarraji will become the first Indian to compete in the Olympics 100m hurdle as she made it to the Paris Games through world ranking quota.

"In the past, I did too much thinking, too much worried because of my family, my personal life and my background but I learnt a lot," Yarraji said at a virtual media interaction facilitated by Reliance Foundation.

"My situation is really bad sometimes. My mom always told

me to just keep going forward because we can't stop the present, past and the future."

"She told me 'You work for yourself, whatever the result it will come we will take it'. My mom will never tell me before a competition to win a medal, to win a gold. She will tell me to go and be healthy and be self-satisfied with whatever I am doing. That is why I always go forward with a positive mindset."

She also said that having people with positive mindset also has helped her as she tried to "improve my present, without thinking too much of the past and future".

"In the past, there was no great team around me. Now I have lots of positive people, a team of great mentality around me. That is helping me a lot. I always take the positivity with me. I try to change the negative thought into positive one," she said, referring to her support system led by her coach James Hillier, who is also the Athletics Director at Reliance Founda-



tion. Yarraji, who holds the national record of 12.78 second, admitted that there will be pressure during her debut Olympics but she is trying to remain calm and focused by doing meditation.

"I don't have experience of (competing in the) Olympics but I am confident that it will go well. I have experience of Asian Championships, Asian Games and World Championships and I hope to take

my plus points from there (Asian Games, Asian and World Championships) to the Olympics.

"It will be a tough and intense competition in Paris. There will be pressure but I will try to concentrate on my race so that I can reproduce what I had done in the training. I am now focussing more on recovery and meditation so that I remain calm and focussed," said Reliance Foundation athlete. (PTI)

Hardik Bhatt returns to Mumbai City FC ahead of ISL 2024-25 season

MUMBAI, July 17: India defender Hardik Bhatt will make a return to Mumbai City FC for the upcoming season after the Indian Super League side signed him on a one-year contract on Wednesday. Hardik, 27, had previously played for the two-time ISL Cup winners during the 2022-23 season on loan, during which the team won the league shield.

He had started his career with ARA Football Club in Ahmedabad, before making his senior debut with the side in 2018.

Since then, Bhatt has played for Bengaluru United (2019-20), Hyderabad Sports FC (2021-22) and Rajasthan United (2022).

After his stint with the Islanders, he returned to Rajasthan, where he came up with two assists and helped his team survive

relegation. Bhatt has so far featured in 47 competitive domestic outings, scoring two goals.

"I am delighted to be back with Mumbai City FC. The club holds a special place in my heart, and I am honoured to wear the jersey again," said Hardik after the signing. "It's a privilege to be part of a team that consistently raises the bar by winning titles, and I am looking forward to contributing to the team's success in the upcoming season."

Mumbai City head coach, Petr Kratky, said, "We are excited to have Hardik back with the club. He is a Mumbai native who has been with us before, and he is committed to improving his game and helping us move forward." (PTI)

IOA releases list of 117 athletes, 140 support staff for Olympics; shot-putter Abha Khatua missing

NEW DELHI, July 17: India will be represented by 117 athletes at this month's Paris Olympics after the sports ministry cleared the final contingent that also features 140 support staff and officials, of which 72 have been approved at "cost to the government" to meet the "requirements" of the travelling sportspersons.

The only qualified athlete missing from the list is shot-putter Abha Khatua. The Games will run from July 26 to August 11.

Khatua, who made the cut through world rankings quota, has been dropped without any explanation after her name was found missing from the World Athletics' list of Olympic participants a few days ago.

There is no word yet on whether her name has been knocked off owing to injury, a doping violation or any other technical issue.

The rest of the contingent that has been cleared is on expected lines with London Olympics bronze medal-winning former shooter Gagan Narang as chef-de-mission. Narang is also a vice president in the Indian Olympic

Association (IOA).

