

6 WORLD

8 NATION

- Wildfires ravage southern S Korea, killing 24 people and forcing 27,000 to evacuate
- Sri Lanka slams Britain's 'unilateral action' to sanction its former generals
- Congress, SP 'barriers' in UP's development: CM Adityanath
- Share of middle class in national income at pre-colonial level: Kharge

Karbi Anglong delegation submits memorandum to Gadkari seeking swift implementation of Article 244(A)



HT Correspondent

KHERONI, March 26: Several organisations in Karbi Anglong on Wednesday submitted a memorandum to Union Minister Nitin Gadkari, urging for a bill in Parliament to expedite the implementation of Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution.

The delegation comprised representatives from the Karbi Anglong-Dima Hasao Autonomous State Demand Committee (KADHASC), Karbi Students' Association (KSA), and Dimasas Students' Union (DSU).

In addition, Members of Parliament Amarsing Tisso, and members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) Dr Numal Momin (Bokajan), Dorsing Ronghang (Howraghat), Bidya Sing Englang (Diphu), Rupsing Teron (Baithangso), and Nandita Gorlosa (Haf-long), along with the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council chief executive member (CEM) Dr Tuliram Ronghang and Dima Hasao Autonomous Council chief executive member Debolal Gorlosa, were also part of the delegation.

Gadkari, known for his proactive approach to infrastructure development, received the memorandum amid his busy schedule addressing regional issues. While no official response has been issued yet, the delegation expressed hope that their plea

would be taken up with the seriousness it deserves.

Speaking on behalf of the delegation, a representative emphasized the need for swift action, stating, "The people of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao have waited decades for the fulfillment of this constitutional promise. We urge the Government of India to introduce a Bill in Parliament without delay to ensure justice and self-governance for our communities."

It is worth mentioning that the delegation's primary demand is the immediate creation of an autonomous state encompassing the Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao regions within Assam, as promised under Article 244(A).

This constitutional provision allows for the establishment of an autonomous state with its own legislature or council of ministers—or both—granting greater autonomy over governance, law and order, and financial matters compared to the existing framework under the Sixth Schedule.

The submission of the memorandum follows a series of advocacy efforts by the groups, including a recent trip to Delhi where they sought meetings with top government officials. The demand for autonomy in Assam's hill districts has been a long-standing issue, tracing back to the 1950s, with renewed urgency in recent years.

'India has urged the interim regime to hold those behind minority violence accountable'

Bangladesh govt not acknowledging persecution of minorities: MEA to Par panel

NEW DELHI, March 26: The External Affairs Ministry is learnt to have told a parliamentary committee that the Bangladesh government has not only not acknowledged the systematic persecution of minorities in the country but has also sought to downplay the scale and nature of violence against Hindus since the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government, sources said.

The ministry, in its presentation to the Standing Committee on External Affairs headed by Congress MP Shashi Tharoor, underlined the rise in religious symbolism in public spaces in the neighbouring country with the capture of political vacuum by extremist groups promoting an ideology of the establishment of Islamic caliphate, the sources said.

Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri briefed the committee on the "Future of India-Bangladesh Relation-



ship" and various aspects of the Indian diaspora living across the world.

Tharoor told reporters later that the bulk of the meeting was devoted to a discussion with Misri on India's relationship with Bangladesh. "It was a very comprehensive discussion," he said, adding that the committee adopted

its report on the diaspora.

The ministry told the committee that the Bangladesh army chief in his public remarks has underlined the threat to the country by such fighting and factionalism in the country.

It cited frequent reports of lawless chaos steered by mob justice, vandalism of properties and

crimes against women and minorities.

The committee was told that Bangladesh Chief Adviser Md Yunus and his colleagues termed the reports of atrocities against minorities as media exaggeration and have tried to justify them as not communal but as "political killings" of the Awami League members.

The Indian government, the ministry said, has repeatedly asked the interim regime in the neighbouring country to bring to justice the accused behind violence against minorities, sources said.

While there have been some arrests, serious actions against the culprits have not yet been taken, even as incidents of attack on minorities and their places of worship continue to be reported, it said, adding that India is continuously monitoring the situation.

The ministry said India's work-

ing-level engagements with Bangladesh have provided a framework of bilateral cooperation while working towards ensuring that its core strategic concerns continue to be addressed.

It said that while India continues to be interested in advancing mutual interests and priorities, it is crucial that Bangladesh pays due attention to its security and strategic concerns in the region, according to the sources.

The ministry in its briefing said that the stability of Bangladesh is of paramount importance to the region and that a constructive and cooperative relationship with the country is important for the continued security and safety at borders.

The continued release of violent Islamic extremists who had been sentenced for serious crimes is a matter of grave concern for law and order as well as for regional and global security, it added. (PTI)

Indian-origin law enforcement official appointed to important role in FBI

NEW YORK, March 26: An Indian-origin law enforcement official, who worked on temporary assignments at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, has been appointed to a critical role in the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Shohini Sinha has been named by the FBI as the assistant director of the Victim Services Division. She had most recently served as the special agent in charge of the Salt Lake City Field Office.

Sinha joined the FBI as a special agent in 2001. She was first assigned to the Milwaukee Field Office, where she worked in counterterrorism investigations. She also served temporary assignments at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, the FBI Legal Attaché Office in London, and the Baghdad

Operations Center, a statement issued here said.

She was promoted in 2009 to supervisory special agent and transferred to the Counterterrorism Division in Washington, D.C. She served as program manager of Canada-based extraterritorial investigations and facilitated liaison efforts with Washington-based Canadian liaison officers.

In 2012, Sinha was promoted to assistant legal attaché in Ottawa, Canada, working on counterterrorism matters in collaboration with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. In 2015, she was promoted to field supervisor in the Detroit Field Office, where she led squads responsible for investigating (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Trump cites India as example in executive order on overhauling American election system

NEW YORK, March 26: President Donald Trump has cited India and Brazil in his executive order to overhaul the American election system, saying the two countries are linking voter identification to a biometric database while the US relies on self-attestation for citizenship.

The sweeping executive order, signed by Trump on Tuesday, states that "despite pioneering self-government, the US now "fails to enforce basic and necessary election protections used by both developed and developing nations."

"India and Brazil, for example, are tying voter identification to a biometric database, while the United States largely relies on self-attestation for citizenship," according to the order.

"In tabulating votes, Germany and Canada require the use of paper ballots, counted in public by local officials, which substantially reduces the number of disputes as compared to the American patchwork of voting methods that can lead to basic chain-of-custody problems," it said.

"Further, while countries like Denmark and Sweden

sensibly limit mail-in voting to those unable to vote in person and do not count late-arriving votes regardless of the date of postmark, many American elections now feature mass voting by mail, with many officials accepting ballots without postmarks or those received well after Election Day," it said.

In India, the Election Commission is exploring linking voter cards with Aadhaar, which includes a biometric database. On March 18, the EC said technical consultations between its experts and the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) for the exercise would "begin soon".

The poll authority said that while voting rights could only be granted to a citizen of India, according to Article 326 of the Constitution, Aadhaar establishes a person's identity and not citizenship or right to get enrolled as a voter.

The President also called for "free, fair, and honest elections unmarred by fraud, errors, or suspicion."

"Free, fair, and honest elections unmarred by fraud, errors, or suspicion are fundamental to maintaining our constitutional Republic. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Taking relentless action against bank loan defaulters, fugitives: Sitharaman

NEW DELHI, March 26: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Wednesday said relentless action is being taken against bank loan defaulters, including fugitives, and assured the Rajya Sabha that the government is not lying low in dealing with fraud cases.

The finance minister, while replying to a discussion on the Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill 2024, NPAs have reduced drastically and the government has remained "absolutely committed" to taking stringent recovery action against wilful defaulters.

Opposition parties have been repeatedly raking up the issue of loan write-offs of large corporate borrowers and economic fugitives.

To this, Sitharaman said write-offs do not mean waivers. Borrowers of written-off loans remain liable to repay their dues and banks continue to pursue recovery actions in written-off accounts using various mechanisms.

She said that during the last five years, the Directorate of Enforcement has taken up around 912 cases related to bank fraud, including those pertaining to wilful default, and approximately ₹ 44,204 crore of

proceeds of crime have been attached/seized/frozen in these cases.

In eight cases, assets amounting to ₹ 22,276 crore have been restituted to banks/legitimate claimants/victims of money-laundering. Also, 144 accused persons have been arrested, and 239 prosecution complaints, including 66 supplementary prosecution complaints, have been filed before Special Courts.

Besides, 23 accused persons have been declared Proclaimed Offenders and 9 have been convicted under PMLA, Sitharaman said.

The minister said action has been taken against economic offenders who fled the country.

As on December 31, 2024, nine individuals have been declared as Fugitive Economic Offenders (FEOs), and assets worth ₹ 749.83 crore have been confiscated. "So action is going on relentlessly. We have not let it lie low," she said.

The minister further said the government's efforts have not been restricted to structural reforms alone. The government has deepened financial inclusion, took banking to the last (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

India likely to add 150 million room ACs by 2035 amid rising temperatures: Study

'This growth is outpacing India's power supply and could lead to serious electricity shortages'

NEW DELHI, March 26: India is expected to add 130-150 million new room air conditioners (ACs) over the next decade which could increase the country's peak power demand by more than 180 gigawatts (GW) by 2035, straining the power system, according to a new study published on Wednesday.

The study by the India Energy and Climate Center (IECC) at the University of California (UC) in Berkeley said the fastest-developing major economy can avoid severe power shortages and save consumers up to Rs 2.2 lakh crore (USD 26 billion) by doubling the energy efficiency of room ACs over the next 10 years.

India adds 10-15 million new ACs annually, with another 130-150 million expected over the next decade. Without policy intervention, ACs alone could drive 120 GW of peak power demand by 2030 and 180 GW by 2035, nearly 30 per cent of the projected totals,



the study said.

"This growth is outpacing India's power supply and could lead to serious electricity shortages as early as 2026," said Nikit Abhyankar, the study's lead author and UC Berkeley faculty.

"ACs are becoming one of the biggest drivers of peak demand, and without intervention, we risk blackouts or costly emergency fixes. But with smart policy, we

can turn this into a win for consumers, manufacturers and the grid," he said.

PTI reported on Monday that India is likely to experience a nine to 10 per cent growth in peak electricity demand this summer with the country expected to experience more heat waves.

Last year, the all-India peak electricity demand crossed 250 GW on May 30, which was 6.3 per

cent higher than the projections. Climate change-induced heat stress is one of the key factors driving electricity demand.

The share of the household sector in India's total electricity consumption increased from 22 per cent in 2012-13 to 25 per cent in 2022-23. Much of this rise can be attributed to economic growth and the increasing need for cooling due to rising temperatures, experts say.

In the summer of 2024, room air conditioner sales surged by 40 to 50 per cent year-on-year amid record-breaking temperatures.

According to an ongoing research at the Oxford India Centre for Sustainable Development at the University of Oxford, the largest cooling demand, in terms of the total population, will come from India, followed by China, Nigeria, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Brazil, the Philippines and the US in a world two degrees Celsius warmer than pre-industrial times. The study (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Maternity scheme severely underfunded: Sonia Gandhi

NEW DELHI, March 26: Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) chairperson Sonia Gandhi on Wednesday said the government's flagship programme to provide maternity benefits to pregnant women is "severely underfunded", resulting in a drastic fall in entitlements to beneficiaries.

Raising the issue through a Zero Hour mention in the Rajya Sabha, she said Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) has seen a drastic fall in the number of beneficiaries and asked the government why this was allowed to happen.

Gandhi said the National Food Security Act (NFSA), passed by Parliament in September 2013 under the leadership of the then prime minister Manmohan Singh in September 2013, has been the foundation for PM Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY), which was launched during Covid-19 to provide foodgrains to poor families. PMGKY currently has 81 crore beneficiaries. Under NFSA, pregnant women were entitled to maternity benefit of ₹ 6,000 per child, paid in two instalments.

PMMVY was launched in 2017 to fulfil this entitlement. But under PMMVY, only ₹ 5,000 is given for the first child and the benefits are extended to the second child only if it is a girl.

"According to an informed analysis for 2022-23, about 68 per cent of pregnant women received at least one instalment of PMMVY for their first birth, but this number drastically dropped to 12 per cent (in) the following year. I would like to ask the Union government



why this was allowed to happen," she asked.

She also questioned the provision for PMMVY not being separately mentioned in the Union Budget documents. "The full implementation of the maternity benefits provision requires an annual budget of around ₹ 12,000 crore. Surprisingly, the Budget documents do not contain separate information on allocations for PMMVY," she said.

All that the Budget documents reveal is that there is a programme called Samarthyaa in the Ministry of Women and Child Development. It has five components, of which PMMVY is one.

"The allocation in 2025-26 for Samarthyaa is only ₹ 2,521 crore. This clearly shows that the PMMVY is severely underfunded, thereby violating the key provisions of the law passed by Parliament," she said. This is the second time (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Punjab Budget FY26: ₹ 5,598 cr for health sector, drug problem in focus

CHANDIGARH, March 26: Punjab Finance Minister Harpal Singh Cheema on Wednesday presented a ₹ 2.36 lakh crore budget, which focusses on tackling drug menace in the state, and allocated a whopping ₹ 5,598 crore for the health sector.

No fresh taxes were imposed in the budget for financial year 2025-26. It was silent on giving monthly ₹ 1,000 to women which was one of the poll promises of the AAP before coming to power.

He said the biggest threat to the progress and prosperity of Punjab is the drug problem.

"We are taking yet another landmark initiative to effectively fight the war against drugs. We have to fight this war not just with force and weapons, but also scientifically through data and analysis."

"We have decided to carry out the first-ever 'drug census' in Punjab next year (fiscal). This census will cover every household of Punjab and will collect data to understand the prevalence of drugs, usage of de-addiction centres, etc, besides collecting data on socio-economic status of the people of Punjab," Cheema said.

This data will be used to craft an effective and scientific strategy to eradicate the drug menace. He said Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann's visionary leadership has been the driving force behind Punjab's remarkable progress over the past three years.

Cheema proposed a total budget expenditure of ₹ 2,36,080 crore for FY 2025-26. The effective revenue deficit and fiscal deficit are expected to be 2.51 per cent and 3.84 per cent respectively.

Cheema said the Punjab government will establish a second line of defence at border by deploying 5,000 home guards alongside BSF.



He said that for the first time in Punjab's history, Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann's government has decided to extend the state health insurance scheme in the coming fiscal year to make it universal and cover all the 65 lakh families in Punjab.

There will be no bar or discrimination—rural or urban, rich or poor—everyone can participate in this scheme, he said.

Cheema said the government is extending the insurance cover for all the families of Punjab to ₹ 10 lakh per annum.

"This includes those enrolled in central government schemes too, they will get an additional top-up cover of ₹ 5 lakh from the state government. Further, all families who are covered under Mukh Mantri Sarbat Sehat Bima Yojana will receive a 'Sehat Card' next year through which they can avail

cashless treatment up to ₹ 10 lakh in government and private hospitals across Punjab," he said.

Moreover, a budgetary allocation of ₹ 5,598 crore has been provided for the health sector, an increase of ten per cent over the previous year.

To incentivise crop diversification, a new scheme covering three districts -- Bathinda, Kapurthala and Gurdaspur -- is being introduced for Kharif maize crop. On stubble burning issue, he said it is a national concern and the Punjab government is committed to addressing it.

An allocation of ₹ 9,992 crore has been made for providing power subsidy to the agriculture sector. A state-of-the-art shrimp processing unit is proposed to support farming in waterlogged areas, Cheema said. Cheema said the cost of availing doorstep delivery of government services is being reduced from ₹ 120 to ₹ 50.

Presenting the fourth budget of the AAP government in Punjab, Cheema said, Chief Minister Mann's "unwavering commitment to the welfare of our people has guided us in delivering transformative change across multiple sectors, laying a strong foundation for a prosperous and empowered Punjab".

During his speech, Cheema took a dig at rival parties who ruled Punjab in the past, and alleged they have destroyed and looted the state. "...The only legacy these parties left in Punjab was that of 'Udta Punjab,'" said Cheema targeting them on the drug issue.

An entire generation of youth is being eaten hollow from within due to drugs, he lamented adding that the AAP government's resolve is to build a "Rangla Punjab", a Punjab that is inclusive, progressive, and brimming with opportunity for all. (PTI)

Sensex falls by 728 pts, snaps 7-day gaining streak on profit-taking in IT, banking shares

MUMBAI, March 26: Stock markets snapped the seven-day winning run on Wednesday with benchmark Sensex tanking 728 points due to profit-taking in banking and IT shares ahead of monthly expiry of derivatives contracts.

The 30-share BSE Sensex declined by 728.69 points or 0.93 per cent to settle at 77,288.50 as 25 of its components closed in the red. During the day, it slumped 822.97 points or 1.05 per cent to 77,194.22.

The NSE Nifty dropped 181.80 points or 0.77 per cent to 23,486.85.

In the past seven trading days, the BSE benchmark index jumped 4,188.28 points or 5.67 per cent. The Nifty surged 1,271.45 points or 5.67 per cent during the same period.

From the Sensex pack, NTPC, Tech Mahindra, Zomato, Axis Bank, Bajaj Finance, Infosys, Maruti, State Bank of India, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Reliance Industries, Hindustan Unilever, and HDFC Bank were the losers.

IndusInd Bank, HCL Tech, Titan, Mahindra & Mahindra and Power Grid were the gainers.

"The market experienced profit-taking after the recent gains, on the back of next week's US tariff announcements. The sectors with higher exposure to the US market, like pharma & IT, have witnessed some selling pressure," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Investments Limited, said.

Among Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo and Hong Kong settled in the positive territory while Shanghai ended lower.

European markets were trading lower. US markets ended higher on Tuesday.

"Markets declined after a brief pause amid mixed cues. Following an initial uptick, Nifty remained range-bound in the first half, but profit-taking in select heavyweights dragged the index lower as the session progressed. Participants are booking profits ahead of the March derivatives contract expiry, while concerns over tariff discussions continue to weigh on

sentiment," Ajit Mishra SVP, Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said.

The BSE smallcap gauge declined 1.45 per cent and midcap dipped 0.67 per cent.

Among BSE sectoral indices, oil & gas dropped the most by 1.52 per cent, followed by realty (1.37 per cent), utilities (1.32 per cent), energy (1.29 per cent), bankex (1.08 per cent), BSE Focused IT (1.12 per cent), IT (1.11 per cent) and teck (0.77 per cent).

Capital Goods emerged as the only gainer.

As many as 3,115 stocks declined while 919 advanced and 109 remained unchanged on the BSE.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth ₹ 5,371.57 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.58 per cent to USD 73.44 a barrel.

The BSE benchmark gained 32.81 points or 0.04 per cent to settle at 78,017.19 on Tuesday. The Nifty eked out gains of 10.30 points or 0.04 per cent to 23,668.65. (PTI)

Bandhan Bank signs MoU with Indian Air Force to provide corporate salary account

KOLKATA, March 26: Private lender Bandhan Bank on Wednesday said it has inked an MoU with the Indian Air Force to provide corporate salary accounts to the defence personnel.

The 'Bandhan Bank Shaurya Salary Account' will have features like zero balance savings account, protection for self and family, and attractive interest rates, the lender said in a statement.

"Bandhan Bank, with its pan Indian presence, is deeply committed to support the nation through every initiative. We are excited to strengthen our partnership with the IAF to deliver superior banking experience," Executive Director and Chief Business Officer Rajinder Babbar said. The RBI has appointed Bandhan Bank as an agency bank. The lender has been also authorised by the Central Board of Direct Taxes for collection of taxes, and disbursement of central civil and railway pensions.

Bandhan Bank currently has 6,300 banking outlets, with total business touching Rs 2.73 lakh crore, the statement said. (PTI)



Rupee rises 3 paise to close at 85.69 against US dollar

MUMBAI, March 26: The rupee pared its initial losses and settled for the day higher by 3 paise at 85.69 against the US dollar on Wednesday, supported by a resurgence of foreign fund inflows. Forex dealers said the rupee is facing renewed pressure on liquidity constraints, concerns over reciprocal tariff implementations and month-end demand for the US currency from importers.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 85.71 then touched an intraday high of 85.68 and a low of 85.98 against the greenback. The unit ended the session at 85.69 against the dollar, registering a gain of 3 paise from its previous closing level.

On Tuesday, the rupee snapped its seven-session rally and settled with a loss of 11 paise at 85.72 against the US dollar. (PTI)

Gold snaps 4-day losing streak, climbs ₹ 235 to ₹ 90,685/10 g

NEW DELHI, March 26: Cutting short the four-day losing streak, gold prices rebounded by ₹ 235 to ₹ 90,685 per 10 grams on Wednesday amid firm global trends, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

On Tuesday, the yellow metal of 99.9 per cent purity had ended at ₹ 90,450 per 10 grams. Gold of 99.5 per cent purity rose by ₹ 235 to ₹ 90,235 per 10 grams against the previous close of ₹ 90,000 per 10 grams.

According to the traders, fresh buying by retailers after recent losses led to the recovery in gold prices. Firm global trends also influenced the sentiment. Similarly, silver prices recovered by ₹ 1,500 to ₹ 1,01,500 per kg. The metal had settled at ₹ 1,00,000 per kg on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, spot gold traded 0.16 per cent higher at USD 3,024.96 per ounce in the global markets. Also, Comex gold futures for April delivery in the Asian market hours quoted higher

at USD 3,059.10 per ounce.

"Gold edged slightly higher on Wednesday, buoyed by safe-haven demand and strong inflow from gold-backed Exchange Traded Funds (ETFs). "The uncertainty surrounding US President Donald Trump's reciprocal tariff decision on April 2 appears to be a crucial factor supporting safe-haven metal gold," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst of Commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst - Commodity and Currency at LKP Securities, said market participants are awaiting key macroeconomic data, including US GDP and Core Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) Price Index, scheduled for release later this week.

"The broader trend will also be influenced by developments in the Russia-Ukraine situation, which continues to drive safe-haven demand," Trivedi added. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Indian-origin law enforcement

international terrorism matters. In early 2020, Sinha was transferred to the Cyber Intrusion squad, which worked on national security and criminal cyber intrusion matters. Later in 2020, she was promoted to assistant special agent in charge for national security matters, and later criminal matters, in the Portland Field Office.

Sinha was selected to serve as the executive special assistant to the director in 2021. She has been serving as the special agent in charge of the Salt Lake City Field Office since July of 2023.

Before her employment with the FBI, Sinha worked as a therapist and later as an administrator for a private, not-for-profit clinic. She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in mental health counselling from Purdue University in Indiana, it said. (PTI)

Naxal violence down by 81 per

"Incidents of violence by Left Wing Extremists which reached its highest level of 1,936 in 2010 have reduced to 374 in 2024 i.e. a reduction of 81 per cent. The total number of deaths (civilians + security forces) has also reduced by 85 per cent during this period from 1,005 deaths in 2010 to 150 in 2024," he said in a written reply.

The minister said during the last six years, incidents of violence by LWE which were 501 in 2019 have reduced to 374 in 2024 i.e. a reduction of 25 per cent. The total number of deaths (civilians and security forces) has also reduced by 26 per cent during this period from 202 deaths in 2019 to 150 in 2024, he said. (PTI)

Taking relentless action against

citizen, and ensured a citizen-centric banking interface, she said. Over 55 crore Jan Dhan accounts have been opened, of which over 55 per cent have been by women, and over 66 per cent have been in rural/semiurban centre bank branches.

She emphasised the Modi government has taken numerous steps to ensure that financial inclusion does not stop with merely with 'Banking the Unbanked' and instead enables meaningful engagement with financial services.

To counter opposition's assertions that enough employment was not being generated, Sitharaman said the Modi government has created 3.94 lakh jobs in Public Sector Banks (PSB) alone across different cadres and levels. The Rajya Sabha later passed the Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill with voice vote. It had got the approval of the Lok Sabha in December 2024. (PTI)

Trump cites India as example in

The right of American citizens to have their votes properly counted and tabulated, without illegal dilution, is vital to determining the rightful winner of an election," it said.

President Trump has repeatedly questioned certain voting methods since he lost the 2020 US Presidential election to Democrat Joe Biden.

He has for years spread unproven claims about widespread voter fraud involving noncitizens and mail-in ballots. He has repeatedly described his 2020 election defeat as "rigged," pointing to expanded mail-in balloting that was allowed during the coronavirus pandemic, the Hill reported. (PTI)

India likely to add 150 million

by the University of California recommends updating India's Minimum Energy Performance Standards (MEPS), beginning with a 2027 revision that raises the 1-star label to ISEER 5.0 -- equivalent to today's 5-star level -- and tightening standards every three years. This alone could avoid 10 GW of shortages by 2028, 23 GW by 2030 and 60 GW by 2035, equivalent to 120 large power plants. "This is not just about long-term energy savings; it's an immediate grid reliability solution," Abhyankar added.

Efficient ACs also offer massive consumer benefits. Even with slightly higher upfront prices, they could deliver net savings of ₹ 66,000 to ₹ 2,25,000 crore (USD 8-26 billion) by 2035, paying for themselves within two to three years through lower electricity bills.

"A common concern with efficient ACs is that they might be more expensive," said Amol Phadke, co-author and UC Berkeley faculty.

"But our analysis of global markets, including India, shows that efficiency is not the main factor driving retail prices. With the right policy support, higher efficiency often goes hand in hand with lower costs, thanks to economies of scale, better supply chains and competitive markets," he added. Over 600 AC models -- 20 per cent of all offerings -- already exceed India's top efficiency threshold, the 5-star level, with many produced by domestic manufacturers. "This is a chance for Indian manufacturers to lead," said Jose Dominguez, co-author and IECC researcher. "With the right policy signal, they can scale under Make in India and PLI (Production Linked Incentive) schemes, positioning India as a global hub for sustainable and affordable cooling," he said.

The report also calls for updating AC test procedures to better reflect India's humid climate, where comfort depends not just on cooling but on moisture removal. (PTI)

Maternity scheme severely

in the current sitting of the Rajya Sabha in the Budget Session where Gandhi has raised an issue. On March 18, she raised concern over the dilution of employment guarantee under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). (PTI)

GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM OFFICE OF THE JOINT DIRECTOR OF FISHERIES (HILLS) DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG

No.AFHD-7/2024-25/264
2025

Dated Diphu the 26th March'

NOTICE

In continuation to earlier advertisement vide this office letter No. AFHD-7/2024-25/253-58 Dated Diphu the 18th March' 2025 against the existing sanctioned vacant post of Chowkidar (Grade-IV), the following candidates have been shortlisted for appearing for the viva-voce to be held on 28-03-2025 at Department of Fisheries, Biven Hemtun (Meen Bhawan), Amalapatty, Diphu, Karbi Anglong from 11.00 AM onwards.

Sl. No.	Name & Father's Name	Sl. No.	Name & Father's Name
1	William Rongpi S/o : David Rongpi	9	Sumphong Timung S/o : Longsing Timung
2	Sona Sing Engti S/o : Suren Engti	10	Robindra Singnar S/o : Sarthe Singnar
3	Malini Rongpharpi D/o : Borsing Rongphar	11	Absolom Rongpi S/o : Jason Rongpi
4	Ratan Timung S/o : Rajen Timung	12	Monsing Timung S/o : Dhonsing Timung
5	Sanjoy Bhattacharjee S/o : Bibhash Bhattacharjee	13	Alish Hansepi D/o : Borsing Hanse
6	Padum Kurmi D/o : Mahesh Kurmi	14	Mohansing Ronghang S/o : Late Kat Ronghang
7	Rustom Rongphar S/o : Birsing Rongphar	15	Amir Bey S/o : Joyram Bey
8	Jackson Bey S/o Mangolsing Bey		

- The candidates are to bring all original testimonials for verification before the interview on the date and time as mentioned above.
- No separate call letters will be issued to any candidates for the said viva-voce.
- The candidates should mandatorily be present when called for interview or else the candidates will be treated as absent and subsequently disqualified.
- No travelling allowance is admissible for appearing in the interview.
- The candidates who have provided their contact numbers in their applications will be contacted individually also for appearing for the viva-voce.
- The department of Fisheries does not take any responsibility for any typing errors.

Sd/-
Joint Director of Fisheries
(Hills)
Diphu, Karbi Anglong

ENGINEERING WORKS AT NEW BG RAILWAY LINE PROJECT FROM JIRIBAM TO TUPUL

Tender Notice No. CON/J-I/JRBM/2025/03; Dated: 21-03-2025. Open tender through e-Tendering system is invited from experienced and reputed contractor(s)/firm(s) for the following works:- Tender No.: DYCE-CON-JT-MIS-2025-03; Name of work: Housekeeping of rest house & site camp office by supplying manpower and supply of drinking water for the use of RPSF/CRPF Security personnel camped in between Jiribam to Thingpou for the period of 12 months) under Dy/CE/CON/Jiribam at Silchar in connection with the construction of New BG Railway Line Project from Jiribam to Tupul (Impfal). Tender Value: ₹1,20,02,732.78; Earnest Money: ₹2,10,000.00; Date & Time for submission of Tender : From 29-03-2025 to 12-04-2025 upto 13:00 hrs. Opening date & time: 12-04-2025 at 13:30 hrs. For details please visit www.bids.gov.in.

Dy/CE/CON/Jiribam, Silchar
Northeast Frontier Railway
(Construction Organisation)
"Serving Customers with a smile"

NAME CORRECTION

I, Smt. Sitara Basumatary, D/O late Ganga Ram Boro & W/o Sri Sunil Basumatary, a permanent resident of village Harilal Basti, Ward, No. 3, Diphu, P.O. & P.S., Diphu, district Karbi Anglong, do hereby solemnly affirm and declare that before my marriage I used to write my name and title as 'Sitara Boro', and after my marriage I use to write my name and title is 'Sitara Basumatary' of my husband, instead of my own title 'Boro' as per Hindu rites and custom.

That I swear this affidavit before the Executive Magistrate, Diphu Court, Diphu as a piece of evidence of proof and declare that I shall at all times hereafter in all records, deeds, writings and in all proceedings and transactions upon all occasions whatsoever use and sign the name of 'Smt. Sitara Basumatary' as my name in place and in substitution of my former name 'Smt. Sitara Boro.'

FIR Lodged at Dhubri Police Station Bank employee siphons off ₹ 34 lakh, goes traceless



HT Correspondent
DHUBRI, March 26: In a startling case of embezzlement, an employee of UCO Bank's South Salmara branch situated in Ward

No. 5, in Dhubri town, is accused of syphoning off rupees thirty four lakh before escaping the district.

The accused, identified as Shivshankar Prasad Bin, resident of Dhubri reportedly diverted about eight lakh rupees deposited by customers without crediting them to the bank. Not only were customer deposits misappropriated, but significant amounts, approximately twenty-six lakh, from the bank's own reserves were also taken, raising serious concerns about the branch's internal security and financial protocols.

The incident came to light when Chiradeep Paul, the branch manager of the South Salmara branch, was informed by two to three cus-

tomers regarding deposit balance.

Paul immediately filed a written complaint at the Dhubri Sadar police station, highlighting the irregularities and disappearance of the accused.

Despite the FIR being registered, the police have yet to trace the whereabouts of Shivshankar Prasad Bin. The incident has created panic among customers and raised concerns regarding the security of their deposits.

The investigation is ongoing, and further developments are awaited. The bank authorities, along with law enforcement, are now working together to recover the embezzled funds and apprehend the fugitive employee.

Junior engineer of Fakiragram municipality board arrested

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, March 26: The Directorate of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption on Wednesday arrested Junior Engineer Nekibuz Zaman red-handed while accepting a ₹ 10,000 bribe at his office in Fakiragram Municipal Board in Kokrajhar.

Zaman was allegedly demanding the bribe from a complainant in exchange for granting permission to renovate a shop. Acting on the complaint, vigilance officials laid a trap and arrested him while taking the bribe.

According to source, Zaman has been demanding bribe from the businessmen for granting permission to do other activities works in the town, and accordingly he has apprehended today by vigilance. Interrogation is underway.

'New generation media persons must upgrade their skill to cope with new challenges'

There are still journalists whom cannot be bought with money

HT CORRESPONDENT
SIVASAGAR, March 26: While addressing a workshop today organized by Sivasagar E-media Association in association of Sibsagar Girls' College on "Journalism as a career", Sachin Gogoi, the Editorial Lead of the BBC, New Delhi, and a Special Correspondent on SE Asian issues, said that our new generation of journalists, especially from rural areas, must upgrade their skill to outsmart the new challenges faced by the media world.

Gogoi quoted George Orwell, author of Animal Farm and 1984, who said that Journalism is printing something which people do not want to be printed, and that should be the guiding spirit of every journalist. Referring to noted US journalist Carl Bernstein, Gogoi said

that journalist should challenge people not amuse them with their stories. He expressed his concern that the new generation has left the habit of reading books and journals. In-depth study of the issues builds the analytical mind which can make a mark in journalism, he added.

Referring to journalist Ravish Kumar, Gogoi said that the new journalists should keep up his own brand or identity even while working in an organisation.

On government controlling media, Gogoi said that there must be a broad consensus on quality of news dissemination and if the media people stand together no government can force them to toe their line. Paying homage to Kamala Saikia and Parag Kumar Das,

Gogoi said that there are still journalists whom cannot be bought with money. India unfortunately stands at 159th position among 180 countries though theoretically press freedom exist there, he said. A news report is an intellectual property and free distribution of news leads to degradation of news values. Sachin Gogoi criticised police action against a journalist while working in his field and such repressive activity by the authority leave a bad name in international fora.

Earlier, delivering the welcome address, Protim Sharma, principal, Sibsagar Girls' College said that in the age of AI, Algorithms and Post-truth, the media world has been facing a stiff challenge and our journalist must take up the challenge and go ahead.

Rubber plantation set into fire

HT Correspondent
BOKAJAN, March 26: Unknown miscreants set ablaze the rubber plantation of Anand Terang at Sangtilangso near Chunganaj village yesterday and totally destroyed the plantation.

According to information, yesterday at around 11 am some unknown miscreants set ablaze the seven bighas of rubber plantations of Terang. The owner of the rubber plantation Terang is in grief as he has already invested around ₹ 2 lakh planting the rubber plants. It's been only two years since the rubbers were planted.

70th annual session of Shatadal Sakha Sahitya Sabha concludes

HT Correspondent
NAGAON, March 26: The 70th annual conference of the Puranigudam Shatadal Sakha Sahitya Sabha was successfully held at the Chariali Hem Baruah High School in Puranigudam on Sunday last here. The conference was organized by Shatadal Sakha Sahitya Sabha in collaboration with the villagers of Puranigudam Potharaag village and Bishnu Rabha Yuva Sangha, Puranigudam.

UPPL leader Rajen Boro passes away

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, March 26: Noted social activist and senior UPPL party leader of Bhergaon district, Rajen Boro passed away on Tuesday evening at a private hospital in New Delhi.

According to source, Boro underwent for a dental surgery treatment in New Delhi on March 22 after suffering dental tumor, and since post surgery his health condition deteriorated, and breathed his last at 9 pm on Tuesday evening.

Boro was president of the Bhergaon district committee of United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) party. He was hailed from Gopipur village under Paneri police station in Udalguri district.

He was an active social worker and popularly well known amongst the citizens for active involvement in the social uplift and development in his locality.

He was former president of the Paneri anchalik committee ABSU, and former convener of the PCDR of Bhergaon district committee in 2015, and held several positions of UPPL party besides CWC member of the party

SITA sponsored project on scientific goat farming with GB College



HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 26: State Innovation and Transformation Aayog (SITA) Vice-Chairman Narayan Chandra Borkatakty inaugurated SITA sponsored project 'Scientific Goat Farming' on March 26 at an official programme held at Ghanakanta Baruah College, Morigaon in collaboration with Jarabari Agro Producers Co-operative Society Ltd.

In the meeting Vice-Chairman Narayan Chandra Borkatakty also handed over the first installment of fund for the project to the Principal of GB College, Morigaon Bishnu Prasad Upadhaya amounting to ₹ 9,63,000.

The event marked a transformative step towards modernizing the agricultural sector with sustainable and scientifically-backed farming

practices. The ceremony began with a formal introduction to the Scientific Goat Farming Initiative, which aims to revolutionize goat farming by implementing advanced technologies and best practices to increase productivity, enhance the quality of livestock, and ensure better economic sustainability for women beneficiaries.

The project aimed to empower individuals with practical skills and provide practical training for empowering skill in goat farming. It also aims in establishing a village level knowledge sharing centre for dissemination of technology and capacity building of women farmers for undertaking goat farming as profitable business enterprise. The scheme is prepared in four clusters each with a unit of 20

women beneficiaries. Each cluster will be provided financial aid prior to which training of the beneficiaries shall be mandated before the commencement of farms.

Speaking on the occasion, vice-chairman Narayan Chandra Borkatakty expressed his gratitude to all the stakeholders stressing the importance of scientific farming practices in uplifting local communities and contributing to the nation's agricultural growth. He emphasized that the project is not only a stepping stone for local economies but also aims to create new opportunities for women employment, particularly in rural areas. With the commencement of the project and the release of the first installment, it is anticipated that the Scientific Goat Farming initiative will set a new benchmark

for goat farming practices in the region, supporting women in increasing their livelihoods while contributing to a more sustainable agricultural future.

In the meeting Co-Vice Chairman Dhruva Prasad Baishya further highlighted that the initiative is designed with a long-term vision to improve the quality of goat farming, ensuring higher returns for goat farmers and fostering the development of rural industries. He also stated that the project will upscale the economy of the state especially in the field of agriculture and hoped that the project which is sponsored by SITA will be successful in enhancing productivity of livestock and poultry and at the same time upgrade the skills of women farming community.

The meeting was attended by the Nodal & Coordinating Officer of the project Dr Panchi Devi, District Veterinary officer of Morigaon Nilutpal Kakati, State Organising Secretary of Bharatiya Kisan Mancha Krishna Bora, beneficiaries from Jarabari Agro Producers Co-operative Society Ltd, and the officials of SITA. The event also saw a gathering of women beneficiaries, veterinary experts, College teachers and students of the college, all of whom shared a collective enthusiasm for the potential impact of the project.

KAAC EM led delegation inspects distilleries



HT Bureau

DIPHU, March 26: Executive Member (EM) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Excise and Irrigation departments, Lunsing Teron along with by Superintendent, Excise Department, in charge Paban Deori; Inspector in charge Pran Jyoti; Assistant Inspectors Alberto Rongpi and Pranjal Sharma this morning visited Radiant Distilleries Pvt. Ltd. and Dhansiri Wines & Company (Bonded Warehouse) at Khatkhati for an inspection.

During the inspection, the EM reviewed operations and checked if everything was running as per regulations. He also ensured that proper procedures were followed to maintain crucial standards. Teron expressed his commitment to keeping a close watch. Lastly, he assured that necessary action would be taken wherever required. The BJP Mahamaya Mandal Committee, vice president Kusing Timung, and Ward Commissioner Lawrence Rongpi accompanied the EM.

Man found dead at wedding ceremony in Nagaon

HT Correspondent
NAGAON, March 26: A 30-year-old married man named Ritu Mura was found dead at a wedding spot in Silpeta area under Samaguri police station last night here. According to reports, Ritu had attended a wedding ceremony at Sanjay Terang's residence at Silpeta, which falls under the Samaguri Police Station in Nagaon district.

Ritu's family resides at Nibukali Navajyoti village under Rangalo Police Outpost. Ritu's family received a phone call around 9 pm, informing them that Ritu was lying on the floor with stab wounds. The family rushed to the spot and brought Ritu immediately to Nagaon Medical College Hospital, where he was declared dead.

The victim family alleged that Ritu's death was a pre-planned murder. They suspected that Ritu might have had an altercation with someone at the wedding ceremony, leading to the fatal attack. The police have started investigating into the incident and have detained three people for questioning. The post-mortem examination of the deceased has been conducted, and the body has been handed over to the family. Ritu's untimely death has left his family and the village in a state of shock. It is reported that Ritu got married two years ago and has a two-year-old son.

Tragic road accident in Sonitpur claims 2

HT Correspondent
TEZPUR, March 26: A fatal road accident took place at Barpat Gaon near Balipara in Sonitpur on Tuesday afternoon claiming two lives leaving another four injured.

The accident occurred when a Tata Sumo bearing registration number AS01KC9178 heading towards Tezpur from Arunachal Pradesh lost control at Barpatgaon and hit a roadside tree. A female passenger later identified as Swati Sherpa of Tinsukia died on the spot. Injured persons were shifted to hospital for treatment and the driver of the vehicle also died later at Tezpur Medical College and Hospital.

NFR achieves another milestone in Train Automation System

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 26: The Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has successfully linked Data Loggers installed at railway stations with the Control Office Application (COA) of the Centre for Railway Information Systems (CRIS). This integration automates the capture and transmission of train arrival and departure data, marking a new era of real-time monitoring and efficiency in train operations. This innovative system leverages signalling data to automatically detect train movements at stations and updates the COA in real-time. By replacing manual data entry with automated data capture, NFR not only enhances the accuracy of train running information but also reduces dependency on human intervention, thereby minimizing errors and delays in data reporting. The implementation has been carried out at all originating, destination, divisional interchange, and zonal interchange stations across NFR. With the recent successful linking at 21 additional stations, in addition to the 38 stations that had already been connected earlier, the complete network of key operational stations is now equipped with this advanced system. This development ensures that all critical locations across the zone are capable of automatically transmitting accurate and timely train operation related data directly to the CRIS server, thereby improving the effectiveness of control operations. This technological upgrade marks a significant step towards improved accuracy of train movement records enabling faster and more uniformed decision-making for railway controllers. As Indian Railways steadily progresses towards a smarter and more automated future, NFR's initiative is set to play a crucial role in enhancing train punctuality, improving the passenger information system, and contributing to the overall efficiency of railway operations.

Estate cultivates TV1 and Assam Broad Leaf Jat

Luxmi Group: Crafting the world's finest tea honored on the global stage

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 26: Luxmi Group wins prestigious award at the 2025 Global Tea Championship in Las Vegas on Wednesday. Luxmi's Gisovu White Tea from Rwanda has been recognized as the finest white tea, winning the Origin Award. The company also secured the Premium Award in the Black Tea CTC largest category for its Attabarie PF, Sivasagar, Assam, produced in India.

These accolades reflect Luxmi's pursuit of excellence and its dedication to producing world-class teas that honor both tradition and innovation. The company remains committed to quality, sustainability, and the dedicated hands that craft its exceptional teas.

"I congratulate the managers and workers who strive hard to achieve this standard," said Chairman Dipankar Chatterjee. "Luxmi, in Assam, Darjeeling as well and in Rwanda has evolved its plantation practices, in pruning and plucking and manufacturing to produce high quality teas consistently."

"To make tea popular, we need to produce the best quality teas. Luxmi aims to produce good tea from the world's best regions: flavourful Darjeelings from Makaibari, the strong Assam teas from Attabarie and the bright Rwandan teas from Gisovu," said Managing Director Rudra Chatterjee.



Attabarie Estate in Assam has long been celebrated by major global tea brands for its high-quality Assam tea. The estate cultivates TV1 and Assam Broad Leaf Jat, producing a well-rounded cup highly sought after in both domestic and international markets. Every leaf is nurtured with precision, benefiting from advanced field management and an expertly monitored production process. Attabarie, situated in

the fertile southern basin of the Brahmaputra River, is Rainforest Alliance Compliant and Trustea Certified, reinforcing Luxmi's commitment to sustainability and ethical farming.

Gisovu Estate in Rwanda, rising at an elevation of approximately 2,500 meters, produces some of the finest white teas in the world. This breathtaking estate thrives due to its high altitude, rich soil, and ideal climatic conditions. Gisovu White Tea stands out for its bright, brisk, and golden liquor—an outcome of nature's bounty and the tireless dedication of smallholder farmers and estate workers. Their skill and craftsmanship are the foundation of Luxmi's award-winning quality.

"We at Luxmi Group strive for quality in Rwanda and Assam, Darjeeling – West Bengal, and this award has encouraged us to push even further in our commitment to excellence," said Mr Rudra Chatterjee. "These honours belong to every worker and farmer whose expertise and passion make our teas extraordinary."

The Global Tea Championship recognizes the finest teas worldwide, celebrating excellence in flavor, leaf profile, and innovation. Luxmi Group's continued success at this prestigious event underscores its unwavering mission to create teas of the highest caliber while honoring the people and environments that make them possible.

Pressure cookers, water filters distributed

HT Correspondent
JAGIROAD, March 26: The Assam Linguistic Minority Development Board distributed pressure cookers and water filters among 546 beneficiaries in Morigaon on Wednesday.

The chief guest of the distribution ceremony, Morigaon MLA Ramakant Deuri described the public welfare initiatives of the Government of Assam in his speech. He said the government of Assam has taken many steps for the welfare of the minorities. He also said that the government has been committed to provide more opportunities in the coming days.

Additional district commissioner and sub-divisional Welfare Officer Sulakshana Barpathrago-hain addressed the function and said that such welfare programs will create a healthy environment among all sections of the society of Assam. She said the government of Assam has taken this step to integrate the minorities into the mainstream of development. The event was attended by district commissioner Devashish Sharma, Assam Linguistic Minorities Development Board Chairman Shilditya Deb and many other dignitaries.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Silence is the mother of truth - Benjamin Disraeli

Political unrest in B'desh and Army's role

Is the Bangladesh Army going to take over control of their politically turbulent country, either from front or behind, to precipitate the holding of early elections? This question is being raised by the seasoned political observers in Dhaka, as the whole of last week was dominated by highly controversial posts on Facebook, Instagram, interviews in YouTube channels and both formal and unofficial interventions by the country's top army officials through statements and meetings. All this started soon after the stern remarks made by the U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard last Monday during her visit to India. Gabbard strongly criticized the Yunus government for its failure to protect the security of the Hindu minorities and the interim government's indulgence of the fundamentalist groups with international terrorist connections. Though the Yunus government officially contradicted the observations terming those exaggerated, the signal was there. Along with this, a Facebook post by a leading spokesman of the newly set up political party National Citizens Party (NCP), mainly by the August movement students, created a furore in political circles. This leader claimed that the army chief had a meeting with their delegation last week and a proposal was given that the national elections should be held early with the participation of all political parties, including the revamped Awami League.

The consensus was that the Army must ensure early national elections with transparency and the Army should have more powers to control the law and order situation in the country which the police administration of Yunus' government had failed to maintain. The army people were angry that the student agitators held demonstrations early in the week before the cantonment against the army and hurled abuses. Interestingly, the role of CIA is currently under intensive discussion in Bangladesh among the political parties and students activists.