"The permissible limit for stay of support personnel in the Games Village against accreditation as per norms of the Paris Organising Committee for the 2024 Olympic Games is 67 including 11 IOA Contingent Officials, which includes five Medical Team Members," stated a letter from the ministry to IOA President P T Usha, explaining the ratio of support staff allowed as per the size of the contingent.

"For catering to the requirements of the athletes, additional coaches and other support staff numbering 72 have been approved at cost to the Government and arrangements for their stay have been made in Hotels/in locations outside the Games Village," it added.

Despite Khatua's absence, athletics will make for the biggest group in the contingent with 29 names (11 women and 18 men), followed by shooting (21) and hockey (19).

Table tennis will be represented by eight players, while badminton (7) will feature seven competitors,



including two-time Olympic medallist P V Sindhu.

Wrestling (6), archery (6), and boxing (6) will have six representatives each, followed by golf (4), tennis (3), swimming (2), sailing (2), and one each for equestrian,

judo, rowing and weightlifting.

The shooting contingent, which is the second biggest, consists of 11 women and 10 men, while table tennis will have four players each in both categories.

Tokyo Olympic silver medallist

Mirabai Chanu is the lone weightlifter in the contingent and will compete in women's 49kg category.

In Tokyo Olympics, India were represented by a 119-member contingent, and the country logged its best-ever performance of seven medals, including the historic javelin throw gold by Neeraj Chopra. Chopra will be there in Paris to defend his medal.

Besides, there will 21 contingent officials of which 11 will be accommodated at the Games Village, including Narang, two Deputy Chef de Mission, Press Attache, two Headquarter Officials and five medical team members.

The remaining 10 officials (eight medical team members, social media attache and a team official) will be accommodated in hotels outside the Games Village, the cost of which will be borne by the government.

Shooting (18) will have the highest number of support staff, which includes one High Performance Director and six coaches, who will stay at the Games Village

while the remaining 11 (four coaches, four physios, two psychologists, one strength and conditioning expert) will stay in hotels.

Athletics will have 17 support staff members, followed by wrestling (12), boxing (11), hockey (10), table tennis (9), badminton (9), golf (7), equestrian (5), archery (4), sailing (4), weightlifting (4) tennis (3), swimming (2) and judo (1).

The ministry letter further stated that Air Commodore Prashant Arya, Air Attache in Embassy of India at Paris will be Olympic Attache, who will have accreditation, and will be visiting the Games Village and competition venues to take care of any issues requiring assistance and intervention of the Embassy.

The golf competition will be conducted at the Le Golf National in Guyancourt, Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, which is around 42km from Paris. To ensure hassle-free travel and practice arrangements, the Indian golf contingent will stay at a hotel near the venue instead of the Games Village.

"...accordingly arrangements for accommodation for members of the Golf Team, including players, coaches, physio and caddy at the request of the Golf players and Indian Golf Union have been made in a Hotel near the competition venue," the ministry said in its letter.

In a bid to avoid doping embarrassment in Paris, the government has asked the IOA and concerned federations to take appropriate measures.

"The IOA, SAI, National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) and concerned National Sports Federations may take appropriate measures for conducting the dope tests. IOA may also ensure fitness of the team/individual sports person prior to their departure," it said.

Besides, the Paris Organising Committee will provide three cars for the Indian contingent without drivers.

"Embassy of India at Paris has been requested to assist in identification and temporary employment for these drivers," the ministry letter stated. (PTI)

Express yourself in Paris: Kapil Dev's advise to Olympics-bound Indian athletes



NEW DELHI, July 17: Former India skipper Kapil Dev, on Wednesday, advised Olympic-bound Indian athletes to express themselves fearlessly at the mega-event starting July 26 and hoped that the country would hit double digit mark on the medals tally.

India will be represented by a strong 117-member athlete contingent in Paris and the country hopes to better seven-medal count it logged in Tokyo.

"I can't really say for anybody but I can just wish them all the luck and hope we should win more medals this year and that's impor-

tant," Kapil, who is also the president of Professional Golf Tour of India (PGTI) said here on the sidelines of the launch of second edition of the Trinity Golf Champions League (TGCL).