As the latest political scenario unfolds in Bangladesh seven and half months after the installation of the Yunus government on August 8, 2024, three trends have emerged. First, the Army wants to hold early elections in Bangladesh and it does not want to exclude the Awami Party altogether. Second, the role of the new party NCP and its curious relationship with the BNP and the Army. Third is the attitude of the USA and China. The US policy makers also are following developments in Dhaka now, though Trump's own preoccupation right now is with Ukraine and Gaza. The U.S. may take some more time to decide whom to back in the general elections. As regards China, the Chinese ambassador in Dhaka has done extensive spawork among all the political stakeholders in Bangladeshi politics. The high-level delegations from BNP and Jamaat have already visited Beijing and had discussions with the senior Chinese leaders in the last few months. Moves are on to invite a delegation of the newly set up NCP to China also.

The QUAD conundrum: Militarisation or Equilibrium?

As Donald Trump prepares to descend upon New Delhi for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) summit in 2025, a murmur of speculation ripples through geopolitical circles. Analysts posit that the mercurial US president, known for his disdain for multilateral cooperation beyond security realms, might steer this strategic quartet—comprising the United States, India, Japan, and Australia—toward militarisation. They cite his withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord and other non-security initiatives as evidence of a singular focus on hard power, envisaging a QUAD transformed into a robust counterweight to China's ascendancy. Yet, such assertions falter under scrutiny, clashing with the very raison d'être of the QUAD: a flexible framework designed to uphold a balance of power and strategic deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, not to ignite a militarised powder keg. As Trump's shadow looms over this year's summit, the feasibility of such a shift demands rigorous examination, set against the QUAD's evolutionary arc and the intricate realities of regional dynamics.

The QUAD's genesis traces back to the cataclysmic 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, when the United States, India, Japan, and Australia coalesced into the "Tsunami Core Group" to orchestrate rescue and relief efforts. This embryonic collaboration blossomed into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in 2007, bolstered by joint military exercises like Malabar, which that year saw the navies of these four nations, alongside Singapore, flex their maritime muscle. China's vehement objections swiftly derailed this nascent alliance, prompting Australia's exit and India's cautious retreat under Beijing's diplomatic pressure. Though the QUAD languished, the Malabar exercise endured, with Japan joining as a permanent partner in 2015—a harbinger of renewed intent. The grouping's revival in 2017, under Trump's first administration, was no coincidence. It coincided with China's assertive pivot under Xi Jinping, who, since assuming power in 2012, has jettisoned Deng Xiaoping's low-profile dictum for a muscular foreign policy that has roiled the Indo-Pacific.

China's belligerence has been palpable across multiple fronts. For India, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has been a perennial flashpoint, with incursions escalating since 2013—most notably in 2014, when the People's Liberation Army probed the Chumar sector of Ladakh just as Xi visited New Delhi. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), threading through Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir—territory India claims as its own—has further inflamed tensions, as has Beijing's opposition to India's Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) bid and its shielding of Pakistan-backed terrorists at the UN Security Council. The 73-day Doklam standoff in 2017, near the India-Bhutan-China trijunction, marked a zenith of Sino-Indian friction, underscoring China's willingness to flex its military might. Beyond India, Japan grapples with territorial disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, while Australia reels from economic coercion—trade reprisals that prompted Canberra to recalibrate its China policy. The United States, meanwhile, watches warily as China's militarisation of the South China Sea, via artificial islands, and its sprawling Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) threaten to erode American preeminence in the region.

This backdrop catalyzed the QUAD's 2017 resurgence, an informal alliance elevated from secretarial to ministerial dia-

logues by 2019 and crowned with its inaugural leaders' summit in 2021. Today, it convenes regularly, weaving a tapestry of cooperation that spans security—Maritime Domain Awareness, cybersecurity, critical technologies, and supply chain resilience—and non-security domains like humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), health, and climate change. Far from a Cold War relic like NATO, the QUAD eschews rigid structures or binding commitments, its fluidity a deliberate choice to foster strategic equilibrium rather than provoke outright confrontation. To militarise it, as some fear Trump might advocate, would invert this ethos, risking instability across an already volatile region.

The notion of a weaponised QUAD under Trump's aegis stumbles on several counts. First, it misaligns with his own transactional worldview. During his first term, Trump balked at alliances demanding sustained US commitments, decrying NATO as obsolete and pressing allies to shoulder greater burdens. A militarised QUAD, entailing significant financial and security obligations, would chafe against this instinct to minimise America's overseas entanglements. His focus on burden-sharing—evident in trade spats with allies and his "America First" mantra—suggests he is unlikely to champion a formal military pact that binds the US to expansive regional defense roles. Moreover, the QUAD's current trajectory, blending security and non-security initiatives, aligns with Trump's penchant for pragmatic, results-driven diplomacy, as seen in the ministerial meeting held in the US mere hours after his second inauguration in January 2025—a testament to its continuity under his stewardship.

Militarisation would also alienate key regional players, notably the ASEAN bloc. These Southeast Asian nations, economically tethered to China yet security-aligned with the US, thrive on strategic ambiguity. Hedging between great powers, they recoil from overtly anti-China frameworks that curb their diplomatic latitude. The QUAD's inclusive design—addressing HADR, health, and climate alongside security—has cultivated broader appeal, drawing ASEAN into its orbit without forcing a binary choice. A security-centric pivot would fracture this delicate balance, pushing ASEAN toward neutrality or even alignment with Beijing, thus diluting the QUAD's efficacy as a counterweight. China, perceiving a militarised QUAD as an existential threat, might retaliate with escalatory measures—fortifying its South China Sea outposts or intensifying economic pressure—heightening the risk of direct confrontation and unraveling the strategic deterrence the QUAD seeks to sustain. Critics who dismiss the QUAD as a toothless "talking shop" or an "Asian NATO" miss its nuanced potency. Unlike NATO, with its codified mutual defense pact and bureaucratic heft, the QUAD thrives on informality, its working groups tackling diverse sectors from technology to disaster response. Regular summits, ministerial dialogues, and operational initiatives—like joint maritime patrols and vaccine coordination during the COVID-19 pandemic—belie the notion of inertia. China's labeling of it as an "Asian NATO" is less a critique than a strategic gambit to delegitimise a grouping that threatens its regional hegemony. The QUAD's strength lies in its adaptability, a 21st-century construct attuned to fluid geopolitical currents rather than the rigid binaries of yesteryear.

The spectre of militarisation

also overlooks the QUAD's foundational intent: to preserve a favorable balance of power, not to ignite a new arms race. A shift toward overt weaponisation would amplify China's security dilemma, potentially triggering a destabilising spiral of tit-for-tat escalation—precisely the outcome the QUAD was revived to avert. Historical precedent supports this caution: Australia's 2007 withdrawal under Chinese pressure and India's reticence until 2017 reflect the quartet's sensitivity to regional equilibrium. Even under Trump's first term, the QUAD's revival prioritised dialogue over sabre-rattling, a trend reinforced by its 2021 elevation to leaders' summits and its focus on non-security cooperation, such as the Quad Fellowship for STEM students launched in 2022.

In the shadow of Trump's impending visit, the QUAD stands at a crossroads. His transactional lens might nudge it toward sharper security contours—perhaps bolstering maritime exercises or technology-sharing to counter China's naval ambitions—but a full-scale militarisation seems improbable. Such a move would contravene his aversion to long-term commitments, alienate ASEAN, and undermine the strategic deterrence that underpins the grouping's raison d'être. Instead, the QUAD is poised to persist as a multifaceted alliance, weaving security with softer domains to maintain equilibrium in an Indo-Pacific buffeted by China's rise. As New Delhi hosts this summit, the dialogue will likely reaffirm this balanced trajectory, proving that the QUAD's potency lies not in militarised bravado but in its capacity to adapt, deter, and endure. In a region teetering on the edge of rivalry and reconciliation, that may well be its most enduring legacy. (The writer can be reached at dipakurmigpltd@gmail.com)

A fitting step by the Assam Government



By: Bishaldeep Kakati

A conscious effort has been seen on part of the Assam Government to enhance the art of reading and writing amongst the enthusiasts in the state. It was back on 23rd December 2024 in a cabinet meeting held in Dibrugarh, where the state cabinet approved the celebration of 2025 as the 'Year of Books.' The honourable Chief Minister of Assam stated, "Books written about our glorious history and future aspirations will inspire readers. I have consistently strived to ensure my writings represent hope for the future. The reception of my books among readers convinced me that people desire to read words of hope. They wish to learn about our glorious history, including the journey of the Assamese language until receiving classical status." The initiative was unique and as such it was equally appreciated by the people at large as the State Government wanted to provide the residents the opportunity to further indulge in the habit of reading books and also penning a few that further glorifies the rich literary history of the state.

Accordingly, when the Assam State Budget of 2025-2026 was announced, the State Government amongst many other schemes, introduced the scheme of 'Astadash Mukutar Unnoyonee Mala' specially meant for strengthening the art of reading and writing amongst the dwellers. The scheme highlighted four important features, i.e.

a) financial support to 1000 writers offering ₹ 25,000 each who can contribute to creative, scientific and academic writing

b) financial support of ₹ 5,00,000 to organize Grantha Mela for district and ₹ 2,50,000 for co-district headquarter, both of which has to be approved by Assam Prakashan Parishad

c) Official gifts presented at Government functions should be in the form of books

d) a one time grant of ₹ 1000 to each government employee for book purchase.

Each of the four crucial points incorporated in the scheme is highly thought of and as such the benefit of this scheme needs to be analysed and discussed so that one can understand its benefit in the longer run.

It is pertinent to mention herein that before the era of social media stepped in, people more often than not kept themselves busy either in reading or writing whenever they had some free or leisurely time. Although this habit of reading and writing still exists amongst the dwellers at large, however one cannot deny the fact there has been a steep decline in the same as compared to the yesteryears. Conspicuously, one clearly understands the fact that only when there is more readership, there will be an urge for the writers to pen and author more and more books.

However, decline in the readership has meant that people are not that interested in investing much in buying books and that not hampers the morale of the writers and authors but also the entire book industry. As a result of which, it has literally become impossible for most of the writers to make a livelihood by writing or authoring books. This further has prompted many upcoming writers or even a few known ones to stop investing in writing and publishing books as the returns are not worth it. As such the four important facets introduced in the above mentioned scheme by the Assam Government can be a game changer in this regard, bringing in a ray of hope once again for all upcoming writers and authors.

For any upcoming writer, who has good content to attract the readers at

large often faces the problem of finance in terms of publishing a book. With the increase in the publishing cost of books, the writers often find it difficult to take the risk of publishing as the returns might not be worth the investment. As such, the decision of providing a grant of ₹ 25,000 by the Assam Government might help the writers immensely at least in terms of managing the finance of publishing a book. Although the eligibility criteria and the modus operandi of the scheme is still not out, however taking into account the desire of the honourable Chief Minister of Assam to enhance the age-old habit of reading and writing, it can be presumed that the scheme shall be very helpful for the young writers in question.

Furthermore, credit has to be also given to the Assam Government for understanding the fact that readership shall only increase if the people at large are given the opportunity to buy more and more books. As such the decision to provide grant for organising Grantha Mela in District and Co-district headquarter shall mean the people from each and every nook and corner of the state shall have the opportunity to read, access and buy books. If this happens in reality, then people of the state won't have to travel every time to Panbazar or visit the annual book fair organized in Guwahati to buy books of their choice. Although in the present time, effort has been undertaken to organize book fairs in different parts of the state, this scheme shall further increase the number of book fairs that can be organised.

Furthermore, with the recently concluded Assam Book Fair including records with ₹ 7 crores sale, and book fair of Assam Sahitya Sabha Adhibekhan selling books worth ₹ 5 crore, highlight the fact that people have shown their interest in buying books if provided with the right opportunity and the right stock. Therefore if more numbers book fairs are organised in the coming years taking into relevance the newest scheme of the government, then the numbers can be even more promising. Moreover, the other two aspects of the scheme, viz, the idea of gifting books at Government functions and granting a sum of ₹ 1000 to government employees for purchasing will further strengthen the ratio of books being published and books being bought. Moreover if this scheme can be executed and continued by the Government of Assam in the way it is thought of, then the state can lead by example and might see itself in the list of countries like Norway, Ireland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Denmark, UK and other that are known for providing grants and several funding opportunities for writers. (The author is an Advocate, Gauhati High Court)

Mamata Banerjee's visits London to give global message

By: Dr. Ratan Bhattacharjee

"We are delighted to welcome the Honourable Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee, in conversation with our College President Prof Jonathan Micgog and Bynum Tudor Fellow at Kellogg Lord Karan Bilimoria. The discussion will be focused on the topic of social development' girl child and women empowerment. It will provide a rare opportunity to talk with one of India's most influential leaders about her remarkable journey in politics, literature, and cultural advocacy' this is how Kellogg College notified in their Event Notice on the visit of Mamata Banerjee's London visit to spread a global message on Women Empowerment and Industrial Development in West Bengal. Kellogg college also focused on the achievements of CM Mamata Banerjee in improving infrastructure, healthcare, education, and rural development. They highlighted how the Mamata government introduced several welfare programs aimed at empowering marginalised communities and women. Under her leadership, West Bengal has seen substantial growth in various sectors, with her administration receiving praise for promoting inclusive development. They also introduced Mamata Banerjee as an accomplished writer and poet, having authored numerous books in Bengali, which include collections of poems, political essays, and works reflecting her political philosophy and social views. Through her literary works, cultural initiatives, and artistic contributions, Mamata Banerjee has solidified her role as not only a political leader but also a cultural ambassador, furthering the reach and recognition of Bengali culture while inspiring new generations to engage with their roots. Her efforts are lauded by the industrialists in London and the Indian High Commissioner in Britain extended cooperation for propagating her message. British Council already extends help in the educational sector and technological expertise.

In the Biswa Banga Conference the seeds for this visit to London were sown. Mamata Banerjee also requested British Airways to start direct flight to Kolkata from London by reminding them of the century old relation between Kolkata and London. She loves London so much that at one time she had a dream of transforming Kolkata into London though the British ruled us for two long centuries. Kolkata has been the British Capital. Her lecture in Kellogg College can be an opportunity for her to tell the audience how West Bengal Government is working for the welfare of Women and Children in the state through a number of projects.

CM Mamata Banerjee has a lot to tell on the projects of the West Bengal Government for the welfare of women and children whatever the Opposition goes on telling against her and even after the RG Kar incident. Kanyashree Prakalpa seeks to improve the status and wellbeing of girls, specifically those from socio-economically disadvantaged families through



Conditional Cash Transfers. By incentivizing them to continue in education for a longer period of time, and complete secondary or higher secondary education, or equivalent in technical or vocational streams, thereby giving them a better footing in both the economic and social sphere and by disincentivising marriage till at least the age of 18, the legal age of marriage, thereby reducing the risks of early pregnancies, associated risks of maternal and child mortality, and other debilitating health conditions, including those of malnourished women can be empowered. The purpose of Kanyashree Project is to uplift girls who are from poor families and are unable to pursue higher studies due to tough economic conditions. It has been internationally recognised by the United Nations Department of International Development and the UNICEF. Rupashree Prakalpa came into effect on 01 April, 2018 with an objective of mitigating the difficulties that poor families face in bearing the expenditure of their daughters' marriages, for which they often have to borrow money at very high interest rates.

According to another project called Oikya Prakalpa women from Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe households will receive ₹ 1000 per month. Women from households other than Sac/St households will receive ₹ 500 per month. All these women empowerment projects can be focused in the conversation of Mamata Banerjee with Jonathan Michie, President of Kellogg College and Professor of Innovation and Knowledge Exchange at the University of Oxford and Lord Karan Bilimoria a Bynum Tudor Fellow at Kellogg College. He is a British Indian entrepreneur, politician, and philanthropist, who is known for his contributions to the business and political landscape of the UK, for being the former President of the Confederation of British Industry. Even the State Governor said, "It is a matter of pride the Chief Minister of his state is getting global recognition. In fact this opportunity will enable her to showcase the positive steps taken by the government for the empowerment of women in the state. As the Chief

Minister of the state it is really a glorious moment for her to speak on the projects abroad especially in the college under a heritage University in Europe. It is a matter of pride that the CM, who hails from the land of Rabindranath Tagore, has been invited to such a prestigious institution. Governor Ananda Bose remarked, highlighting the significance of Banerjee's international acclaim. Lord Karan Bilimoria is the current Chairman of the International Chamber of Commerce UK (ICC UK). He is also known for his advocacy for higher education including as former Chancellor of the University of Birmingham and President of the UK Council of International Students Affairs (UKCISA).

Kellogg College was established in 1990 with a mission to make graduate study more open and accessible. It offered part-time study options that were more compatible with career progression outside academia, and recognised the personal commitments of family life. This simple concept was ground breaking at the time, but is now a part of the fabric of the University of Oxford. Kellogg continues to innovate, and is committed to making lifelong learning available for the professional and personal development of its students, and the betterment of society. Besides her lecture in Kellogg College, she also has addressed a business meet on March 25, organised by the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation (WBIDC) in association with the UK India Business Council (UKIBC) and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI). The event mainly aimed to attract investments and facilitate business collaborations between West Bengal and the UK. CM Banerjee also attended a Government-to-Government (G2G) programme on March 26. Being accompanied by former Indian cricket captain Sourav Ganguly in Kellogg College, CM Mamata Banerjee is expected to surely make her visit more glorious and memorable.

(The author is a former Affiliate Faculty Virginia Commonwealth University USA is a Multi lingual Columnist and Poet. Email prafatanbhattacharjee@gmail.com)

Unlocking global potential: Promoting indigenous agricultural varieties of Assam in export markets

By: Mowsam Hazarika

Assam, the lush green land of the Brahmaputra, is home to a diverse range of indigenous agricultural products that hold immense potential in global markets. From aromatic rice varieties like Joha and Bora to world-famous Assam Tea, vibrant turmeric, juicy citrus fruits, and exotic herbs, the state's agricultural wealth is deeply intertwined with its cultural heritage. However, despite their uniqueness and superior quality, many of these indigenous varieties remain underutilized in international trade. Promoting these agricultural treasures in export markets can not only boost Assam's economy but also secure the future of its farmers, preserve biodiversity, and elevate India's global agricultural footprint.

The global food industry is increasingly shifting towards organic, sustainable, and traditional food products, with consumers demanding healthier and more authentic choices. Assam's indigenous agricultural produce aligns perfectly with this trend. The world is recognizing the value of traditional food systems, and Assam's naturally grown crops, cultivated for centuries using eco-friendly methods, offer a unique selling proposition. The demand for non-GMO, chemical-free, and climate-resilient crops is rising, making it the ideal time for Assam to step forward and claim its rightful place in the international market.

Among Assam's most significant agricultural products, the state's rice varieties stand out as a prime export opportunity. Joha rice, with its distinct aroma and taste, has the potential to compete with international aromatic rice varieties such as Basmati and Jasmine rice. Similarly, Bora rice, a glutinous variety, is perfect for making traditional sweets and rice-based snacks, which are highly popular in Southeast Asia and Japan. If these rice varieties receive the right branding and international market linkage, they can fetch premium prices, benefiting farmers and boosting the agricultural sector.

Assam Tea is already a global brand, known for its strong flavor and briskness.

However, the focus has mainly been on the mass production of CTC (Crush, Tear, Curl) tea, while specialty teas like Orthodox Assam Tea, White Tea, and Hand-Rolled varieties remain underrepresented in premium markets. The emerging preference for artisanal and organic teas in Europe and North America presents an opportunity for Assam's tea planters to reposition their products as luxury beverages. Moreover, the demand for traditional herbal infusions, such as those made from locally grown herbs like Thekera (Garcinia), Brahmi, and Tulsi, can open new avenues for Assam's tea industry.

Turmeric from Assam, particularly the Lakadong variety grown in nearby Meghalaya, has gained attention for its high curcumin content. Similarly, the local Assamese turmeric varieties, known for their deep color and rich aroma, can be marketed as premium spices in health-conscious markets. The increasing demand for curcumin-based supplements, herbal medicines, and natural food colorants in the West provides an untapped market for these indigenous spices. Assam's Black Pepper, Bhut Jolokia (Ghost Pepper), and exotic citrus fruits like Kaji Nemu (Assam Lemon) also hold great promise in international spice and fresh produce markets.

Another significant segment that can be explored is Assam's indigenous pulses and oilseeds. The naturally grown black gram (Matimah), pigeon pea (Arhar dal), and sesame seeds from the region have unique nutritional properties that can attract global health-conscious consumers. The trend of plant-based protein consumption is growing, and these indigenous legumes can be positioned as superfoods in international markets. Additionally, Assam's mustard oil, known for its purity and pungent flavor, can find a niche among the Indian diaspora and gourmet food lovers abroad.

One of the key aspects of successfully promoting Assam's indigenous agricultural varieties in export markets is ensuring proper certification and branding. Organic certification, Geographical Indication (GI) tagging, and adherence to global food safety standards



will enhance the credibility of these products. Currently, many small farmers struggle to obtain such certifications due to high costs and bureaucratic hurdles. Government initiatives and private partnerships must focus on streamlining these processes so that more farmers can access export markets.

Infrastructure also plays a crucial role in the export potential of agricultural products. Efficient cold storage facilities, food processing units, and logistics networks must be developed to ensure that perishable items such as citrus fruits, medicinal herbs, and organic vegetables reach global markets in optimal condition. Establishing export hubs, dedicated agricultural clusters, and farmer cooperatives will help in aggregating production and reducing transportation costs, making Assamese products more competitive on the international stage.

Digital marketing and e-commerce platforms can also revolutionize the way Assam's agricultural products reach global consumers. With the rise of direct-to-consumer models, farmers and agripreneurs can leverage online marketplaces like Amazon,

Flipkart, and dedicated organic food platforms to sell their products directly to international buyers. Social media campaigns, storytelling about traditional farming practices, and influencer collaborations can further enhance the brand value of Assam's unique agricultural products.

Apart from commercial benefits, promoting indigenous agricultural varieties in export markets plays a crucial role in biodiversity conservation. Many traditional crop varieties are on the verge of extinction due to the over-reliance on high-yield hybrid crops. Encouraging the cultivation and export of indigenous crops will provide financial incentives for farmers to continue growing them, ensuring their survival for future generations. Additionally, these crops are naturally adapted to local climatic conditions, making them more resilient to climate change, droughts, and pests.

The government's role in facilitating exports cannot be understated. Policymakers should prioritize trade agreements, reduce export barriers, and provide financial assistance to farmers and agribusinesses looking

to expand internationally. Assam's agricultural universities and research institutions can contribute by developing high-quality, disease-resistant indigenous seed varieties while maintaining traditional characteristics. Training programs on best export practices, value addition, and sustainable farming techniques should be implemented to empower farmers and agripreneurs.

International collaborations can further strengthen Assam's position in global agricultural trade. Engaging with countries that have strong trade ties with India, such as the UAE, USA, UK, Japan, and European nations, will help in gaining insights into market demands and consumer preferences. Participating in global food expos, trade fairs, and agricultural summits will allow Assamese producers to showcase their products and establish direct connections with international buyers.

It is also essential to involve Assam's young entrepreneurs in this agricultural transformation. The new generation of agripreneurs can bring innovation, technology, and modern marketing strategies to the sector. Startups focusing on organic farming, food processing, and blockchain-based traceability systems can revolutionize the export potential of Assam's indigenous products. Public-private partnerships should be encouraged to create an ecosystem where traditional knowledge meets modern technology for sustainable agricultural growth.