"My advise to all (Indian athletes) would be to go and express yourself. I cross my finger and why not if we believe it (double digit medal haul) will happen."

Kapil, however, refrained from commenting on Indian cricket and newly-appointed head coach Gautam Gambhir.

"If Gautam Gambhir is taking that position (of head coach of In-

dian cricket team), I wish good luck to him and the team. I hope they do better than what we have done previously. I want to wish the Indian players all the best."

Kapil, who played a lot of amateur event back in the day, hoped that the sport will continue to grow in the country.

"When I started playing cricket, I never thought golf will reach this height. I hope to see golf reaching the heights of cricket one day," he said.

"We just need good sponsors to promote the game. Without sponsors nothing is possible. In 5 years time we should reach there," added Kapil, who is the ambassador of TGCL and also plays in the league.

Buoyed by the resounding success of the inaugural season last year, which featured four teams, TGCL this year will feature eight teams -- seven from India and one from Sri Lanka. The event will be held in Bengaluru from September 2 to 7.

The league is a IPL kind of a venture and will be played in the Ryder Cup format with 20 players in each team, which includes professional, celebrity and amateur golfers playing together.

The winning team will be richer by Rs 30 lakh, while second and third placed sides will get Rs 15 and Rs 10 lakh respectively.

"It's a unique concept, never seen something like this. I hope the prize money for the winners of TGCL will one million dollars in the next five years," Kapil said.

The eight teams participating in this year's TGCL are debutants Wave Riders,

Mumbai Warriors, Chandigarh Titans, Chennai Hustlers, Dakshin Rangers, Lahari Lions, Golfism and Colombo Lions. (PTI)

Nagal-Drzewiecki pair bows out of Nordea Open

BASTAD (SWEDEN), July 17: Olympic bound Indian tennis player Sumit Nagal and his Polish partner Karol Drzewiecki made a first round exit after suffering straight-set loss in the Nordea Open here.

The Indo-Polish pair suffered a 3-6 4-6 defeat in the hands of the French duo of Alexandre Muller and Luca Van Assche in a 59 minute round of 16 contest on Tuesday.

The 26-year-old however is still alive in the singles event. Nagal, who is now placed 68th in the ATP singles chart, next faces world number 36 Mariano Navone from Argentina.

Meanwhile, veteran Rohan Bopanna and N Sriram Balaji's men's doubles first round match against the German duo of Jakob Schnaitter and Mark Wallner at the Hamburg Open in Hamburg, Germany has been postponed to Thursday.

Bopanna and Balaji will also be pairing up for the Paris Olympics later this month.

In the same event, Jeevan Nedunchezhiyan and Vijay Sundar Prashanth won their second round qualifying match to advance to the main draw. (PTI)

Suryakumar holds 2nd spot, Jaiswal make gains in ICC T20I batting rankings

DUBAI, July 17: The big-hitting Suryakumar Yadav is the highest placed Indian at second spot, while young opener Yashasvi Jaiswal occupies the sixth position in the ICC T20I batting rankings issued on Wednesday.

Ruturaj Gaikwad has dropped a place to the eighth position in the T20I batters' list, which was updated following India's recent 4-1 series triumph over Zimbabwe.

Jaiswal was the big winner following his 141 runs in the series as he rose four places, behind No.1 ranked batter Travis Head of Australia and Suryakumar.

Shubman Gill, who led India against Zimbabwe in the absence of senior players and was the leading run-scorer of the series with 170 runs from five innings, moved up a whopping 36 places to 37th.

No Indian features in the top 10 of the T20I bowlers rankings. Axar Patel, who was rested for the Zimbabwe series, dropped four places to 13th spot.

Fast bowler Mukesh Kumar and spinner Washington Sundar also made upward movements.

Mukesh, who scalped eight wickets from three games, has



gained 36 places to rise to 46th spot. Washington, who picked up eight wickets in five matches, has risen 21 spots to 73rd rank.

England's Adil Rashid is leading T20I bowlers' chart ahead of South Africa's Anrich Nortje and Wanindu Hasaranga of Sri Lanka.

In the T20I all-rounders' rankings, India's Hardik Pandya

dropped four places to sixth while Axar slipped one rung to 13th.

Washington (41st) and Shivam Dube (43rd) have risen by eight and 35 places to 41st and 43rd spots respectively.

Sri Lanka's Hasaranga continues to top the all-rounders' list ahead of Australia's Marcus Stoinis and Zimbabwe skipper Sikan-dar Raza. (PTI)

Asian Paralympic Committee appoints Deepa Malik as representative for South Asia

NEW DELHI, July 17: India's first woman Paralympic medallist Deepa Malik has been named sub-regional representative for South Asia by the Asian Paralympic Committee (APC). This appointment, which was confirmed during the 34th Executive Board meeting of the APC, signifies a significant step forward for gender diversity and athlete-centric leadership in para-sports. She will take up her post immediately.

The former Paralympic Committee of India chief's appointment brings the number of female representatives on the APC Executive Board to five, making it the highest female representation

on the board in the history of the organization, according to a media release.

"Having more women during our Executive Board meetings is a very positive step forward, especially when one voice is of someone with the experience, skills and wisdom of Dr. Deepa Malik," APC President Majid Rashed said.

"The APC acknowledges Dr. Deepa's extensive experience and is confident that our members from the South Asia Sub Region will be excellently represented by you on the APC Executive Board," he added.

Malik's role will involve representing South

Asian nations and advocating for the development and promotion of para-sports across the region.

"It is an honor and an opportunity for me to represent South Asia and be a voice for our region. India for long is a flag bearer of 'Vasudev Kutumbakam' and now is also a right time to take a step forward in taking the lead in contributing to this one big family," Malik said.

"It's time for me to represent India at a bigger level and contribute in the collective growth of parasports and 'inclusion through sports' at large," she added. (PTI)

Trying to give the best support to Indian contingent but still being criticised: IOA chief Usha

NEW DELHI, July 17: Indian Olympic Association President PT Usha on Wednesday said "unprecedented teamwork" between the sports ministry, IOA and the national federations ensured that Paris-bound athletes got the support staff of their choice and lashed out at critics for turning a "blind eye to such synergy".

The Sports Ministry has cleared 117 athletes and 140 support staff for the Paris Olympics, beginning July 26, with the standout feature being an almost three-fold increase in the number of support staff, including personal coaches, mental trainers and physiotherapists.

A 13-member Sports Science team especially constituted by the IOA under renowned sports medicine expert, Dr Dinshaw Pardiwala, is also being sent with the team.

"At IOA, we have embarked on an era when athletes are at the centre of our planning and preparations. Instead of the usual 3:1 ratio between athletes and support staff, we have worked hard to change it to slightly better than 1:1 ratio," said Usha in a statement on Wednesday. She pointed out that 68 coaches and 50 support staff will accompany the 117 athletes.

Usha said despite the efforts to ensure athletes' demands were met, it was "disappointing" to hear that some reports were still painting a negative picture of the work.

"Together with the sports ministry, and its units, the National Sports Federations and a good bunch of corporate partners, IOA had forged unprecedented teamwork. It is shocking that some have turned a blind eye to such synergy," she added.

Despite the huge number of support staff being cleared, Antim Panghal, one of the six wrestlers who has qualified for the Olympics, is reportedly still waiting for visas for her four-member support staff, hampering her training.

Usha said she would ensure there are no further visa delays for any of the athletes' non-accredited support staff and that she would take up issue of Vikas's coach Bhagat Singh, physiotherapist Heera and sparring partner Vikas with the Embassy of France in India.

She blamed the now disbanded ad-hoc committee for the confusion.

"In its wisdom (the IOA-appointed) Ad Hoc Committee, administering wrestling, chose not to include the names of Antim's coach or physiotherapist in the long list of names sent to the Olympic Games Organising Committee," said Usha.