Promoting Assam's indigenous agricultural varieties in export markets is not just an economic opportunity but a necessity for the preservation of the region's rich agrarian heritage. By embracing global trade with a strategic approach, Assam can position itself as a key player in the international organic and specialty food industry. The time is ripe to showcase the state's agricultural excellence on the world stage, ensuring a prosperous future for farmers while preserving Assam's traditional farming legacy for generations to come. *(The author is a Science Journalist, Former Director, Assam Seed & Organic Certification Agency and Ex-Joint Director of Agriculture, Assam)*

Air pollution worsened in almost all Bengal cities in 2024: Global report

By: Javanta Basu

Spike in air pollution has become a rule rather than an exception in West Bengal, with all cities barring Kolkata witnessing deteriorating air quality in 2024 compared to 2023, a new report showed.

Kolkata recorded a marginal decrease in air pollution but is still the second most polluted metro city in the country after Delhi and among the top two per cent of the world's cities with the worst air qualities, according to the report.

The study was carried out by IQAir, a Swiss air quality monitoring technology company. It was based on particulate matter (PM) 2.5 data collected from more than 40,000 air quality monitoring stations across 8,954 locations in 138 countries, territories and regions.

PM2.5 is one of the most potent, fine air pollutants that can penetrate the deep crevices of lungs and trigger a bevy of respiratory diseases, including the fatal ones.

The state's twin industrial cities Durgapur and Asansol, located about 170 kilometres northwest of Kolkata, ranked 24th and 25th globally in terms of air pollution, the report showed. Both recorded poorer air quality in 2024 compared to 2023, the report stated.

While Durgapur is listed under both the Union government's flagship National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) and Smart City programmes, Asansol is an NCAP city.

Huge investment still pollution surged

Four of the seven cities studied in West Bengal — Durgapur, Asansol, Barrackpore and Howrah — recorded PM2.5 values 10 times more than the World Health Organisation guideline of 5 microgrammes per cubic metre of air, the report showed. This is despite around Rs 120 crore invested to counter air pollution in these cities.

Durgapur led with 72.3 microgrammes and Asansol remained just behind with 72.2 microgrammes. Both the cities recorded substantial jumps from their respective pollution levels of 2023: Durgapur from 49.5 to 72.3 — a 46 per cent rise — and Asansol from 62.4 to 72.2 — around 16 per cent.

Barrackpore, a city in North 24 Parganas district where the air pollution was measured for the first time under the global project, recorded 58.4 microgrammes. Howrah's annual average of PM 2.5 was 57.1 microgrammes — a 10 per cent increase over 2023. The national limit is 40 microgrammes.

The highest PM2.5 value of 128.9 microgrammes in West Bengal during 2024 was recorded in December 2024 in Durgapur.

Siliguri and Haldia, despite having annual pollution levels below 40 microgrammes each, however, recorded higher values compared to 2023.

The state pollution control board accepted that the air quality trends in these cities were concerning. "We are trying our best but while the north

PM2.5 is one of the most potent, fine air pollutants that can penetrate the deep crevices of lungs and trigger a bevy of respiratory diseases, including the fatal ones

westerly pollution load coming from Jharkhand side is mainly responsible for poor air quality in Durgapur and Asansol, Barrackpore, I feel, gets impacted by the pollution generated by the brickfields in the adjoining areas," said Kalyan Rudra, chairperson of the state pollution control board. The unplanned nature of industries and minimum green cover in Howrah pushes up its pollution levels, it added.

Kolkata, whose PM2.5 levels exceeded the WHO guideline by nearly nine times, spent ₹ 792 crore under NCAP in the last five years, out of the total released fund of ₹ 960 crore.

"We could control Kolkata's pollution to an extent using a range of actions, particularly sprinkling of water and reducing roadside emission by providing gas connection to several roadside eateries and cloth presser units," claimed Rudra. "However, it will be difficult to reduce the city's pollution beyond a point, as World Bank experts have pointed out, unless pollution within the regional airshed can be countered," added Rudra.

Kolkata has long been holding the tag of the second most polluted metro city in India, despite having few industries and less vehicles than many others in the country.

"It is a fact that climatic and meteorological factors play a key role in worsening Kolkata's air pollution status, as the city is in the tip of the Indo-Gangetic plains and gets affected by the pollution generated in the zone, like Delhi; but the inadequate policy implementation also contributes to the problem," explained Anumita Roychoudhury, an air pollution expert from environmental think tank Centre for Science and Environment.

"Like the rest of the country, Kolkata has also been focusing on dust control; which is important but to substantially reduce pollution level, it needs to act as well to counter pollution from transport, waste burning and likewise; a multi sectoral approach," added the expert.

"As observed through in-depth chemical characterisation, solid waste and biomass burning are the dominant sources over Kolkata. Such emissions are enhancing ammonia in air, which in turn helps form a huge amount of particulate matter. We need to target ammonia emission that is producing ultrafine particulate matter through a secondary process," explained Abhijit Chatterjee, a scientist associated with the central government research organisation Bose Institute. *(Courtesy: Down to Earth)*

Early arrival of summer in India and increase in heatwaves

By: Dr. Satvawan Saurabh

Heat wave events in India are increasing rapidly due to climate change. According to the India Meteorological Department, a heat wave is defined as a heat wave when the temperature in the plains exceeds 40 degrees Celsius and this condition persists for a long time. India experienced 554 heat wave days in 2024, while the number was 230 in 2023. This increase is affecting agriculture, water availability, and public health, necessitating urgent mitigation measures.

February, which is usually a winter month, is now experiencing extreme heat. Odisha, Telangana, and Maharashtra recorded temperatures above 40°C in February 2025, pointing to climate change. Example: Mumbai recorded a temperature of 38.7°C in February 2025, the hottest February day in five years. This disrupted daily life and led to a rise in heat-related illnesses. Global warming is leading to more frequent and intense heatwaves in urban and rural areas, putting a huge strain on the population. Night temperatures are also increasing unexpectedly. 31 states and union territories recorded night temperatures 1°C above normal, while 22 states saw an increase of 3°C-5°C. Delhi recorded its hottest February night in 74 years in 2024, shortening the recovery time for vulnerable sections. Marine heatwaves increase inland temperatures

and affect monsoon patterns. In 2023, marine heatwaves in the Bay of Bengal delayed the monsoon in eastern India and increased pre-monsoon heat. Concrete structures, less greenery, and the presence of pollutants make urban areas hotter. In April 2023, temperatures in urban areas of Ahmedabad were 3-4°C higher than the surrounding rural areas.

It is necessary to incorporate heatwave mitigation in the national adaptation plan while ensuring coordination among states. Ahmedabad's Heat Action Plan (2013) helps prevent 1190 deaths every year. Urban planning should increase the use of green buildings, passive cooling, and heat-resistant materials. Telangana's Cool Roof Policy (2021) promotes heat-reflecting roofs, which reduce indoor temperatures. Tree plantation, rooftop gardening, and conservation of water bodies can reduce temperatures. Delhi's Urban Forest Initiative reduced local temperatures by 2-3°C in several hotspots. Local weather monitoring, heatwave forecasting, and urban heat island mapping should be expanded. Heat insurance, adjusted working hours, and cooling shelters need to be ensured for vulnerable workers. Rajasthan's Heat Insurance Pilot (2023) provided financial compensation to daily wage workers on extreme heat days.

Extreme heat can lead to longer summer holidays in schools, making it difficult to complete the syllabus.

Many schools do not have adequate cooling facilities, which affects the health of students. Heat waves during exam time can affect student performance. Extreme heat reduces the productivity of workers, especially in construction, farming, and other outdoor jobs. Increased electricity consumption can lead to energy crises, which increase power cuts. Heatwaves lead to health problems, which puts pressure on hospitals and increases healthcare costs. Water levels in lakes, ponds, and rivers fall rapidly, worsening the drinking water problem. Groundwater levels decline, affecting irrigation and drinking water supply. Incidents of forest fires increase, which causes loss of biodiversity. Heat affects the ecosystem of many plants and animals. Yields of wheat, paddy, and other major crops decline, affecting food security. Animal husbandry is also affected due to extreme heat and the water crisis.

Develop and use crops that are more heat tolerant and require less water. Encourage farmers to adopt micro-irrigation technology (drip irrigation). Promote green roofs, reservoirs, and open green areas. Install shade trees and water spray systems in public spaces. Adopt temperature adaptation technologies in smart cities. Promote heat-resistant building materials and energy-efficient design. Strengthen global and regional efforts to control sea temperature. Regenerate mangrove

forests in coastal areas, which naturally help balance temperatures. Europe's Heat Action Plan: France and Spain have implemented cooling centers and public alert systems during heatwaves. Australia's Water Management: Effective policies have been implemented for water harvesting and conservation in drought-affected areas. America's 'Green Infrastructure' program: Various schemes are being run to promote greenery and shade areas in urban areas.

A multi-pronged strategy is needed to mitigate the effects of rising heat and heat waves in India. For this, the government, society, and the scientific community will have to work together to develop long-term solutions. Climate adaptation, smart urban planning, agricultural innovation, and global cooperation can tackle this challenge. The increasing threat of heat waves has made it necessary to implement climate-adaptation plans. It is important to strengthen early warning systems, heat action plans, and resilient infrastructure. Urban greenery, reflective roofs, and sustainable water management should be prioritized. Also, expanding schemes like Mahatma Gandhi NREGA and implementing cooling-focused urban policies will help ensure public health, livelihoods, and future sustainability. *(The author is a poet, freelance journalist and columnist, radio and TV panelist)*

Net zero carbon emissions

By: Ankurjyoti Hatimuria

The pursuit of net zero carbon emissions has become a critical goal for governments, businesses, and communities around the world as the urgency to tackle climate change intensifies. Net zero refers to the balance between the amount of greenhouse gas emissions produced and the amount removed from the atmosphere. Achieving this balance is essential for curbing global warming and ensuring a sustainable future.

One of the primary reasons for striving towards net zero emissions is the alarming impact of climate change. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, melting ice caps, and sea-level rise are all dire consequences of increasing concentrations of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels requires global carbon dioxide emissions to reach net zero by around 2050. Consequently, strategies to achieve net zero emissions have gained momentum globally.

Governments have adopted a variety of policies and frameworks to facilitate the transition to net zero. Many countries, including the United Kingdom (UK), Sweden, and New Zealand, have set legally binding targets for achieving net zero emissions by 2050 or sooner. These targets often require significant reductions in fossil fuel use, increased reliance on renewable energy sources, and the promotion of sustainable practices across various sectors, such as transportation, agriculture, and industry. For example, the UK has seen a remarkable decline in coal use for electricity generation, decreasing from 40 percent in 2012 to just 2 percent in 2020, largely due to government interventions and the rise of renewable energy sources like wind and solar.

However, achieving net zero emissions extends beyond governmental policies. It requires active participation from businesses and individuals alike. Companies are increasingly recognizing the need for sustainability, and many are committing to net zero



targets as part of their corporate social responsibility strategies. For instance, major corporations like Microsoft and Amazon have pledged to reach net zero emissions by 2030, investing in renewable energy, enhancing energy efficiency, and implementing carbon offset programs.

On an individual level, lifestyle changes also play a significant role in reducing carbon footprints. Simple actions such as using public transportation, consuming less meat, and reducing waste can collectively lead to meaningful reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Educational initiatives aimed at raising awareness about the importance of sustainable practices further enhance

community engagement in the drive towards net zero.

In conclusion, the journey towards net zero carbon emissions is imperative for combating climate change and ensuring environmental sustainability. It necessitates a collective effort from governments, businesses, and individuals. As recent initiatives and examples illustrate, substantial progress can be made through effective policies, corporate commitment, and individual actions. Embracing a net zero future will not only mitigate the impacts of climate change but also foster innovation and economic growth in the transition to a more sustainable world. *(The author is a student who can be reached at ankurjyoti@hatimuria1131@gmail.com)*

Wildfires ravage southern South Korea, killing 24 people and forcing 27,000 to evacuate

SEOUL, March 26: Wind-driven wildfires that were among South Korea's worst ever were ravaging the country's southern regions, killing 24 people, destroying more than 200 structures and forcing 27,000 people to evacuate, officials said Wednesday.

The death toll included a pilot who died after a helicopter crashed during efforts to contain wildfires in the southeastern town of Uiseong, one of the areas hardest-hit. The aircraft had no other crew members.

The National Fire Agency said at least 26 other people sustained varying degrees of injuries.

An ancient Buddhist temple, houses, factories and vehicles were among the structures destroyed in the wildfires that have burned 43,330 acres, the government's emergency response centre said.

In a televised address, South Korea's acting President Han Duck-soo said the wildfires that began last Friday were causing worse damage than many other past wildfires.

"Damages are snowballing,"

Han said. "There are concerns that we'll have wildfire damages that we've never experienced, so we have to concentrate all our capabilities to put out the wildfires in the rest of this week."

Han said crews were struggling to extinguish the wildfires because strong winds swept the areas overnight. Han said about 4,650 firefighters, soldiers and other personnel were working Wednesday to extinguish the wildfires with the help of about 130 helicopters.

He said that "a small amount" of 5-10 millimetres of rain was expected Thursday.

Observers say the ongoing wildfires are the third biggest in South Korea in terms of land burned.

Officials in several southeastern cities and towns had ordered residents to evacuate Tuesday as firefighters struggled to contain multiple blazes fuelled by dry winds.

The largest fires were in Andong, the neighbouring counties of Uiseong and Sancheong, and the city of Ulsan, according to South Korea's Interior Ministry.



Earlier on Tuesday, officials had said firefighters had extinguished most of the flames from the largest wildfires in those areas, but wind and dry conditions allowed the blazes to spread again.

But efforts to fight the fires were partially suspended overnight as the winds strengthened.

The blaze in Uiseong destroyed nearly half of more than 30 struc-

tures at Gounsa, a temple which was said to be originally built in the 7th century. Among the destroyed structures were two state-designated "treasures" -- a pavilion-shaped structure built on a stream built in 1668 and a Joseon Dynasty structure built in 1904 to mark the longevity of a king.

The temple's another state-designated "treasure," a stone Buddha

statue reportedly manufactured in the 8th century, was evacuated to a safe place, according to government and Buddhist officials.

The Justice Ministry said it proactively removed 500 inmates from a detention centre in Cheongsong, another southern town, but no damages were reported to the facility.

The Korea Forest Service said it had raised its wildfire warning to the highest "serious" level nationwide Tuesday, requiring local governments to assign more workers to emergency response, tighten entry restrictions for forests and parks, and recommend that military units withhold live-fire exercises. The 18 dead include four firefighters and government workers who were killed in Sancheong on Saturday after being trapped by fast-moving flames driven by strong winds, according to officials.

Government officials suspect human error caused several of the fires, possibly due to the use of fire while clearing overgrown grass in family tombs or sparks from welding work. (AP)

Palestinians protest against Hamas in rare public show of dissent in Gaza



CAIRO, March 26: Palestinians chanted against Hamas during an anti-war protest in the Gaza Strip, according to videos circulating online in a rare show of public anger against the militant group, which has long repressed dissent and still rules the territory 17 months into the war with Israel.

The videos, which appeared to be authentic, showed hundreds of people taking part in an anti-war protest in the heavily destroyed northern town of Beit Lahiyah on Tuesday.

People held signs saying "Stop the war," "We refuse to die," and "The blood of our children is not cheap."

Some could be heard chanting: "Hamas out!" Other videos appeared to show Hamas supporters dispersing the crowds.

"We are sick of the bombing, killing and displacement," Ammar Hassan, a young man from Beit Lahiyah who took part in the protest.

He said it started as an anti-war protest with just a few dozen people but then swelled to more than 2,000, with people chanting against Hamas.

"It's the only party we can affect," he said over the phone. "Protests won't stop the (Israeli) occupation, but it can affect Hamas," he said.

"The protest was not about politics. It was about people's lives," said Mohammed Abu Saker, a father of three from the nearby town of Beit Hanoun, who joined the demonstration.

"We want to stop the killing and displacement, no matter the price. We can't stop Israel from killing us, but we can press Hamas to give concessions," he said.

A statement released by family elders from Beit Lahiyah expressed support for the protests against Israel's offensive and its tightened blockade. They also said the community fully supports armed resistance against Israel and rejects "any attempt to exploit legitimate popu-

lar demands by a fifth column," apparently referring to opponents of Hamas.

The protests erupted a week after Israel ended its ceasefire with Hamas by launching a surprise wave of strikes that killed hundreds of people. Earlier this month, Israel halted deliveries of food, fuel, medicine and humanitarian aid to Gaza's roughly 2 million Palestinians.

Israel has vowed to escalate the war until Hamas returns the 59 hostages it still holds -- 24 of whom are believed to be alive. Israel is also demanding that the group give up power, disarm and send its leaders into exile. Hamas has said it will only release the remaining captives in exchange for Palestinian prisoners, a lasting ceasefire and an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

The war was triggered by Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack into Israel, in which Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted 251. Hamas has said only a handful of its top commanders knew about the attack ahead of time.

Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed over 50,000 people, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not say how many were civilians or combatants. Israel's bombardment and ground operations have caused vast destruction and at their height displaced some 90 per cent of Gaza's population.

Hamas won a landslide victory in the last Palestinian elections, held in 2006. It seized power in Gaza from the Western-backed Palestinian Authority, dominated by the secular Fatah movement, the following year after months of factional unrest and a week of heavy street battles.

Rights groups say both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas violently suppress dissent, quashing protests in the areas they control and jailing and torturing critics. (AP)

IMF approves loan for Pak to address climate change

ISLAMABAD, March 26: The IMF approved a loan of USD 1.3 billion for Pakistan to address climate change while also reaching a staff-level agreement on the first review of the already agreed USD 7 billion loan.

The new agreement spans over 28 months under the Climate Resilience and Sustainability Facility which aims to help nations address climate challenges while committing to reforms.

Additionally, freeing USD 1 billion for the country under the USD 7 billion bailout programme would bring the total disbursements to USD 2 billion.

"The IMF team has reached a staff-level agreement (SLA) with the Pakistani authorities on the first review of the 37-month extended arrangement under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF), and on a new 28-month arrangement under the IMF's (Resilience and Sustainability Trust) with total access over the 28 months of around USD 1.3 billion," Nathan Porter, mission chief to Pakistan, said on Tuesday.

"Upon approval (by the IMF board), Pakistan will have access to about USD 1 billion under the EFF, bringing total disbursements under the programme to about USD 2 billion," he added. Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif praised his team for the "positive development." "This was achieved through teamwork, no doubt," he said.

Sharif further said that politicians from the opposition had questioned if the government would be able to convince the IMF without a mini-budget. "With God's grace, the mini-budget did not come," he said. He acknowledged that the people faced difficulties as the government persevered to fulfill the conditions set by the IMF.

"Particularly, the common people who faced difficulties, if their sacrifices weren't there, the staff-level [agreement] would not have been possible as they face the burden of inflation," he added. (PTI)

Sri Lanka slams Britain's 'unilateral action' to sanction its former generals



COLOMBO, March 26: Sri Lanka on Wednesday slammed the British government's "unilateral action" to sanction its three former military commanders, who led the campaign that crushed the LTTE in 2009, saying the move will complicate the national reconciliation process.

A UK foreign office statement Monday said Sri Lanka's three military commanders - former Army Commanders Gen Shaven-

dra Silva, Jagath Jayasuriya and former Navy Commander Wasantha Karannagoda - were among those sanctioned and subjected to UK travel bans and asset freezes.

The UK government also sanctioned Vinyagamurthy Muralidaran, the deputy leader of the LTTE, who later turned a rebel of the group and became a deputy minister in the national parliament.

In a statement on Wednesday,

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that "such unilateral actions by countries do not assist but serve to complicate the national reconciliation process underway in Sri Lanka".

"The government is in the process of strengthening domestic mechanisms on accountability and reconciliation and any past human rights violations should be dealt with through domestic accountability mechanisms," the ministry said.

Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath conveyed Sri Lanka's position to British High Commissioner Andrew Patrick, it added.

Rights abuses alleged on both government troops and the LTTE during the final battle in 2009 caused four UN rights resolutions, which called for international mechanisms for the prosecution of alleged perpetrators.

Sri Lanka outrightly rejected resolutions and said local mechanisms would be set up. Rights groups charge that only minimal progress has been made despite pledges.

The UK government's sanctions on General Silva follow a similar

action against him by the US State Department in 2020.

In 2023, Canada sanctioned two former presidents, Mahinda and Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

The two Rajapaksa brothers led the military campaign which crushed the LTTE, ending their three decades of armed struggle to create a separate Tamil homeland in the north and east regions.

General Silva and Karannagoda were key commanders in the three-year campaign.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ran a parallel state in the north and east regions of Sri Lanka in their bid to set up a separate homeland for the minority Tamils, claiming discrimination at the hands of the Sinhalese.

On May 18, 2009, the Sri Lankan Army declared victory with the discovery of the body of the dreaded LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.

According to Sri Lankan government figures, over 20,000 people are missing due to various conflicts, including the three-decade war with Tamil militants in the north and east, which claimed at least 100,000 lives. (PTI)

Palestinians protest against Hamas in rare public show of dissent in Gaza

CAIRO, March 26: Palestinians chanted against Hamas during an anti-war protest in the Gaza Strip, according to videos circulating online. It was a rare show of public anger against the militant group, which has long repressed dissent and still rules the territory 17 months into the war with Israel.

The videos, which appeared to be authentic, showed hundreds of people taking part in an anti-war protest in the heavily destroyed northern town of Beit Lahiyah on Tuesday.

People held signs saying "Stop the war," "We refuse to die," and "The blood of our children is not

cheap." Some could be heard chanting: "Hamas out!" Other videos appeared to show Hamas supporters dispersing the crowds.

A statement released by family elders from Beit Lahiyah expressed support for the protests against Israel's offensive and its tightened blockade. They also said the community fully supports armed resistance against Israel and rejects "any attempt to exploit legitimate popular demands by a fifth column," apparently referring to opponents of Hamas.

The protests erupted a week after Israel ended its ceasefire with Hamas by launching a surprise

wave of strikes that killed hundreds of people.

Earlier this month, Israel halted deliveries of food, fuel, medicine and humanitarian aid to Gaza's roughly 2 million Palestinians.

Israel has vowed to escalate the war until Hamas returns the 59 hostages it still holds -- 24 of whom are believed to be alive. Israel is also demanding that the group give up power, disarm and send its leaders into exile.

Hamas has said it will only release the remaining captives in exchange for Palestinian prisoners, a lasting ceasefire and an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. (AP)

Zelenskyy says Ukraine ready to observe ceasefire against energy targets



KYIV, March 26: Ukraine is ready to proceed with a ceasefire prohibiting attacks on energy infrastructure, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said, in line with a deal that was brokered by the United States during three days of negotiations with Ukrainian and Russian officials in the Saudi capital.

Speaking in a video address late Tuesday, Zelenskyy said Ukraine had agreed with US negotiators "that a ceasefire for energy infrastructure can start today." But, he warned, any strikes on Ukraine's energy facilities by Moscow would draw "strong retaliation."

The comments underscored the tenuous agreements that came out of the three days of separate US-Ukrainian and US-Russian talks in Riyadh. Washington said it had agreed with the warring parties to implement a pause on attacks on energy infrastructure as well as these steps to ensure safe navigation for ships in the Black Sea.

Those talks were part of a broader effort by President Donald Trump's administration toward a limited, 30-day ceasefire that Moscow and Kyiv agreed to in principle last week, but has thus far failed to materialize as both sides continue to launch drone and rocket attacks against the other.