"It is strange that the responsible authorities, who approved the long list of athletes, coaching and support staff, did not deem it fit to recommend the inclusion of Bhagat Singh or Heera or Vikas. (PTI)

'Son rising': Race walker Suraj Panwar gears up for debut within debut at Olympics

NEW DELHI, July 17: Plucked out of his comfort zone and training without a partner for a mixed event in what is to be his debut Olympics, race walker Suraj Panwar is gearing up for quite a roller-coaster ride in Paris this month.

But he is quite used to upheaval. He was born into it.

The 23-year-old was an infant when his forest guard father Udai Singh Panwar was killed in the line of duty while trying to prevent illegal logging of trees. He was raised single-handedly by his mother Poonam, who worked at the forest department's nursery in a village near Dehradun and supported his sporting ambitions.

"I have never competed in marathon race walk mixed relay in my career, this is going to be my first time. So, I don't even have a target timing in my mind. But, it's a matter of representing my country and I will give my 100 per cent," Panwar told PTI in an interview.

The event was first introduced in a major championship at the World Athletics Race Walking Team Championships in Antalya, Turkey in April. It will make its Olympics debut in Paris.

Panwar, who is a 20km race walker, will pair with Priyanka Goswami in the new event which will cover the marathon distance of 42.195km. The first 12.195km will be covered by the male race walker before his female team-mate takes over for the next 10km.

After that, the male race walker will cover another 10km before his female counterpart takes over for the final 10km up to the finish line. The combined time of the two athletes



will be taken into consideration to decide the result.

"I will cover a little over 20km (22.195km in total in two legs) but the difference (from 20km race) is that I will do it with a break in between after completing 12.195km," he explained.

"At that time, Priyanka will be running her first 10km. I can do my recovery with the help of a masseur or physiotherapist and get ready for my next 10km," said Panwar, who won a 5000m race walk silver in 2018 Youth Olympics in Buenos Aires.

There will be change zones where the male and female race walkers will exchange wristbands, similar to change of batons in relay races.

But, interestingly, Panwar is not practising

with Priyanka, who is currently training abroad. She will reach Paris on July 28 or 29.

National record holder Priyanka will also be competing in the women's individual 20km race walk event in Paris.

"I am doing simulation practice (at SAI Bengaluru). After doing 12.195km, I will take a break of around 45 minutes. Then I resume again," said Panwar, who is currently training under Russian coach Tatiana Sibileva.

Panwar breached the Olympic qualifying standard (of 1:20.10) in 20km race walk event during the National Championships in Chandigarh in January by clocking 1 hour 19 minutes 44 seconds but World Athletics invalidated that result citing some technical

issues.

He still made the grade through the world ranking quota in the 20km event. But the Athletics Federation of India selected him for the marathon race walk mixed relay event.

"It (selection for Olympics) was a bit of a surprise. I was very disappointed after the National Championships timing was cancelled. I was thinking whether I will be picked for Olympics or not. I was very anxious," Panwar said.

"But I continued my training thinking it's alright if I don't go to Paris. But, the federation picked me after checking my overall results. It is a dream come true to be an Olympian," he added.

Panwar's stoic mother has been his inspiration growing up and she doesn't yet have a clear idea about his achievements. He had won a silver in the Youth Olympics in 2018, competing in a pair of second-hand shoes gifted to him by Olympian Manish Singh Rawat.

"I am focussing on my training routine. My mom told me to focus on my game and not on other things. So, I don't even talk to her too often on phone," he said.

Recently, Mission Olympic Cell included Panwar in the Target Olympics Podium Scheme's (TOPS) core group.

The inclusion will ensure that his training and other expenses are taken care of by the government. He will also get a monthly allowance of ₹ 50,000.

"I have kept it a secret from my mother till I begin to get the allowance. I will give her a surprise and tell her once I start getting the money. She will be very happy," he said. (PTI)