While Zelenskyy on Tuesday thanked the US for its efforts to strike an agreement, questions remained over some key details, and a comprehensive peace deal to end the

three-year war still looked distant.

Russia links the Black Sea deal to sanctions relief

On Tuesday, the White House said in separate statements that the sides had "agreed to ensure safe navigation, eliminate the use of force, and prevent the use of commercial vessels for military purposes in the Black Sea."

Details of the prospective deal were not released, but it appeared to mark another attempt to ensure safe Black Sea shipping after a 2022 agreement that was brokered by the UN and Turkey but halted by Russia the next year.

After the White House issued its statement Tuesday, the Kremlin warned that a potential Black Sea deal could only be implemented after sanctions against the Russian Agricultural Bank and other financial organisations involved in food and fertilizer trade are lifted and their access to the SWIFT system of international payments is ensured.

Zelenskyy on Tuesday evening reacted to those demands, casting them as an example of Moscow "manipulating, twisting agreements, and lying" about the terms of the agreement.

"There are absolutely clear statements that have been published by the White House, everyone can see what is stated there," Zelenskyy said. "And there is something that the Kremlin is lying about again: that supposedly

(the ceasefire) in the Black Sea depends on the issue of sanctions."

In an apparent reference to Moscow's demands, the White House said Tuesday the US "will help restore Russia's access to the world market for agricultural and fertilizer exports, lower maritime insurance costs, and enhance access to ports and payment systems for such transactions."

When asked about when Washington might help Moscow achieve those ambitions, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday that contacts between Russia and the US "continue quite intensively," and that authorities are "satisfied with how pragmatic, constructive and productive our dialogue is."

Peskov said the 2022 Black Sea Grain initiative could be revived if Russia's demands regarding agricultural and fertilizer exports are met. He said that those are the same demands that Russia initially put forward in the grain deal and that weren't being fulfilled.

Moscow claims compliance with pause on energy strikes

Peskov said that Putin's order to pause strikes on Ukraine's energy infrastructure for 30 days, given on March 18 per an agreement with Trump, still stands, and that Russian forces are complying with it. He accused Kyiv of continuing to target Russia's energy infrastructure but added that "we still believe that this moratorium (on strikes) should be observed."

Ukrainian officials have reported multiple strikes against their energy sites since March 18. In a post on X on Tuesday, Zelenskyy's communications adviser Dmytro Lytvyn said Moscow was "lying" about observing a ceasefire on energy infrastructure.

"They've been hitting our energy sites with bombs, attack drones, and FPV drones. We're not going into all the details, but there have already been 8 confirmed hits on energy facilities," Lytvyn wrote. (AP)

Universal health coverage in Global South under threat through decreased financing, South Africa at G20 meet

JOHANNESBURG, March 26: Universal health coverage in the Global South is under threat because of decreased financing as funds are being diverted for other priorities, host South Africa told the second G20 Health Working Group meeting here on Wednesday.

The three-day G20 Health Working Group (HWG) meeting is part of a series of countrywide G20 events taking place throughout this year as South Africa holds the presidency of the G20.

"Constraints we are witnessing (include) a concerning trend of declining global health budgets, simultaneously with rising costs," South African Health Minister Aaron Mokoaleli told the opening event in KwaZulu-Natal province.

"This is particularly acute in the Global South, where many nations are burdened by unsustainable debt servicing. These step repayments are effectively cannibalising vital health budgets, leaving millions without access to essential health services," the minister said.

"We must reverse this trend and accelerate progress towards Uni-



versal Health Coverage (UHC). We must invest in accessible, affordable and comprehensive primary health care for all," Mokoaleli told the meeting, the theme for which is "Accelerate Health Equity, Solidarity and Universal Coverage".

The minister called on the G20 members to acknowledge that spending on health is not a cost but an investment. "We must advocate

for greater allocation of national budgets to health, ensuring efficient and equitable spending," he said, adding that debt relief and restructuring for many nations was no longer a luxury but a necessity. "We must explore mechanisms that allow countries to reallocate resources towards health."

"We must prioritise public health over competing interests, ensuring that adequate resources

are allocated to meet the health needs of our populations.

"Furthermore, we must all align our efforts with the provisions of the Lusaka agreement, which emphasises the importance of strengthening health systems and promoting equitable access to health care," Mokoaleli said.

"South Africa is committed to collaborating with all the G20 members to achieve our shared goals. Let us work together to ensure that health remains a priority, not a commodity, especially during these unstable economic times," Mokoaleli concluded.

Apart from various critical health issues, including financial protection for UHC and sustaining health financing, also on the agenda are bridging the equity gap to accelerate addressing the burden of Non-Communicable Diseases.

In the spotlight is also expected to be a response to the Global Health financing emergency following the decision by US President Donald Trump to halt billions of dollars of health funding worldwide. (PTI)

CPI(M) claims Tripura speaker partial

Boycotts remaining days of assembly session

AGARTALA, March 26: The opposition CPI(M) in Tripura on Wednesday announced that its MLAs would boycott the remaining days of the budget session of the assembly, accusing Speaker Biswa Bandhu Sen of being partisan. The seven-day budget session which commenced on March 21 entered its third day on Wednesday.

The Left party's legislators' announcement came after Sen rejected a privilege motion moved by Leader of the Opposition Jitendra Chaudhury of the CPI(M), while accepting another by Parliamentary Affairs Minister Ratan Lal Nath on technical grounds.

Soon after the Question Hour, the Speaker said he received two motions for alleged breach of privilege by Nath and Chaudhury.

"Under the Rule of Assembly proceedings, the Speaker can allow only one privilege motion in a day. Since I have received the privilege motion submitted by the parliamentary affairs minister first, I will allow it. I am rejecting the privilege motion submitted by Chaudhury," he said.

Angered by the Speaker's decision, CPI(M) MLAs started raising slogans against him.

The issue has its genesis in Nath's alleged racist remarks against Chaudhury, a tribal leader, in the House on Monday.

The leader of the opposition moved the privilege motion claiming that Nath had made a "derogatory, abusive and racial" comment against "myself, my family and my community".

In his privilege motion against the CPI(M)'s mouthpiece in the state, Nath alleged that the newspaper published a "deliberately motivated" report on his remark.

The parliamentary affairs minister read his motion against the editor of the CPI(M) mouthpiece.

"My words have been deliber-



ately given a communal angle, spreading a hateful provocation in a highly planned manner," he said.

Angry CPI(M) MLAs rushed to the well and staged protests accusing the Speaker of being partial. They later staged a walkout.

Later, the leader of the opposition told reporters in his chamber that the CPI(M), the main opposition in the 60-member Assembly, will boycott the remaining days of the ongoing Budget session.

"We are elected by the people to raise their problems in the Assembly but unfortunately the opposition is not allowed to speak for the public interest. The Speaker is trying to suppress the voice of the opposition. This is a black day for the democracy," Chaudhury said.

He said, "The Speaker is supposed to discharge his duties like an umpire (in a cricket match), but he himself is playing for the ruling party and is trying to score. Since we are not allowed to speak in the House, the CPI(M) legislature party will boycott the remaining days of the Budget session".

Responding to CPI(M)'s decision, senior Congress MLA Sudip Roy Barman said, "This is a shame that the main opposition party will boycott the remaining day of the session pointing finger at the Speaker. I request Chief Minister Manik Saha to intervene in the matter". (PTI)

Aims to strengthen Sikkim's economy, promote inclusive growth Sikkim CM presents ₹ 16,196 cr budget for 2025-26

GANGTOK, March 26: Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang on Wednesday presented in the assembly a budget of ₹ 16,196 crore for the 2025-26 fiscal with a focus on empowering youth, uplifting farmers, investing in infrastructure and ensuring financial discipline.

The budget comprises ₹ 11,028 crore of revenue expenditure and ₹ 5,168 crore of capital outlay.

The devolution of taxes from the Centre was estimated at ₹ 5,519 crore, a leading source of receipts, along with ₹ 2,600 crore that the central government will provide to Sikkim as grants and aids in 2025-26, said Tamang, who also holds the finance portfolio.

The state government will generate its own tax revenue worth ₹ 2,076 crore and non-tax revenue to the tune of ₹ 1,007 crore, he said, adding that ₹ 2,651 crore will be raised through borrowing.

The chief minister said that a provision of ₹ 2,896 crore has been made in the next fiscal year's budget for the state government's contributions to the centrally sponsored schemes with a goal to maximise the development of the Himalayan state.

At the end of the presentation of his seventh consecutive budget on the second day of the ongoing session, Tamang said that the



budget reflects the SKM government's commitment towards fiscal prudence for sustainable development and the welfare of the people of Sikkim.

"I presented the 7th consecutive annual budget for the financial year 2025-26 of our government since we took over the governance of Sikkim in 2019. The budget reflects our government's commitment towards fiscal prudence for sustainable development

and the welfare of our people," he said.

This budget aims to strengthen Sikkim's economy, promote inclusive growth, and ensure that development benefits reach all citizens, Tamang said.

The chief minister also said that his government's focus remains on empowering youth, uplifting farmers, investing in infrastructure, and ensuring financial discipline.

"Through effective governance, we will drive economic growth, social equity, and environmental sustainability while maintaining peace and harmony," Tamang said, adding that the budget will accelerate Sikkim's growth while ensuring long-term sustainability and inclusivity.

Through strategic investments across key sectors—infrastructure, education, health-care, connectivity, environmental conservation, tourism, and social welfare, the government aims to strengthen the state's economy, improve livelihoods, and enhance the quality of life for every citizen, the chief minister said.

He said that the state government recognises the challenges posed by the state's unique mountainous terrain, vulnerability to climate change, and uncertainties of the global economic landscape, and implements policies that drive equitable and sustainable development.

"We are focused on enhancing resilience, fostering innovation, and leveraging our natural and human capital to build a prosperous future," Tamang said, adding that the investments in infrastructure will improve connectivity, ease transportation bottlenecks, and facilitate economic activities.

After the chief minister's 37-minute budget speech, Speaker M N Sherpa said that the discussion on the budget will take place on Thursday.

Earlier, Governor OM Prakash Mathur addressed the House ahead of the presentation of the annual budget and hailed Sikkim as an epitome of peace, tranquillity and harmony.

The Himalayan state has made a name for itself as a beautiful place where peace and tranquillity prevailed even as rapid strides have been made in terms of development over the past 50 years since the state was integrated into the Union of India, he said.

Mathur lauded Tamang for providing good governance in Sikkim along with quality education and health facilities to the people.

The Sikkim governor exuded confidence that the state will maintain the momentum in the journey towards development and prosperity under the leadership of the chief minister in the years to come. (PTI)

Over 1.92 lakh metric tons of illegally mined coal detected



SHILLONG, March 26: Over 1.92 lakh metric tons of illegally mined coal have been detected in four coal-rich districts of Meghalaya as per aerial survey conducted by a leading drone survey and inspection company - Garuda.

This was revealed by Justice (ret'd) BP Katakay, who is heading the high court constituted one man committee, after chairing a meeting on Tuesday.

Addressing media persons, Katakay said, "The report of the aerial survey conducted by Garuda has been submitted and according to the report, in four districts - East Jaintia Hills, South West Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills and South Garo Hills, they found little over 1.92 lakh metric tons of coal other than the inventoried coal."

"I have asked them to furnish certain clarification which I am expecting today or by tomorrow. So therefore, according to them other than inventoried coal there are more coal available

within 1 km radius. Therefore, in today's discussion I have requested the deputy commissioners and superintendents of police of the concerned districts as well as concerned departments to be more vigilant about the availability of coal other than this 1.92 lakh metric tons of coal," he said.

Katakay added, "Based on this survey report, I will submit my report to the Meghalaya High Court what would be my impression on this report because I have to give my impression on this report, which I cannot share with you right now unless I submit the report and unless the High Court makes it public. So, facts remain that the survey report conducted by Garuda, found an additional 1.92 lakh metric tons of coal in four districts in the state of Meghalaya."

When asked, Katakay said, "Any coal found other than CIL designated depot is illegal. After the ban was imposed by the NGT, which has been confirmed by the Supreme Court, which has said that there cannot be rat hole mining, it means illegal mining unless the mining is allowed under the provision of MMDR Act."

Further, he informed, "I have been told in today's proceedings that whole prospective licenses have already been

issued and another four have also been granted total eight and out of eight in respect of three environmental clearances have been granted and five are yet to get the environmental clearance and out of those three environmental clearance projects, one has started their operation."

"Why should I ask the government to clarify because I am here because of the high court and as per high court order. These surveys have been conducted because of the directions issued by me from time to time and based on these reports I will scrutinize those reports, and I will have my own interpretation of this report and inform the high court, and the high court will definitely take appropriate action thereafter," Katakay added.

"But I am reiterating that any coal found other than the coal available in the CIL designated depots are illegally mined coal and action has to be taken under the MMDR Act means FIRs have to be registered, coal has to be seized, the entire coal has to be put into auction subject to the permission to be granted by the respective courts of law and the entire deposits will go to the state's exchequer, not a single of it will go to the coal miners," he further added.

CPIM's Assembly boycott discredited to Govt: Tripura Cong MLA

HT Correspondent

AGARTALA, March 26: Senior Congress leader and former Tripura minister Sudip Roy Barman on Wednesday criticized the CPIM's decision to boycott the remainder of the ongoing Tripura Legislative Assembly Budget session, calling it a significant discredited to the state government.

The Budget session for the financial year 2025-26, which commenced on March 21, is scheduled to continue until April 1. However, citing alleged violations of Assembly procedures and misuse of power by Speaker Biswabandhu Sen, the CPIM, the principal opposition party, announced on Wednesday that it would abstain from the remaining proceedings.

Reacting strongly to the development, Roy Barman described the situation as deeply unfortunate.

"I have never witnessed such an incident in the Tripura Legislative Assembly. While the ruling party, by virtue of its majority, may have an upper hand, it is unacceptable to see the opposition being silenced and insulted. The Assembly's norms and dignity are being completely disregarded. By using muscle and money power, they are running the House as they please. The Speaker's actions are tarnishing the sanctity of his chair and setting a dangerous precedent for newcomers, who may begin to believe that this is how the system operates," he stated.

NSCN-IM accuses BSF of transporting illegal immigrants

DIMAPUR, March 26: The NSCN-IM has accused the Border Security Force (BSF) of transporting "unidentified illegal immigrants from Churachandpur district and dropping them at Litan village areas where there are few Kuki villages surrounding the Litan in Ukhrul district".

In a press statement issued to media houses today, the NSCN-IM asserted that it will not allow "Naga areas to be used as dumping ground for any illegal immigrants transported by India's paramilitary forces from across the border or from any other non-Naga areas".

The NSCN-IM press release alleged that the BSF has been guarding the Kuki militants' camp at Molhang Kuki village since quite long. It further stated that this "entails a cooperative relationship between the BSF, a paramilitary force responsible for guarding India's border, and the Kuki militants". The NSCN-IM further said such a relationship that "defied any logic" is a direct challenge and insult to the NSCN-IM that is in ceasefire with the Government of India since 1997 to pave the way for political dialogue for a peaceful solution of the Indo-Naga political conflict. (NNN)

Five militants arrested in Manipur

IMPHAL, March 26: Security forces arrested five militants belonging to different proscribed outfits from two Imphal valley districts, police said on Wednesday.

Two active cadres of the banned United National Liberation Front (Koireng faction) who were involved in extortion activities in Imphal and Bishnupur districts were arrested by police in Imphal East district on Tuesday, they said.

Security forces arrested two active cadres of the banned Kangleipak Communist Party (PWG) from Thangtek Teramkhong in Bishnupur district on Tuesday. They were involved in extortion activities in Imphal West district. (PTI)

7th Act East Business Show inaugurated in Shillong

SHILLONG, March 26: Meghalaya Chief Minister, Conrad K Sangma, recently inaugurated the 7th Act East Business Show at State Convention Centre, Shillong. The three-day business show organised by Indian Chamber of Commerce in collaboration with the Government of Meghalaya aims at strengthening ties with BBIN and ASEAN nations.

It can be noted here that 14 nations are participating in the 7th Act East Business Show

Speaking during the inaugural session, Conrad K Sangma, welcoming delegates from Australia, Bhutan, Germany, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and UAE, said that Meghalaya is eager to strengthen ties with BBIN and ASEAN nations and added that the state's proximity to Dubai, BBIN and ASEAN nations can make Meghalaya a natural hub for trade, commerce and connectivity.

He further said that the partnerships, understanding and the bonding that is developed at such events are important takeaways too for all and not just a platform for a gathering of industrialists, leaders, policy makers and entrepreneurs.

The Chief Minister also added that there is a very strong political will that is pushing the agenda of taking the North Eastern region forward and said, "This strong will and desire of developing and pushing forward the North eastern region of the country comes all the way from the Prime Minister, to the Chief Ministers of the North Eastern states and also at the level of bureaucrats, officials and administration."

He further added that Meghalaya has seen a growth rate above the national level in the last few years due to the processes, initiatives and policies that were taken to make the growth a possibility. "The institutional setups that have been created, the involvement of the community at multiple levels, the different activities for our young entrepreneurs are testaments to the intention and the goal of the government," he added.

"Our government has been working tirelessly to develop policies that foster economic expansion, attract investments and create new opportunities for business," he said and added that the state is working towards becoming a mer driver in regional economic cooperation.

The Chief Minister also reiterated that while growth is important the growth must come with sustainability. "Sustainability can come only if we work closely with environment, culture, tradition and the community and as a government we have believed that while growth is important, respecting these different aspects of environment, culture, tradition and community is very crucial as we move forward," he stated.

NU researchers, local community collaborate to conserve Indigenous fish species

Approach is uncommon in scientific studies in the region

HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, March 26: Researchers at Nagaland University have collaborated with the local community to study and conserve indigenous fish species in Dikhu river in Nagaland.

The river, one of the most important tributaries of the Brahmaputra, flows through Nagaland and is home to many freshwater species crucial for local biodiversity and the economy.

According to a release from the university on Tuesday, this research integrates traditional ecological knowledge from local villagers to better understand fish diversity, fish species assessment, indigenous fishing techniques, and community-based fishing practices.

It said the approach is uncommon in scientific studies in the region.

The study underscored an urgent need for focused conservation efforts in the river systems of Nagaland. The release said these systems support a unique and rich biodiversity but are threatened by increasing human encroachment and unsustainable practices.

It showed that the Dikhu river is not



only vital for local communities but also plays an important role in global conservation efforts.

The research team from the Zoology department, Nagaland University (Lumami campus) and ICAR-National Bureau of Fish Genetic Resources, Lucknow, aimed to explore and document the ichthyofaunal diversity of Dikhu river. They focused on the lack of comprehensive data on fish species in the river and the pressing threats these species face due to anthropogenic pressures such as habitat destruction, overfishing, and destructive fishing techniques.

The study, funded by ICAR-National

Bureau of Fish Genetic Resources, Lucknow recorded 28 fish species across six orders, 13 families, and three subfamilies, with Cypriniformes being the most dominant order (67.9%).

The Research was led by Dr Pranay Punj Pankaj, associate professor, department of zoology, Nagaland University (Lumami Campus) and Metevinu Kechu, research scholar, Nagaland University.

Their findings were published in the reputed, peer-reviewed journal of Threatened Taxa.

Elaborating on the need for such research, Dr Pankaj said, "The study is significant because the Dikhu river and its fish species have received limited attention in scientific literature.

Thus, this study makes a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge on the freshwater ecosystems of Northeast India."

He added the findings are vital for conservation strategies aimed at preserving freshwater biodiversity in the Northeast, a biodiversity hotspot. He said documenting threatened fish species and their population trends will support targeted conservation efforts.

E-AUCTION PROGRAMME FOR THE MONTH OF APRIL/ 2025

E-Auction programme for sale of Railway scrap material under the jurisdiction of Tinsukia Division for the month of APRIL/2025... is hereby fixed as under.

SN	MONTH	DATE FIXED
1	APRIL/2025	24-04-2025 & 30-04-2025 For Tinsukia Division 10-04-2025 & 18-04-2025 For GSD/Dibrugarh Town

Interested bidders are advised to bid through IREPS website (www.ireps.gov.in) for participation in e-auction.

Dy. CMM/D, Dibrugarh

NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY

Serving Customers With A Smile

E-AUCTION FOR INSTALLATION AND OPERATION OF WATER VENDING MACHINE

E-Auction for installation and operation of water vending Machine. Details are as under. Auction Catalogue No.: LMG-WVM-02-25. Auction Start Date & Time (All Lots): 11:00 hrs. on 09-04-2025. Auction Close Date & Time: 11:30 hrs. on 09-04-2025. Rate Unit: Annual Licensing Fee, Trips/Days: 1826.

Seq No.	Lot No./Category	Description
AA/1	MSS-LMG-LMG-WVM-21 -25-1 (Misc-Static-Services - Water Vending Machines)	Installation and operation of 36 nos. of Water Vending Machines at specified/ earmarked locations of 13 nos. of Railway stations over Lumding division for a period of 5 (Five) years.

Prospective bidders are requested to visit e-Auction leasing module of IREPS website www.ireps.gov.in.

Sr. Divisional Commercial Manager, Lumding

NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY

"SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE"

No.BDB/Tender/46/2023-24/4593

Date 25/03/2025

SHORT NOTICE INVITING TENDER

Sealed tender affixing a non-refundable Court fee stamp of Rs. 8.25 (Rupees eight & twenty five paise) only with a validity period of 180 days which will subsequently be converted and drawn up in the printed of F-2 form are invited from the registered contractors of Class-I (A, B & C), Class-II & Class-III category of Assam PWD (Roads & Building) and BTC according to their eligibility for submitting tenders for the works under Cultural Affairs Deptt. BTR during the financial year 2024-25 as stated below. The tenders will be received by the undersigned up to 2.00PM on 22/4/25 and will be opened on day after tomorrow (as on 23/4/25) & place at 2.30 PM.

Sl. No.	Name of activity	Est. Value (in Lakhs)	Tender Value (in Lakhs)	EMD/Bid Security (in Rs.)	Cost of Tender paper (in Rs.)	Pre-bid date and Time	Last date & time of bid submission	Date & Time of bid opening	Time of completion of Work
1	Renovation of open cultural Stage at 2 No. Khagrabari, Bhergaon	5.00L	5,00,000	for 5,000 ST, SC) 10,000/- (for OBC/ General	150	1/4/25	22/4/25	23/4/25	6 month
2	Const. of Open Cultural Stage at Panisheli Bishnu Mandir, Bhergaon	7.00L	7,00,000	for 7,000 ST, SC) 14,000/- (for OBC/ General	210	1/4/25	22/4/25	23/4/25	6 month
3	Const. of open cultural Stage at Chewni, Bhergaon	7.00L	7,00,000	for 7,000 ST, SC) 14,000/- (for OBC/ General	210	1/4/25	22/4/25	23/4/25	6 month

Detail N.I.T. may be seen in all working days during office hours in the office of the undersigned. Tender papers will be issued to the contractors or their authorized agents from 1/4/25 to 23/4/25 up to 1.30 PM. In the office of the undersigned on payment in the form of demand draft/bankers cheque from any Nationalized Bank, duly pledged in favour of the Principal Secretary, BTC Kokrajhar payable at Kokrajhar.

IPR(BTC)/C/2024-25/1681

Sd/- Block Dev. Officer
Bhergaon Dev. Block, Bhergaon

Congress, SP 'barriers' in UP's development: CM Adityanath

'This is the same state where the youth did not get jobs'

AGRA (UP), March 26: Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Wednesday accused the opposition of acting as "barriers" in the state's development.

Addressing an event organised to mark eight years of the BJP government in the state, the chief minister said, "All those who are above 25 years of age will remember that before 2017, the public system of Uttar Pradesh was ruled by hooliganism and mafia."

He emphasised that the situation was especially dire for the youth, farmers, and the general public. "The youth was facing an identity crisis, farmers used to commit suicide, and the poor used to die of hunger," he added.

Underscoring the progress made under his government, Adityanath said, "This is the same state where the youth did not get jobs and when they went out of the state,



they faced an identity crisis," he said. He criticised the Congress and the Samajwadi Party for allegedly "opposing development". "When it comes to the pride of Uttar Pradesh, these people first start making misleading comments," he said.

He alleged that the Congress and

SP were "fighting against the government during the COVID pandemic". They were not happy with the consecration of Ram temple and "spread false propaganda regarding the Maha Kumbh," he added.

"When these people got the opportunity, the Congress, the Sama-

twadi Party, they never did any development and when it is happening in UP, they are becoming a barrier in the way of development," said the chief minister.

Claiming development in sectors like agriculture, Adityanath said, "Farmers who once faced despair are now contributing to the state's development and no longer committing suicide."

Adityanath outlined the government's commitment to economic growth, citing initiatives such as "One District, One Product" and increased infrastructure development, particularly in expressways, metro systems, and airports.

"Today, Uttar Pradesh is the largest producer of food grains, potatoes, sugarcane, and ethanol in the country," he said, adding, "We have transformed Uttar Pradesh from a BIMARU state into a thriving economy." (PTI)

Share of middle class in national income at pre-colonial level: Kharge

NEW DELHI, March 26: Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Wednesday attacked the Modi government over growing income inequality and alleged that the share of middle class in national income is back to pre-colonial levels.

"In the last 78 years, no government has weakened the common people economically as much as the Modi government has oppressed them.

"Economic inequality is at a frightening level. Billionaires have become trillionaires and the poor are turning paupers. The status of middle class incomes today is what it was before the British Raj, in 1820," he said in a post in Hindi on X.

The Congress chief said the International Labour Organisation



(ILO) data shows that even if anyone has an advanced degree or holds a skilled job, one is still paid the seventh lowest wages in the world.

"Wage growth rate is projected to slow down from 9.3 per cent in 2006 to 0.1 per cent in 2023. The

average hourly earnings of an Indian worker are the fifth lowest in the world.

"Due to the burden of taxes, inflation and economic mismanagement... The middle class, the poor and the neglected are shrinking, and the Modi government is going around shouting 'Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas'," Kharge also said in his post.

He also shared a graph with his post showing the share of poorest one-third reducing from 10.8 per cent in 1820 to 6.4 per cent in 2023 and the middle one-third from 15 per cent in 1820 to 14.9 per cent in 2023.

On the other hand, the graph showed the growing share of richest one-third in national income at 77.8 per cent in 2023 against 73.2 per cent in 1820. (PTI)

Breach of privilege notice against Kunal Kamra in Maharashtra legislative council

MUMBAI, March 26: A breach of privilege notice was moved against stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra in the Maharashtra legislative council on Wednesday over his parody song targeting deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde.

BJP legislator Pravin Darekar moved the notice against the comedian as well as Shiv Sena (UBT) spokesperson Sushma Andhare.

"Kunal Kamra performed a song containing personal and insulting references to deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde," said Darekar, leader of the legislative council, presenting the motion.

"Andhare supported the performance and used objectionable language, which amounts to contempt of the House," he further said.

Both Kamra and Andhare disrespected the dignity of legislative institutions through their remarks, Darekar claimed.

The notice will have to be approved by Council chairman Ram Shinde before it is presented to the privilege committee. If the committee approves it, the motion will be discussed in the House.

In the state assembly, Shiv Sena MLA Ramesh Bormare submitted a breach of privilege notice against Andhare for allegedly mocking chief minister Devendra Fadnis. Minister of State for Finance Ashish Jaiswal supported Bormare.

Sudhir Mungantiwar (BJP) said members of the privilege committee should be named at the earliest.

Presiding officer Sanjay Kelkar said speaker Rahul Narwekar will take a decision on the notice.

Kamra, known for his no-holds-barred stand-up comedy at the expense of politicians and celebrities, incurred the wrath of Shinde's supporters last week with a song targeting the Shiv Sena president. (PTI)

Opposition accuse govt of writing off loans of wilful defaulters, burdening banks with NPAs

NEW DELHI, March 26: Opposition members in Rajya Sabha on Wednesday accused the government of writing off crores of rupees owed by wilful defaulters who have fled the country while crushing banks under the burden of non-performing assets.

Participating in the discussion on the Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024 in the Upper House, Shaktisinh Gohil (Congress) said the government has written off ₹ 87,000 crore owed by 50 wilful defaulters till 2024 citing official data.

"People, including Mehul Chokshi and Rishi Agarwal are in the list of those wilful defaulters. The government has written off loans to those people who looted this country and fled abroad. But when poor, small traders and farmers default on loans the government auctions their assets," he said.

Expressing similar views, Saket Gokhale (TMC) said by the government's own admission, consumption is down in the economy and people are not taking loans to buy any new products or to consume something new but they are taking loans to service their existing loans. "The other side of this problem is that Indian banks are being crushed under the burden of non-performing assets (NPAs). In just the last five years Indian banks have a staggering ₹ 10 lakh crore in NPAs," he said. This is not created by ordinary people, Gokhale said, adding "this is created by a bunch of ten-fifteen people who defrauded the system and left the country".

Taking a dig at the government's approach to solve the "NPA crisis", he said, "Banks have now been told to write off NPAs...these NPAs are taken off the balance sheets of banks, it does not mean they are repaid. It just means that they are taken off to make the balance sheet look healthy...but this money is still not being recovered." (PTI)

This allocation is part of the main Budget presented on March 10 At ₹ 64,008 crore, Maharashtra's gender budget provision constitutes 8.45 per cent of total outlay

MUMBAI, March 26: Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar on Wednesday said the state government allocated ₹ 64,008 crore for gender-specific initiatives in the 2025-26 budget, seeking to allay concerns over the reduced allocation for the Ladki Bahin Yojana in the annual financial plan.

Tabling the gender budget in the assembly, Pawar, who holds the finance portfolio, said the gender budget allocation constitutes 8.45 per cent of the total budget expenditure. This allocation is part of the main Budget presented on March 10 and it doesn't mean a separate budget for women.

The Mahayuti government had drawn flak from the Opposition for slashing the allocation for the flagship Majhi Ladki Bahin Scheme for women from ₹ 46,000 crore in the July 2024 budget to ₹ 36,000



crore in the latest Budget.

Pawar also said an allocation of ₹ 1,00,605 crore has been made for the child budget, accounting for 13.28 per cent of the total outlay. The overall budget expenditure stands at ₹ 7,57,576 crore.

Pawar said that Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) serves as a

tool to bridge gender disparities in public finance assuming that these economic policies affect women, men and others alike.

"This innovation in public finance helps to mainstream and prioritise gender equality and related issues," he added.

Pawar stressed that the GRB is

Protests over Waqf Bill rock Bihar, AIMPLB stages 'maha dharna' in Patna

PATNA, March 26: Protests against the Waqf Bill rocked Bihar on Wednesday, from the legislature to the streets, as political parties within the state and outside stood in solidarity with the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB), which organised a 'maha dharna' here.

The AIMPLB demonstrations were held barely a kilometre away from the Vidhan Sabha premises, to demand rollback of the Bill brought by the Narendra Modi government at the Centre, and to request "secular" leaders like chief minister Nitish Kumar to reconsider "support" to the contentious legislation.

Leader of Opposition Tejashwi Yadav turned up shortly after ruckus created on the issue by his colleagues in the RJD and allies like the CPI(M) had forced adjournment of the assembly within minutes of commencement of proceedings.

Yadav was accompanied by his father Lalu Prasad, the RJD president who chose not to speak owing to bad health.

The young RJD leader assured the gathering that he had the same "blood flowing in the veins" as of the former Bihar CM, who had famously stopped the Ayodhya Rath Yatra in its tracks by getting BJP patriarch L K Advani arrested.

Earlier, BJP MLA Hari Bhushan Thakur Bachaul had claimed that the Bill attacked the Waqf Boards' "extra constitutional" character, and advised the RJD to worry about the fate of Yadav with the assertion that its ally Congress has "refused" to accept him as chief ministerial candidate for the assembly polls, due later this year.

Yadav asserted that his party



will oppose tooth and nail the Bill that was "unconstitutional", "dictatorial" and inspired by the ideology of the RSS ("Nagpuriya").

The 'maha dharna' was also attended by leaders from outside the state like Bhim Army founder Chandrashekhar Azad alias Ravan and Indian Union Muslim League MP, E T Mohammad Basheer.

Ravan, who is an MP from the adjoining Uttar Pradesh, told reporters "after attacking the Waqf, the Modi government is now distributing Eid kits among Muslims. It is like offering spectacles after taking one's eyes away".

Basheer, elected to Lok Sabha from far off Kerala, wrote on X: "Representing IUML, I joined the AIMPLB-led protest in Patna against the Centre's Waqf Amendment Bill".

"Despite widespread opposition, the govt is pushing it forward. This is a wake-up call for authorities. I assured IUML will always be at the forefront of this fight," added Basheer.

CPI(M) legislature party leader in Bihar, Mehboob Alam, likened the Bill, in his speech at the 'maha dharna', to "targeting of

Jews by Hitler in a bid to gain popularity among people of other faiths".

AIMIM MLA Akhtarul Iman, who heads the state unit of the party, alleged that "we are already being targeted for practices like sporting a beard and a skullcap. The Waqf Bill has been brought so that even the dead are not spared and bulldozers are unleashed on our graveyards".

Another prominent attendee at the 'maha dharna' was Jan Suraj Party founder Prashant Kishor, who has been trying to woo the minority community with the promise of a sizeable number of tickets in the Bihar assembly elections.

Kishor has also been asserting that if the Waqf Bill was passed, the blame shall be shared by Nitish Kumar, who heads the JD(U), without support of which the BJP cannot survive in power at the Centre.

The Jan Suraj Party leader, whose differences with Kumar over the CAA-NRC controversy had led to his expulsion from the JD(U) five years ago, chose not to speak at the 'maha dharna'. (PTI)

BJP govt does not believe in autonomy but in centralisation of power: Oppn in LS

NEW DELHI, March 26: Opposition members on Wednesday urged the Centre to ensure the autonomy of the proposed 'Tribhuvan Sahkari University' in Gujarat's Anand, even though they alleged the BJP government believes in centralisation of power rather than autonomy.

Minister of Cooperation Amit Shah moved the 'Tribhuvan Sahkari University' Bill in Lok Sabha for its consideration. The bill proposes to grant a university status to the Institute of Rural Management in Anand, Gujarat as 'Tribhuvan Sahkari University' and declare it an institution of national importance.

The 'bill was introduced in Lok Sabha on Monday.

Participating in the discussion after it was moved by the home minister for consideration on Wednesday, TMC MP Saugata Roy alleged the BJP government does not believe in autonomy, but in centralisation of powers.

Though Roy welcomed the move to name the university after Tribhuvan Das Patel, who is considered the father of the cooperative movement, he said the institution should have academic, administrative and managerial autonomy.

Roy also took a dig at the ruling party, saying that Tribhuvan Das was a member of the Congress, not the BJP, and was awarded the Padma Shri by the Nehru government.

Roy also hailed the contribution of Verghese Kurien in strengthening the cooperative sector.

The Samajwadi Party's Virendra Singh also expressed apprehension about the alleged weakening of autonomous institutions through this bill and said the government should give clear information about the appointment of the Vice

Chancellor of the institute, appointment of members of the Board of Directors, etc. in this bill.

Ganiben Thakor, Congress member from the Banaskantha parliamentary constituency of Gujarat, said the bill is a matter of pride for her home state.

Mitesh Patel, the BJP MP from Anand, said the White Revolution was started in his parliamentary constituency under the leadership of Tribhuvan Das Patel and today Amul has become the world's largest milk producing cooperative.

Mitesh Patel said naming the university after Tribhuvan Das Patel honours his and others' contribution to the cooperative sector.

He said that when Amul started, it used to produce 250 litres of milk a day, whereas today it has reached the level of 60 lakh tonnes.

Patel expressed confidence that the university will play an important role in achieving Prime Minister Narendra Modi's goal of a self-reliant and developed India.

Taking a dig at the Congress, he said the establishment of the first cooperative training institute after 75 years of Independence shows how "irresponsible" were those who were in power for a long time in the country.

The Telugu Desam Party's M Sribharat said more states will come forward to open such institutes after the passage of this bill to establish the Tribhuvan Sahkari University.

According to the Bill, the present education and training infrastructure in the co-operative sector is "fragmented and grossly inadequate" to meet the present and future demand for qualified manpower and capacity building of existing employees in co-operative societies. (PTI)

Lok Sabha being run in 'non-democratic' manner: Rahul Gandhi

NEW DELHI, March 26: Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday claimed that he was not being given a chance to speak in the House which was being run in a "non-democratic style", and said Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla had made "unsubstantiated" remarks about him.

Gandhi's remarks came after Birla asked him to follow the rules of procedure that members are expected to observe to uphold the dignity of the House. It was not immediately clear what was the reason for the Speaker to make the observation. The former Congress president said the Speaker made remarks about him and then adjourned the House without giving him an opportunity to speak. "The Speaker just got up and left. He did not allow me to speak a word. He was speaking about me, and I don't know what he said about me, all unsubstantiated. I said, 'let me speak as you have spoken about me', but he did not say a word and just left. He adjourned the House when there was no need of it," the former Congress president said.

About 70 Congress Lok Sabha MPs, including deputy leader of Lok Sabha Gaurav Gogoi, party general secretary KC Venugopal and party's whip in the Lok Sabha Manickam Tagore, met the Lok Sabha speaker and raised the "denial" of opportunity to Gandhi to speak in the House.

Speaking with reporters in Parliament House complex, Gandhi said there is a convention that the Leader of Opposition is allowed to speak, but whenever he gets up to speak he is not allowed to speak.

"So, in what manner is this House being run? We are not being allowed to speak. I have not done anything. I was sitting quietly, I did not speak anything. In the last 7-8 days, I have not been allowed to speak," the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha said. (PTI)

Terror funding case: Delhi HC allows jailed J&K MP to attend Parliament in custody

NEW DELHI, March 26: The Delhi High Court has allowed Jammu and Kashmir MP Abdul Rashid Sheikh, alias Engineer Rashid, arrested in a terror funding case, to attend the ongoing Parliament session "in-custody" and rejected NIA's apprehension that he was a flight risk.

A bench of Justices Chandra Dhari Singh and Anup Jairam Bhambhani directed the director general (prisons) that Rashid would be escorted by plain clothed policemen from prison to Parliament on days of the Lok Sabha session between March 26 and April 4.

The Baramulla MP, the bench said, would be handed over to the custody of the Parliament security or marshals, who would allow him to attend the proceedings and he could avail other facilities and amenities there.

"While out to attend the Parliament session, the appellant (Rashid) shall not be entitled to use any cellular or landline phone or other communication device; nor shall he be entitled to have access to the internet by any mode," the bench's March 25 order said.

Rashid, who was represented by senior advocate N Hariharan and advocate Vikhyat Oberoi, was directed not to interact with anyone out of jail, except within the Parliament precincts. He should not engage with or address the media in any manner, the court said, including his pending criminal case.

The bench asked Rashid to bear



the expenses for the to-and-fro travel and other arrangements.

Rashid, who is facing trial under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) in a 2017 terror funding case, had challenged a March 10 trial court order refusing him custody parole or interim bail to attend Lok Sabha proceedings till April 4.

In the high court, he gave up his plea for interim bail or custody parole and sought to attend the Parliament sessions "in-custody".

The NIA opposed the plea saying by allowing him to attend Parliament, would enable him a platform to air his opinions which he could misuse.

The high court, however, said the control of parliamentary proceedings was within the remit of the Lok Sabha speaker and it had no doubt that the proceedings would be conducted with requisite

discipline. "This court is confident that subject to the conditions that the court proposes to impose by this order, the state machinery would be able to ensure the integrity of the appellant's custody, so that he remains available to face trial," the bench said.

The bench said NIA's apprehension that once Rashid was within the precincts of Parliament, and inside the house, he would cease to be "in-custody" of the court, was "without basis".

"The appellant would only temporarily be handed over to the Parliament security detail and that too for the limited purpose of performing his duties as a MP of his constituency. Furthermore, the NIA's submission that the appellant, who is an elected MP, would be a flight-risk within the precincts of Parliament, is to be heard only to be rejected," it said.

The court urged the secretary general of the Lok Sabha to ensure compliance of the conditions according to parliamentary rules, to ensure that Rashid's judicial custody was not compromised.

The bench said though there was no doubt Rashid was accused in a serious case of UAPA and had been in judicial custody since his arrest on August 9, 2019, as an MP he owed "to the people of his constituency the duty and responsibility to represent them in Parliament".

The Baramulla MP, who defeated Omar Abdullah in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, is facing trial in a terror funding case with allegations that he funded separatists and terror groups in Jammu and Kashmir. He has been lodged in Delhi's Tihar Jail since 2019 after the NIA arrested him in the 2017 terror-funding case. He was granted interim bail for one month in September last year to campaign in the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly election.

The NIA's FIR alleged Rashid's name cropped up during the interrogation of businessman and co-accused Zahoor Watali. After being charged in October 2019, a special NIA court framed charges against Rashid and others in March 2022 under Sections 120B (criminal conspiracy), 121 (waging war against the government), and 124A (sedition) of the Indian Penal Code and for offences relating to terrorist acts and terror funding under UAPA. (PTI)

India's natural gas demand can grow to 365 MMSCMD by 2030 if situation is conducive: PNGRB

GANDHINAGAR, March 26: Demand for natural gas in India can nearly double by 2030 if factors including accelerated progress, favourable policy implementation, and enhanced investments remain conducive, Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board chairperson Anil Kumar Jain said.

City Gas Distribution (CGD) network is expected to be the primary growth driver, he told the media on Wednesday.

"The current natural gas consumption in India is 190 Million Standard Cubic Meters per Day (MMSCMD). We expect a significant rise in city gas distribution by 2030.

"As per the growth estimates, natural gas consumption will rise to 297 MMSCMD under a scenario based on the existing global and domestic situations and policies. If the situation is conducive, the demand can grow to 365 MMSCMD by 2030," he said.

Jain was in Gandhinagar to attend the 2nd PNGRB national conclave on natural gas and petroleum products infrastructure.

Jain said PNGRB has allotted a license to lay the CGD network through a bidding process. We are committed to setting up 17,000 CNG stations and 12 crore domestic pipeline connections across the country by 2030, he added.

PNGRB is a statutory body mandated to regulate the refining, processing, storage, transportation, distribution, marketing and sale of petroleum, petroleum products and



natural gas. "One of the challenges (to natural gas consumption) is that the prices are not under our control. Another challenge is the exclusion of gas from the GST regime," he said.

Jain demanded that states consider slashing of tax because natural gas is a clean fuel. He said CNG is a new fuel for India. There are associated challenges related to laying infrastructure.

"As far as the natural gas pipeline is concerned, 10,000 km pipelines have been authorised to be laid at ₹ 3-5 crore per km, which will attract an investment of ₹ 40,000-50,000 crore in 3-5 years," Jain said.

He said another commitment of ₹ 30,000 crore is for distributing city gas at ₹ 400 crore per district.

"We expect to see an increase in CNG target with CNG adoption being undertaken rapidly. In domestic PNG, it depends on consumer choice," Jain said.

He said the CGD network bidding involves three objectives - the number of proposed CNG stations, houses to be connected to domestic pipelines, and kilometres of network to be laid in cities or districts.

"We granted seven years to the winner of bids to achieve these three objectives. They gave us a commitment to setting up 17,000 CNG stations and 12 crore domestic pipeline connections. These targets were set up during the last bidding round in 2023, which they have to complete by 2030," Jain said.

As per a report shared by PNGRB on "India's Natural Gas Demand Projection for 2030-2040," the CGD sector is expected to be the primary growth driver for natural gas consumption with a projected 2.5 to 3.5 times growth by 2030. It is expected to play a crucial role in shaping future NG (Natural Gas) consumption trends across various demand projection scenarios. (PTI)

Boy, 16, stabbed to death in Delhi's Wazirabad; 3 minors nabbed

NEW DELHI, March 26: A 16-year-old boy was abducted and killed for a Rs 10 lakh ransom in the Wazirabad area of north Delhi, a police officer said on Wednesday.

Three juveniles have been apprehended in connection with the murder, he said.

The class 9 student was taken to a deserted area near Bhalaswa Lake, where he was stabbed multiple times, he said.

"The family members of the boy had received a call regarding a ransom of ₹ 10 lakh. Later, they discovered his body," said the officer. On Monday, a complaint was filed at the local police station about a boy missing since Sunday. The boy studied in Mukherjee Nagar.

"During investigation, it was found that the missing/kidnapped boy was last seen with three boys, two of them aged 16 and 17, on a motorcycle on Jharoda Pushta road," the officer said. The sighting was confirmed through CCTV footage from the area. Police apprehended all three boys, who, during interrogation, revealed they had kidnapped the boy for a ransom of ₹ 10 lakh. They said that on Sunday, they took him with them on a motorcycle to hang out.

They took him to a forested area near Bhalaswa Lake, where they stabbed him and fled, leaving him dead. The next day, they called the boy's father, a driver by profession, using the boy's SIM and demanded a ransom of ₹ 10 lakh. "The body of the victim was discovered by a police team at the instance of the apprehended juveniles," the officer said. Police sources said that the accused also tried to cut the boy's body into parts. The mother of the deceased told reporters that the boys who allegedly killed her son lived nearby.

"My son left on Sunday around 7.30 pm after receiving a call, saying he will come back in 10 minutes. Later, we got a call with a demand for ₹ 10 lakh," she said. The father of the boy added, "Two boys came to our house to pick my son. After that, his mother kept calling him but it went unanswered. Around 9 pm on Sunday, his phone went off. I started a search for him and then went to the police station to register a complaint."

He said around midnight he got a call with the demand for a ransom, to be paid within three days, or else his son would be killed. "He was killed so brutally. His throat was slit and he was stabbed multiple times. I want them to go through the same pain that my son did," he said.

A relative of the boy blamed the Delhi Police for the slow action and law and order situation in the capital. "They waited so long to investigate the matter. If this continues, no kid would be safe in this neighbourhood. What are the police doing?" (PTI)

'Insensitive, inhuman': SC stays Allahabad HC controversial observations on rape

NEW DELHI, March 26: The Supreme Court on Wednesday took a strong exception to the Allahabad High Court's recent views that mere grabbing of a woman's breasts and pulling drawstrings of her "pyjama" wasn't rape, and stayed the observations, outlining total "insensitivity" and "inhuman approach".

Calling it a "very serious matter", a bench of Justices B R Gavai and Augustine George Masih said, "In normal circumstances, we are slow in granting stay at this stage. But since the observations in paragraphs 21, 24 and 26 are totally unknown to canons of law and depict total insensitive and inhuman approach, we are inclined to stay the said observations."

The top court had taken a suo motu cognisance of the matter after the contentious observations of the high court were brought to the notice of Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna by "We the Women of India" collective. The staying of the high court's controversial observations made in a March 17 verdict would mean that they cannot be used in any judicial proceedings for seeking relief by the present set of accused or others. The high court's verdict had come on a plea by two persons challenging a trial court's order summoning them for the alleged offence of attempt to rape a minor.

The verdict had held that the attempt to rape offence was not made out against the accused. The high court had held they were liable to be summoned for the lesser offence of assault or use of criminal force to woman with intent to disrobe her.

Referring to the high court's observations, solicitor general Tushar Mehta said, "This is one judgement I take a very serious exception." Attorney general R Venkataramani also appeared in the matter.

"It is a very serious matter," Justice Gavai said, "exhibiting total insensitivity on the part of the judge." The bench added, "We are sorry to use such harsh words against the judge."

Mehta said the chief justice of the high court was the master of the roster there and it was advisable that some steps were taken.

"We have perused the order (of the high court). We are at pains to say that some of the observations made in the impugned order and particularly in paragraphs 21, 24 and 26 depicts a total lack of sensitivity on the part of the author of the judgement," the bench said.

The apex court said it was not as if that the verdict was dictated at the spur of the moment in the court itself.

The high court had reserved its verdict in the matter in November last year and after almost four months, the judgement was pronounced, it added. The bench said it was clear that the judge had authored the verdict after application of mind.

The top court issued notices to the Centre, Uttar Pradesh government and the parties before the high court in the matter seeking their responses in the suo motu proceeding.

The registrar (judicial) of the apex court was directed by the bench to communicate its order to the registrar of the Allahabad High Court following which it would be "immediately" placed before the chief justice there.

The high court's chief justice was urged to examine the matter and take such steps as he deemed proper. The bench said the matter would be heard after two weeks.

During the hearing, one of the advocates appearing in the matter said they moved a plea against the high court order. The bench said the plea would be heard along with the suo motu proceedings. Another advocate said they would file an application on behalf of the victim's mother.

The March 17 ruling had also said that such an offence fell under the ambit of assault or use of criminal force against any woman with the intent to disrobe or compel her to be naked.

Justice Ram Manohar Narayan Mishra's verdict came on a petition filed by two persons challenging the order of a special judge in Kasganj through which they were summoned under Section 376 (rape) of the IPC among other sections.

It came on record that an application was moved before the court of special judge, POC SO Act, alleging that on November 10, 2021, she (informant) was returning from the home of her sister-in-law along with her 14-year-old daughter. It was alleged that accused Pawan, Akash and Ashok, who were from her village, met her on the way and offered a lift to her daughter.

The accused allegedly stopped their motorbike on the way to her village and started grabbing her breasts. Akash dragged her and tried to take her beneath the culvert and pulled the drawstring of her lowers. (PTI)

Cash, gold found in abandoned SUV belong to ex-constable of MP transport dept: ED

NEW DELHI, March 26: The Enforcement Directorate Wednesday said cash and gold worth about Rs 52 crore seized from an abandoned SUV in Madhya Pradesh last year "belonged" to former state transport department constable Saurabh Sharma, who is being investigated on corruption charges. The ED's declaration has ended months of speculation over the ownership of the cash and gold stash.

The ED, I-T Department and the Madhya Pradesh Lokayukta Police are the three agencies probing Sharma and the cache recovered from the vehicle on December 20 last year from an area in Bhopal.

The case began with the Lokayukta raiding Sharma first and recovered assets worth more than ₹ 3 crore, including ₹ 2.85 crore in cash, from his premises in Bhopal.

"In this case, Income-Tax Department had seized cash and gold from an Innova car belonging to Chetan Singh Gaur. ED investigation has revealed that the said cash and gold seized from Innova car belonged to Saurabh Sharma only," the federal probe agency claimed in a statement.

The statement did not elaborate further. The vehicle was registered in the name of Gaur and he is stated to be linked to Sharma.

The tax department seized 52 kg of gold bars worth ₹ 40 crore and more than Rs 11 crore in cash from the vehicle.

Sharma or his legal representatives could not be contacted immediately for a response on the charges made against him by the ED.

The issue has snowballed into a political controversy in the central state with the opposition Congress and the ruling BJP trading charges on rampant corruption in the transport department during their respective regimes.

The ED also said it has attached assets worth ₹ 92.07 crore.

A provisional order for attachment was issued on Tuesday under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), it said.

The assets represent the "proceeds of crime" derived and obtained by Saurabh Sharma in his name or in the name of his relatives, associates apart from firms, companies, society, etc. "owned or controlled" by them, the agency said.

The linked associates or entities include Sharad Jaiswal, Chetan Singh Gaur, Aviral Building Constructions Pvt Ltd, Aviral Enterprises Pvt Ltd and U R Infrastructures Pvt Ltd, it said.

The ED said probe found that Saurabh Sharma "had purchased various movable and immovable properties in the name of his family members, friends, associates and also in the name of companies, firms, society by arranging unsecured loans from various unknown persons by laundering of ill-gotten money obtained and derived by him by commission of criminal activity relating to scheduled offences".

Sharma, Gaur and linked person Jaiswal were arrested in the case by the ED and they are currently lodged in jail under judicial custody. The ED case of money laundering stems from the Lokayukta Police FIR.

As per the Lokayukta Police, Sharma got appointed as a constable in the state transport department on compassionate grounds in 2015 and took voluntary retirement in 2023. His father, a government doctor, died in 2015, as per the special police establishment of the MP government.

The Lokayukta also alleged that Sharma earned money through corrupt means including setting up a school and hotel in the name of his mother, wife, sister-in-law and close associates Gaud and Jaiswal. (PTI)

Sarpanch murder: Bid to foil extortion attempt motive

CHHATRAPATI SAMBHAJINAGAR, March 26: The motive behind the killing of sarpanch Santosh Deshmukh was his opposition to extortion attempts targeting an energy firm linked to a windmill project, the prosecution on Wednesday submitted to a court in Maharashtra's Beed district. The court is likely to frame charges in the case against eight persons, including Walmik Karad, a close aide of former Maharashtra minister Dhananjay Munde, in April.

On Wednesday, special public prosecutor Ujjwal Nikam, submitted the facts of the case, including relevant documents, to the court.

"The prosecution informed the court of the gruesome manner in which Deshmukh was first kidnapped, tortured physically and then ultimately killed," Nikam told PTI. The court was also told that the motive behind the offence was Deshmukh's intervention and opposition to the extortion attempts made by the accused persons from the company, the prosecutor added.

The court has posted the matter for further hearing on April 10. Nikam said the court is likely to frame charges in the case next month after which the trial will commence.

The accused in the sarpanch murder case were produced in a court via video-conference on Wednesday. Deshmukh, the sarpanch of Massajog village in Beed district, was abducted and tortured to death on December 9 last year allegedly for attempting to stop an extortion bid targeting an energy company.

Eight persons, including Karad, have been arrested so far and booked under the stringent Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (MCOCA). The other arrested accused were identified as Sudarshan Ghule, Vishnu Chate, Jairam Chate, Mahesh Kedar, Sudhir Sangale, Prateek Ghule and Siddharth Sonawane. One Krishna Andhale is wanted in the case.

Before the hearing, Nikam met the family members of the deceased sarpanch and the Crime Investigation Department (CID) officials.

"We also told the court that we have evidence for every fact presented. This case is based on circumstantial, paper and scientific evidence... We filed an application in the court requesting that the identity of the witnesses be kept secret," Nikam said. The court was told that accused Sudarshan Ghule was working as per instructions of prime accused Walmik Karad, he said.

The prosecution also submitted in the court the audio recordings in which the personnel of Avaaada Energy Private Ltd company were threatened, he said. (PTI)

Stopping funds of states disagreeing to implement PM Shri school scheme not justified: Par panel

NEW DELHI, March 26: Not releasing funds to states which have not agreed to implement the PM SHRI schools scheme is not factual and justified, a parliamentary panel has noted.

The observations by the committee come amid an ongoing war of words between the Centre and the Tamil Nadu government over stoppage of funds worth over ₹ 2100 crore after the state refused to implement new National Education Policy (NEP) objecting to the three-language formula.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports, headed by Congress' Digvijay Singh, recommended that the Ministry of Education should re-evaluate Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) funding allocations and ensure that none of the states are placed in disadvantageous positions for not accepting NEP 2020 or PM SHRI scheme.

"The Committee has taken seri-

ous note of the non-release of SSA funds to certain states which have not signed MoUs for implementation of PM SHRI scheme. The total funds pending under this scheme to the states are considerable, with over ₹ 1,000 crore to West Bengal, ₹ 859.63 crore to Kerala and ₹ 2,152 crore to Tamil Nadu. "The committee also notes that 33 out of 36 states and Union territories have signed the MoU for PM SHRI and are implementing the scheme and developing NEP exemplar schools, so as, to create an equivalence in assessment and curriculum at the national level," said the report tabled in Rajya Sabha on Wednesday.

The committee recommended the department to resolve the issue amicably with the state governments concerned and release the pending funds on priority basis.

"The department has also informed the committee that PM SHRI is the model school scheme



developed under the NEP and the SSA is the program to achieve the NEP goals. This appears to be the reasoning behind the decision to halt SSA grants to states not signing the PM SHRI MoU.

"However, the Committee takes the view that this reasoning is not factual or justified. The SSA pre-dates PM SHRI and is intended to

help states to achieve the targets of the Right to Education Act. The RTE is a law duly passed by Parliament and confers education as a fundamental right onto every child. The SSA, as a scheme that enforces the fundamental right-based RTE, cannot be bypassed by the NEP, which was an executive policy statement," the report said.

The committee observed that states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal have demonstrated strong educational outcomes with a Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), significantly above the national average.

"However, underfunding and delays in transfer of SSA funds have constrained further advancements in their school infrastructure, teacher training, and student support. These states have been compelled to use their own funds to pay salaries to teachers and resource personnel due to delays in release of central allocations," the panel said in its report.

"During FY 2024-25, state like Tamil Nadu was allocated ₹3,586 crore under SSA, with the Union government's share expected to contribute ₹ 2,152 crore, but this amount has not been released despite repeated requests by the state governments. The withholding of funds is severely impacting teach-

ers' salaries, RTE reimbursements, and transportation for students in remote areas.

"The committee further observes that withholding the funds under SSA to states for not entering into MoU for separate schemes like PM SHRI is not justifiable," it added. The panel has recommended immediate release of pending SSA funds to states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal to prevent disruption in salaries, teachers training programs, and school infrastructure maintenance.

"Department should re-evaluate SSA funding allocations and ensure that none of the states are placed in disadvantageous positions for not accepting NEP 2020 or PM SHRI scheme. The committee also recommends the department to ensure an objective, need-based model to ensure equitable fund distribution across states," the report said. (PTI)

Kunal Kamra criticises T-Series after visibility of 'Naya Bharat' video blocked

NEW DELHI, March 26 Comedian Kunal Kamra on Wednesday criticised Bollywood studio T-Series, alleging that his stand-up special "Naya Bharat", which has kicked up a huge controversy over jokes targeting Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, was flagged for copyright violations on YouTube.

Kamra on Wednesday dropped a new video from the comedy special, in which he performed a parody of "Hawa Hawaii" from "Mr India" to criticise Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and her policies.

The songs of "Mr India", which featured Anil Kapoor and late cinema star Sridevi, belong to T-Series label.

Kamra shared a screenshot from YouTube on X, which showed "Naya Bharat", his new video, has been blocked due to copyright restrictions and therefore is not visible to viewers. Due to copyright claims, the video will not be able to generate revenue as well.

"Hello @TSeries, stop being a stooge. Parody and Satire comes under fair use legally. I haven't used the lyrics or the original instrumental of the song. If you take this video down every cover song/dance video can be taken down. Creators please take a note of it," the 36-year-old comic said.

"Having said that every monopoly in India is nothing short of Mafia so please watch/download this special before it's taken down. FYI - T-Series I stay in Tamil Nadu (sic)," he added.

In a statement, a spokesperson of T-Series said, "Mr Kunal Kamra has not taken any authorisation or approval for the usage of the underlying musical work in the song hence the content has been blocked for infringement of composition rights."

"Naya Bharat", which also made jokes about recent political developments in Maharashtra, including the Shiv Sena and NCP splits, has amassed over 6.7 million views on YouTube. On Sunday night, Shiv Sena members damaged the Habitat Comedy Club in Khar, where Kamra's show took place, as well as a hotel in whose premises the club is located. (PTI)



'Premalu' star Naslen's new film 'Alappuzha Gymkhana' releases a quirky trailer



NEW DELHI, March 26 Malayalam actor Naslen K Gafoor, who rose to pan Indian fame with romantic drama "Premalu", is back with a quirky sports comedy in "Alappuzha Gymkhana".

Directed by Khalid Rahman, Naslen will be seen alongside a bunch of young actors like Lukman Avaran, Ganapathi, rapper Baby Jean and Anagha Ravi in the movie, which revolves around a set of friends who decide learning boxing to crack their college admission from sports quota.

The trailer of the film, which released on Wednesday, revolves around their adventure as they embark on their boxing journey in Kerala's Alappuzha district.

The film is written by Sreeni Saseendran and Rahman.

Rahman, known for his versatile outings like the Mammooty starrer "Unda" and the Tovino Thomas starrer "Thallumaala", has retained his team from the latter, including his music director Vishnu Vijay, cinematographer Jimshi Khalid, and editor, late Nishad Yusuf. (PTI)

THERE'S NO SCANDAL, NO SOAP OPERA, NO INTRIGUE: BEN AFFLECK ON DIVORCE WITH JENNIFER LOPEZ



LOS ANGELES, March 26: Opening up about his divorce with singer Jennifer Lopez, actor-director Ben Affleck said there was no drama around it.

Affleck and Lopez began dating in 2002 and even got engaged in the following year, but soon parted ways. They rekindled their romance in 2021 and tied the knot in 2022. But their marriage didn't last long as the duo headed for divorce in September last year. They were granted a divorce in February.

Affleck said actor said his life is "drama-free" despite the divorce. "My life is actually pretty drama-free. And so even if I have the same events that people have. I'm sure in your mind you're thinking, Oh, well, you just got divorced. That's not drama-free," he told GQ in an interview.

"There's no scandal, no soap opera, no intrigue. The truth is, when you talk to somebody, 'Hey, what happened?' Well, there is no: 'This is what happened.' It's just a story about people trying to figure out their lives and relationships in ways that we all sort of normally do...For one thing, you start going, 'Okay, clearly this person has got these issues. Clearly, they have these issues.' And the reason I don't want to share that is just sort of embarrassing. It feels vulnerable," he added.

The actor said he has nothing but respect for his ex-wife. "I have nothing but respect. I guess there's a tendency to look at breakups and want to identify root causes or something. But honestly, like I said, the truth is much more quotidian than probably people would believe or would be interesting." Before Lopez, Affleck was married to Jennifer Garner. (PTI)

Trailer of Mohanlal's next film 'Thударum' released

NEW DELHI, March 26: Malayalam superstar Mohanlal, who is currently promoting the release of "L2: Empuraan", is playing a taxi driver in his next film "Thударum".

The trailer of the film, directed by Tharun Moorthy of critically-acclaimed movies such as "Saudi Vellakka" and "Operation Java", released on Wednesday.

"Thударum" marks the on-screen reunion of Mohanlal and actor Shobana after 2009's "Sagar Alias Jacky Reloaded".

Mohanlal is in the role of a taxi-driver named Shanmugham in the film, who is shown to be over-protective about his vehicle. Moorthy has written the film with KR Sunil.

Meanwhile, Mohanlal is reprising his role of Stephen Ne-dumpally aka Khureshi Ab'raam in "Empuraan", a sequel to his 2019 hit "Lucifer". "Empuraan" will hit the screens on March 27. (PTI)



Sara on father Saif's stabbing incident: It made me realise life can change overnight

NEW DELHI, March 26: Bollywood star Sara Ali Khan on Wednesday said the knife attack on her father, Saif Ali Khan, could have gone "so wrong" and the incident has made her realise about uncertainty of life.

Saif, 54, was attacked in the early hours of January 16 at his Bandra home in Mumbai. He was stabbed six times by the assailant, who was later arrested.

The actor was immediately hospitalised and underwent spinal and plastic surgeries at the Lilavati Hospital. He was discharged on January 21.

Sara opened up about the incident during her appearance on NDTV Yuva and said the whole family is feeling grateful.

"It could have gone so wrong... and I am so grateful that everything is fine. It was a reminder almost of the life we have. We all talk about practicing mental health. Being grateful for your life is so important. And moments like that make you realise it," she said. Asked if the incident brought

the family closer, Sara said she shares a close bond with her father.

"It's about making you realise how transient the things that you chase are. It didn't make me realise I love my father, I have known that for 29 years. It made me realise life can change overnight. So every second of every day deserves mindful celebration. It made me realise the importance of just being," she said.

Taking highs and lows in stride is another learning from the whole episode, Sara said.

"It takes COVID to realise the importance of being at home with your family, or it takes somebody being almost attacked for you to be like, 'okay, life matters.' Life does matter. The small joys do matter. Celebrate everyday that you are alive. That is what life is about," she added.

Sara was most recently seen in "Sky Force", co-starring Akshay Kumar, Veer Pahariya and Nimrat Kaur. She will next star in Anurag Basu's "Metro... In Dino". (PTI)



Angry and disappointed after 0-0 draw with Bangladesh, Marquez says India has gone three steps back

SHILLONG, March 26: "Angry and disappointed" at India playing out a 0-0 draw against Bangladesh in the AFC Asian Cup qualifying round match, head coach Manolo Marquez said his team has gone two-three steps back since the first match under him last year.

At the end of a scrappy contest between the two familiar rivals, Marquez admitted that his team played a "very bad game" in all departments.

"I am really angry and disappointed. If you ask me, maybe today is the most difficult press conference in my career. Because I don't want to say all the

things that are in my head at this moment," the Spaniard said after the match on Tuesday night.

"When we started in Hyderabad against Mauritius (in Intercontinental Cup in September 2024) with one training session, till now, before the game today, it was every time better. Today we took two or three steps back," he said in a hard-hitting press conference.

"Very, very poor performance of the Indian team, in the first half especially. It was better in the second half but not enough. We got one point, that's the best thing." Marquez

mentioned the absence of a few injured players but said it was no excuse for the poor show.

"A lot of very important players, starters, they are not here. All of them injured. But this is not an excuse," he said, referring to the injuries to Brandon Fernandes, Manvir Singh and Lallianzuala Chhangte.

"First, it's a reality. But second, we need to improve always. Even playing good football, you need to improve always in all the areas, in defence, in attack, in transitions, in set-pieces, everything.

"Today was not our day. The best thing is that all four teams are with one point and we have

five games. We start from zero in the second round."

Midfielder Lalengmawia Ralte said his team was "lucky" to have got a draw.

"I also agree that we are lucky not to concede a goal. And we are lucky to get the draw. We could have done so much better."

Marquez, who took charge as India head coach in July 2024, dismissed the notion that his players are lacking in experience. "This is nothing about experience or not experience. This is how you enter in the game. The game started with one pass back. And the goalkeeper passed the ball to the

(Bangladesh) striker. And the striker, without the goalkeeper, he sent the ball out," he said referring to Vishal Kaith's mistake early in the game.

"In this case, it was the goalkeeper. But practically, it was every single player. And I don't want to say this or that. Obviously, some players are better."

He was also asked about very few Indian players playing in striker's position in the Indian Super League teams.

"Nothing to say to the coaches (of ISL teams). They can put the players that they want. Even I played with a foreign striker," said Marquez who is also doubling up as FC

Goa head coach.

He will leave the FC Goa position and will solely be the India head coach after the play-offs matches of the ISL, with the final happening on April 12.

When he was told that some matches of the ISL and Super Cup are left to be played in the domestic circuit, he said, "When you are disappointed, you are disappointed. But if you ask me, I expected this performance."

"You say about ISL and the Super Cup. Maybe it's not the best moment to put the players just after this FIFA window. But this is my opinion."

In the March FIFA window,

India played two matches, the international friendly against Maldives (3-0 win on March 19) being the other one.

Replying to another question, he said, "The players arrived at the national team with two days. They played two days ago, another seven days ago, another five days ago, another four. "Everyone will say excuses. But the reality is that the physical condition is not the same when you arrive. When you played yesterday, and when you played one week ago. But this is not the reason that today we play a bad game. It's only one explanation about your question." (PTI)

Argentina beat Brazil 4-1 after securing its place at the 2026 World Cup

BUENOS AIRES (ARGENTINA), March 26: Defending champion Argentina celebrated throughout Tuesday as the team secured its place at the 2026 World Cup hours before an historic 4-1 win over archrival Brazil.

Bolivia's failure to beat Uruguay meant Argentina had enough cushion in South American qualifying to secure one of the continent's six direct spots for the 48-team World Cup set to be co-hosted next year by the U.S., Canada and Mexico.

After Bolivia's 0-0 draw with Uruguay at El Alto, about 85,000 raucous Argentina fans kicked off the festivities at the Monumental de Nunez Stadium despite the absence of Lionel Messi. They were chanting into the night in Buenos Aires, now more confident their team can defend the World Cup title. For Brazil, its worst deficit in South American World Cup qualifying history compounded pressure on coach Dorival Júnior.

Brazil is in fourth place in South American qualifying with 21 points, 10 behind Argentina but only two behind second-place Ecuador, which was held to a 0-0 draw by Chile. Third-place Uruguay and fifth-place Paraguay also have 21 points, and Colombia is one point behind them in sixth. Seventh-place Venezuela has 15 points after a 1-0 win over 9th-place Peru.

Brazil was missing three regular starters — goalkeeper Alisson, de-



fender Gabriel Magalhães and midfielder Bruno Guimarães — and wasn't really competitive from start to finish.

It's the first time Argentina has won both matches against Brazil in a World Cup qualifying tournament. The home victory was also Argentina's first against the Brazilians since qualifying for the 2006 World Cup.

Argentina has led South American qualifying from the start, with few hiccups and major away wins at Brazil and Uruguay. But coach Lionel Scaloni has not fielded 37-year-old Messi in several games, which still raises doubts on whether the star will play at the World Cup next year.

Messi has an injury to his adductor and was not included in Ar-

gentina's squad for the two latest matches.

Striker Julián Álvarez said Argentina's big win "is historic because of the rival, the context, what was said, the great match we played and because we are qualified to the World Cup."

"Very humbly we did our work," he said.

Argentina scored its two first

goals in only 12 minutes of play, both thanks to accurate passing and some clumsy Brazilian defending.

Álvarez netted the first in the 4th minute after Marquinhos, Murillo and Guilherme Arana failed to reach the ball. The Argentina striker shot between the legs of goalkeeper Bento from close range.

Argentina scored again eight minutes later with Enzo Fernández, once again from close range after a low cross by Gonzalo Molina. Brazil got one back via Matheus Cunha in the 26th after a mistake by Cristian Romero, who lost the ball to the Brazilian by the edge of the box. Enzo Fernández found Alexis Mac Allister bursting into the penalty box unmarked 11 minutes later to make it 3-1 to Argentina. During the break, Brazil sought to get some grip by boosting its presence in the midfield with Joao Gomes and the substitution of Murillo and striker Rodrigo. But it was to no avail, with Giuliano Simeone scoring for Argentina in the 71st after four Brazilian defenders failed to block a low cross in front of their goal.

"Everything we planned, from the first minute of play, did not happen," Brazil's coach told a news conference. "Argentina was much better in every way. I apologize to Brazil fans, we expected something very different from what we showed. It was a very difficult night for us." (AP)

First batch of Indian shooters leave for Buenos Aires World Cup



NEW DELHI, March 26: The first batch of 22 Indian shooters accompanied by 13 support staff left for Buenos Aires on Wednesday to participate in the year's first ISSF World Cup, which will begin from April 3 in the Argentina capital. It will be a combined World Cup in which competitions will be held in all the three disciplines of rifle, pistol and shotgun shootings.

A total of 35 Indian shooters will participate across 15 medal events including 12 individual and three mixed team competitions.

Double Olympic medallist Manu Bhaker is the only athlete to have made the cut in two individual events.

The remaining members of the squad will depart on March 29 as their competitions begin in the latter stages of the tournament.

Barring a couple of exceptions, all shooters reported to the national camp organised by the National Rifle Association of India at the Dr. Karni Singh Shooting ranges in Delhi from March 14 for final preparations ahead of a double World Cup leg in South America, with Lima, Peru hosting the second tournament, right after the season-opener at Buenos Aires.

Earlier Ronak Pandit, high performance manager of the Indian team, had spoken about maximising the potential of every athlete attending the camp.

He said, "We have a larger coaching team this time and also a lot of new crop of young talent that has come in, so the initial days was all about trying to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the shooters, find out what they have

been up to and then devising programmes accordingly for each one of them, along with the coaches."

The Indian team for the first two World Cup stages is a mix of youth and experience with as many as 16 Olympians in the squad, besides former world champions and world number ones.

However, the focus will also be on an exciting group of youngsters such as Suruchi, Sainyam, Arya Borse, Sonam Maskar, Narmada Nithin, Ashi Chouksey and Bhavtegh Gill, who will all be looking to win their first individual ISSF World Cup stage medal.

Ronak also spoke about a culture that has been developed in the team where everyone is trained to live in the moment.

"In the camp when the new upcoming talent see Olympic medallists, world champions, world number ones, getting back to being students of the game, following processes, continuously trying to improve, learning from their coaches, grinding it out and basically being grounded and living in the moment, I think that is the greatest learning that the youngsters can take," Ronak quipped when asked about the progress of the youngsters in the camp.

The tournament will also see a few comebacks. Saurabh Chaudhary, a former world number one, will be making a World Cup comeback after a gap of close to a year and a half, and same is the case with seasoned pistol shooter Gurpreet Singh. (PTI)

Messi and Argentine team visiting India in October to play exhibition match

NEW DELHI, March 26: Football fans in India will have another glimpse of Lionel Messi and his Argentine team in an exhibition match in Kerala in October, 14 years after the World Cup-winning captain first visited the country. In November last year, Kerala Sports Minister V Abdurahiman had announced the news of Argentina visiting the southern state and playing two friendly matches in Kochi.

On Wednesday, HSBC India became the official partner of the Argentine team to collaborate and promote football in India, and announced that the match will be held in October.

"Under this partnership, the Argentine national football team, including legendary player Lionel Messi, will visit India for an international exhibition match in October 2025," a release from HSBC India said.

"The Argentine Football Association (AFA) and HSBC have today announced the signing of a new one-year partnership for India and Singapore, covering the competitive season in 2025 ahead of the 2026 World Cup qualification final matches."

Messi's first visit to India was to play a World Cup qualifying round match against Venezuela in Kolkata in September 2011. Argentina won that match 1-0 at Salt

Lake Stadium.

Sandeep Batra, Head International Wealth and Premier Banking HSBC India, said: "As we join forces with one of the most revered teams in the world of football, we look forward to creating unforgettable experiences for fans and customers alike, and supporting the Argentine team in their journey towards the World Cup 2026." Argentine Football Association President Claudio

Fabian Tapia said: "A new milestone has been achieved for the international expansion of AFA, opening new opportunities with HSBC both in India and in Singapore. "This agreement looks after our team and we look forward to consolidate our agreement and extend in multiple regions as we progress in the 2025 and 2026. We welcome HSBC as the new partner of the Argentine National Team." (PTI)

FIFA details Club World Cup prize money with \$125M target for the winner in \$1BN fund

GENEVA, March 26: The winner of FIFA's first 32-team Club World Cup in the United States could earn \$125 million as details of a \$1 billion prize money fund were finally published Wednesday.

FIFA said it allocated \$525 million in guaranteed fees for teams taking part in the June 14-July 13 tournament, ranging from \$38.19 million to the top-ranked European team — likely Real Madrid — to \$3.58 million for the Oceania representative Auckland City.

A further \$475 million is earned by results in the 63 games, with \$2 million paid for winning group stage games, \$7.5 million for playing in the round of 16 and \$40 million to the team that wins the final at MetLife Stadium near New York.

The golden trophy has been sitting in the Oval Office at the White House this month after FIFA President Gianni Infantino delivered it to President Donald Trump, who was invited to present it to the winning captain.

The prize fund was delayed until a global broadcast deal was

belatedly agreed in December with streaming service DAZN, which then got a major investment from a state-backed sports agency in Saudi Arabia. Fans can watch games for free on DAZN's website.

Saudi Arabia also was confirmed in December by FIFA as host of the men's 2034 World Cup.

Each of the 12 European teams in the Club World Cup lineup will be paid at least \$12.81 million as an entry fee for the first expanded edition of the four-yearly tournament. Payments will be decided by "a ranking based on sporting and commercial criteria," FIFA said without providing details.

Manchester City, Bayern Munich, Paris Saint-Germain and Chelsea also qualified by either winning a Champions League title from 2021 to 2024, or having consistent results in the competition over those four seasons.

Countries were capped at two entries, unless they had three Champions League winners. Salzburg of Austria qualified as the final European team, despite



never advancing beyond the round of 16, because higher-ranked clubs like Liverpool and Barcelona were blocked by the country cap.

The six South American teams each will get a \$15.21 million entry fee.

Teams from Africa, Asia and the CONCACAF region of North America — including Lionel Messi's Inter Miami, despite not winning the MLS Cup title last season — each will get \$9.55 million for playing.

Leon of Mexico is currently contesting its removal from the competition by FIFA because it is in shared ownership with Pachuca which also qualified.

FIFA aims to share \$250 million among clubs worldwide who did not qualify for the tournament. It is unclear how many clubs will be paid, or how much they will get.

The maximum prize of \$125 million ranks below the English Premier League and UEFA's Champions League in soccer's

prize money table.

Man City got 176 million pounds (\$227 million) in prize money from the Premier League for winning the title last season.

In the 2022-23 Champions League prize list, the most recent published by UEFA, title-winning Man City got almost 135 million euros (\$146 million). The competition's total prize fund has now risen by almost 25% for each season through 2027.

UEFA will pay out close to 2.5 billion euros (\$2.7 billion) among the 36 teams in the new expanded format that guaranteed eight games played instead of six. The \$1 billion Club World Cup prize pot is, however, more than double the \$440 million FIFA shared among the 32 soccer federations whose teams played at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

Sponsors who signed with FIFA for the club event in the two highest commercial tiers also have deals for the men's 2026 World Cup in the U.S., which will be co-hosted by Canada and Mexico. (AP)

Naveen Pulligilla, Musa Sherif end fairytale run, win Kenyan NRC RC3

NAIROBI, March 26: Hyderabad's Naveen Pulligilla and co-driver Musa Sherif of Kasargod have become the first all-Indian team to participate in the World Rally Championship (WRC) and win the RC3 Kenyan National Rally Championship here.

The duo competed in the iconic Safari Rally Kenya 2025, which is a part of WRC.

Naveen and Musa, driving a Ford Fiesta Rally3 machine for the Africa Eco Motorsport team, were leading the WRC3 class with just two stages to go and were on the verge of a debut.

But they encountered mechanical issues with the lower arm and were forced to pull out.

However, by that stage, they had already clinched the Kenyan Rally Championship title which concluded after 19 stages.

"The terrain isn't just challenging, it's a shock for any first-timer, with boulder-strewn routes and unpredictable conditions. Despite that, we managed to maintain pace and stay within three minutes of the top WRC

cars," said Naveen, who is planning to take part in two more WRC rounds in Saudi Arabia and Sardinia.

Musa said, "The terrain was brutal, but we pushed through to make history as the first all-Indian team in WRC." Naveen, a regular in INRC for the last couple of years, took part in the Asia Pacific Rally Championship in New Zealand in 2024 and is known for his precise and aggressive driving style.

Musa has over 33 years of rallying experience. As India's most decorated co-driver, he has participated in more than 330 rallies, including 91 international events, and has secured 10 national titles. He is the reigning 2024 Indian National Rally Champion co-driver.

The Safari Rally Kenya is known for its demanding terrain, landscape, and unpredictable weather.

The first Indian duo completed 19 of the 21 challenging stages, with 383.10 km of competitive sections in a total rally distance of 1,381.92 km. (PTI)

LSG wary of Sunrisers Hyderabad's ultra-aggressive batting approach



HYDERABAD, March 26: Having lost their opening clash, Rishabh Pant's Lucknow Super Giants will be wary of Sunrisers Hyderabad's ultra-aggressive approach with the bat when the two teams face off in the Indian Premier League here on Thursday.

Last year's runner-up SRH picked up from where they had left off in the opening clash to nearly break the record of the highest total in the IPL, handing the Rajasthan Royals a crushing defeat by 44 runs.

The huge win also propelled SRH to the top of the points table for having the best net run rate and given their all-round firepower, the Pat Cummins-led side would want to maintain their dominance in the competition.

SRH went hammer and tongs against RR with their new recruit Ishan Kishan smacking a century and the other big guns firing as usual to make 286/6 in their last outing

here at the Rajiv Gandhi International Cricket Stadium in Uppal.

Such batting approach could be terrifying for the opponents and SRH's remarkable consistency makes them the most feared batting unit in the IPL circuit.

The addition of Kishan to the mix of SRH's premier weapons in Abhishek Sharma, Travis Head and Heinrich Klaasen is another masterstroke. To top it off, Nitish Kumar Reddy too struck his runs at more than 200 against Rajasthan Royals.

Kishan appeared to be a man on a mission as he struck his maiden century in the IPL after being let go by Mumbai Indians, smashing six sixes and 11 fours in his 47-ball 106 not out.

In such circumstances, LSG will be required to have clear bowling plans as the smallest of error is proving costly in the IPL, which has already witnessed a new record

being made — 119 sixes have been struck in the first five matches.

On their part, LSG, who lost to Delhi Capitals by one wicket in a thrilling finish showed a similar approach with the bat but they were guilty of losing their way in the middle overs, which proved to be costly.

LSG lost six wickets and added only 76 runs in their last eight overs against Delhi Capitals and despite early wickets, they could not withstand the onslaught by the lower-order as Ashutosh Sharma's 66 not out handed his side a win.

LSG's new skipper Pant had a forgettable game of sorts in his first outing with the team, falling for a six-ball duck during their batting slide and he also missed a regulation stumping when DC needed six off the final over with one wicket in hand.

Nicholas Pooran was magnificent in his strokeplay but the tone was set by Mitchell

Marsh — playing in this IPL only as a specialist batter — with his stunning attack on the DC bowlers.

While LSG would feel they did not do too many things wrong in the clash against DC, they would know a better show with the ball will be paramount against SRH who have been severe on all opponents.

Apart from their senior spinner Ravi Bishnoi, LSG will also have high hopes from the unheralded duo of Manimaran Siddharth and Digvesh Rathi, who both bowled with control to snaffle a couple of wickets each against DC.

With Shardul Thakur outrunning DC's Mitchell Starc to find swing with the new ball which resulted in a couple of wickets, it was inexplicable why LSG did not turn to the senior all-rounder who bowled only two overs upfront when the opposition was running away with the games.

On these counts, LSG would be expected to come up with better plans.

Teams:
Sunrisers Hyderabad: Pat Cummins (c), Ishan Kishan (wk), Atharva Taide, Abhinav Manohar, Aniket Verma, Sachin Baby, Heinrich Klaasen, Travis Head, Harshal Patel, Kamindu Mendis, Wiaan Mulder, Abhishek Sharma, Nitish Kumar Reddy, Mohammed Shami, Rahul Chahar, Adam Zampa, Sanarjeet Singh, Zeeshan Ansari, Jaydev Unadkat, Eshan Malinga.

Lucknow Super Giants: Rishabh Pant (c&wk), David Miller, Aiden Markram, Aryan Juyal (wk), Himmat Singh, Matthew Breetzke, Nicholas Pooran (wk), Mitchell Marsh, Abdul Samad, Shahbaz Ahmed, Yuvraj Chaudhary, Rajvardhan Hangargekar, Arshin Kulkarni, Ayush Badoni, Shardul Thakur, Avesh Khan, Akash Deep, Manimaran Siddharth, Digvesh Rathi, Akash Singh, Shamir Joseph, Prince Yadav, Mayank Yadav, Ravi Bishnoi.

Match starts at 7:30pm IST. (PTI)

BFI postpones elections, say impossible to complete process within original time-lines



NEW DELHI, March 26: Boxing Federation of India (BFI) on Wednesday postponed its election scheduled for March 28, saying it's "impossible to complete the process within originally planned timelines" after the Delhi and Himachal Pradesh High Courts directed the body to reinstate the names omitted from the electoral college.

"This is to inform you that the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Boxing Federation of India (BFI), which was scheduled to be held on 28.03.2025, stands postponed," BFI said in a notification to its member units.

The BFI added that the decision to postpone the AGM, during which election of the office bearers were to be held, was necessitated following the March 21 order by Returning Officer (Justice Retd) RK Gauba.

"The Ld. Returning Officer has observed that in light of the court orders and the resulting mandated additions to the electoral college list, it is practically impossible to continue and complete the election process within the originally planned timelines as per the Model Election Code," the notification stated.

The electoral college was finalised on March 13 while the window of nominations was from March 14 to 16.

In his order, Gauba noted that the two court orders "necessitate certain steps to be taken by BFI under the R&Rs and the

Model Election Code."

"Having regard to the fact that the Model Election Code prescribes the time-lines for the election process, it is rendered practically impossible, with above mandated additions to the Electoral College List, for the electoral process to be continued and completed under the extant Schedule."

Both the Delhi and Himachal Pradesh High courts had stayed the March 7 order issued by BFI President Ajay Singh that rendered all those who are not elected members of their state associations ineligible to be members of the electoral college.

While the Delhi HC had asked the BFI to proceed with the elections, the Himachal HC had directed the federation to extend the date of nominations to enable the candidature of former Sports Minister Anurag Thakur, who was declared ineligible after the March 7 order.

BFI had challenged the the Himachal High Court's ruling but the appeal was rejected on Tuesday.

The elections, which have already faced multiple delays and controversies, were originally supposed to take place before February 2.

The BFI flung into action only after the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) appointed an ad-hoc committee, a move the national federation challenged in the Delhi High Court, which subsequently put a stay on the ad-hoc panel. (PTI)

Nagaon to host Inter-District Gymnastics Championship from tomorrow

HT Correspondent
NAGAON, March 26: The 33rd Inter-District Gymnastics Championship will be held at the Nagaon Indoor Stadium from March 28 to 30.

General Secretary of the Assam Gymnastics Association Ujjal Baruah informed local media persons about the event. Organised by the Nagaon Sports Association under the aegis of the Assam Gymnastics Association, the championship will feature artistic and rhythmic gymnastics events for both men and women across various age categories, including cadet, mini, sub-junior, junior, and senior levels. Preparations are in full swing to ensure the successful conduct of the championship, with the organisers forming several sub-committees to oversee the arrangements.

BCCI has no immediate plans to increase teams in WPL

NEW DELHI, March 26: The Women's Premier League has "grown phenomenally" in the last three years but there are no immediate plans to increase the number of teams from the existing five, IPL chairman Arun Dhimal, who is also a part of the WPL committee, has said.

The WPL committee headed by BCCI president Roger Binny. The Board had plans to increase the number of teams after three seasons but it now wants to consolidate.

"To further strengthen this tournament for the time being, we want to consolidate before we take a call on further addition of any team. There are no immediate plans (to add teams)," Dhimal told PTI.

Having said that, Dhimal is pleased with the growth of the



tournament.

"So, within three editions, WPL has grown phenomenally in terms of traction, for in-stadium attendance. All the broadcast numbers are very, very encouraging. And it has given new impetus to women's cricket worldwide.

"So, we are hoping this continues to grow. And this augurs very well for not only the tournament, but women's cricket in general," he added.

WPL has not yet been played in home and away format, like it is the case with the Indian Premier

League. The BCCI combined smaller centres like Baroda and Lucknow with Mumbai and Bengaluru to host the latest edition that ended on March 15.

Mumbai Indians won their second title in three years beating Delhi Capitals in the final in Mumbai.

The BCCI had mopped up Rs 4670 crore from the sale of five teams representing Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, UP and Gujarat.

The media rights were sold for ₹ 951 crore, making it the second biggest women's league in the world before a ball being bowled.

The crowd turnout for majority of the games was decent this season. Though the main goal of the league is to promote the women's game in India and unearth more talent. The competition has a lot of scope to improve on that front. (PTI)

Brilliant to see the fearlessness of young Indian players: Marcus Stoinis

NEW DELHI, March 26: Australian all-rounder Marcus Stoinis has been left supremely impressed by the quality of youngsters in the Punjab Kings squad as well as the Indian T20 set up on the sidelines of the IPL.

After the retirement of stalwarts Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli and Ravindra Jadeja, the depth of Indian cricket has ensured that T20 team has built on the success of the 2024 T20 World Cup courtesy the likes of Tilak Varma and Abhishek Sharma.

At Punjab Kings camp, rookies like opener Priyansh Arya have already made a mark even though it is early days in the IPL.

"There's great depth here (in Indian cricket)... There always has been. And I think they're getting the chance to show their skills on a world stage," Stoinis told PTI.

"They are super confident. They've had almost the advantage of growing up with IPL, being under pressure from early stages in their career. It's brilliant to see how fearless they are with their cricket and especially (while playing for) Indian cricket (team).

"Some of the youngsters in the Punjab Kings camp who have never really played the IPL are very impressive," said the 35-year-old.

Stoinis returns to the franchise after almost a decade and is excited to work compatriot and head coach Ricky Ponting.

"A lot of Aussie boys here, which is nice for me. So it does feel at home," he said referring to the likes of Glenn Maxwell, Aaron Hardie and Josh Inglis.

"It was my second year in the IPL that I moved to here. So yeah,

it's all familiar. I love the IPL.

"It's a mainstay in the calendar. It's something we all look forward to and personally I look forward to. I's exciting to have the opportunity to bring some success to this franchise," said the Perth based cricketer.

Stoinis' connection with Virat Kohli goes back to their U-19 days when the Indian led his team to the World Cup title in 2008.

Stoinis said he remains in touch with the likes of Tilak Varma and Abhishek Sharma.

"We've known each other for a long time. We've got a mutual friend in Perth that has known him for a long time as well. So that's sort of how that relationship started.

"But yeah, what a great career it's been so far. It's definitely not finished. It seems like he's worn a few caps throughout his career in terms of being the young guy coming into an Indian team that forced his way in there at such a young age and showed such confidence in himself to crack into such a good team to then leading the team and almost changing the whole culture of Indian cricket and inspiring a lot of the young cricketers around India and around the world.

"And then a whole new phase of the fitness side of things as well that he inspired in the Indian set-up to now mentoring the new kids on the block. And he's got his family now as well.

"I think all of those phases have served a purpose, not only for himself, but as a mentor for the wider public and the cricket community. So always hats off to him, to be honest," added Stoinis. (PTI)

Shreyas Iyer asked me not to worry about his century, says Shashank Singh

AHMEDABAD, March 26: Punjab Kings batter Shashank Singh's boundary-hitting spree in the final over of the Indian Premier League (IPL) match against Gujarat Titans left his captain Shreyas Iyer stranded on unbeaten 97 but the latter was not worried about his personal landmark.

Iyer missed his maiden IPL ton by a mere three runs but his 42-ball knock, which featured nine sixes and five fours, powered PBKS to a massive 243 for 5 and helped them win their season opener by 11 runs.

Shashank, who hit five of his six fours in the final over off Mohammed Siraj and took a double to collect 23 runs against the India pacer, said PBKS captain Iyer didn't ask him to rotate the strike.

"I didn't see the scoreboard, to be very honest. But after the first ball I hit (for a four),

I saw the scoreboard and Shreyas was on 97," Shashank, who scored a 16-ball 44 not out, told the media after the match on Tuesday.

"I didn't say anything, he only came and told me 'Shashank don't worry about my hundred', because obviously I was going to say to him that should I give you a single or something.

"It takes a lot of heart and courage to say because obviously hundreds don't come easily in T20s especially in IPL," he added.

Shashank said Iyer's message was to keep attacking the bowler.

"Shreyas told me 'Shashank go and just (try and) hit every ball for a boundary for a four or a six'. That gave me even more confidence, obviously, it's a team game at the end of the day we all know," he said.

"But then at those situations it's difficult to

be that selfless. But Shreyas was one. I know him since past 10-15 years. He is the same and he told me just to be calm, to play cricketing shots what I usually play, to maintain my balance and I think we had a good finish," added Shashank.

Meanwhile, Gujarat Titans spinner R Sai Kishore, who returned with figures of 4-0-30-3, said his side thought they were ahead in the game. Chasing 244, GT remained in the hunt but were eventually overpowered by the mammoth target, finishing at 232 for five in their stipulated 20 overs.

"We were also surprised, to be honest. We thought we were on course. We thought we were ahead of the game, we thought so," Sai Kishore said.

"But in that situation, I think no matter what planning you do, if you are able to be

fully zoned in in the present moment, that is the difference and these games happen."

Sai Kishore rued that GT failed to hit more boundaries during the course of the innings.

"This is also the first game of the season. We will also learn together. We will come back really stronger. We will work on the areas we need to improve and we will again compete," he said.

"We were on course with Sai (Sudharsan) and (Jos) Buttler going very well. In the end, in the last five overs, to be honest, (Vijaykumar) Vyshak bowled brilliantly. All credit to Vyshak for the way he executed his yorkers.

"To be fair, I think those balls we could have, it's very easy for me to say, but we could have tried to hit more boundaries than just looking for sixes (and) that is the learning going forward and we will do that," he added. (PTI)

Shreyas Iyer continues to evolve his game, says Kane Williamson

AHMEDABAD, March 26: India middle-order mainstay and Punjab Kings' captain Shreyas Iyer continues to 'evolve his game' while "adjusting brilliantly" to challenges such as facing short balls, believes New Zealand stalwart Kane Williamson.

Iyer began his captaincy stint for PBKS with a match-winning 97 not out, studded with nine sixes and five fours off 42 balls, against Gujarat Titans in their IPL clash here on Tuesday.

Williamson, a former Gujarat Titans player, heaped praise on the right-handed Iyer for his adaptability.

"What stands out about Shreyas is how he continues to evolve his game," said JioStar expert Williamson.

"For a period, teams targeted him with short balls, but now, he's adjusting brilliantly -- getting deeper in his crease, de-weighting his front leg, and dominating the short-pitched deliveries.

"What is most impressive is his ability to shift his weight forward again, making it difficult for bowlers who try the 'one-two' ap-

proach — going short, then full. He's now able to access all areas of the ground, which makes him such a formidable batter," Williamson added.

The New Zealand batting great termed Iyer's knock of 97 not out of "highest standard."

"It was a knock of the highest standard. From the very first ball, it was almost a highlight reel—he played the ball exactly where it was meant to be hit," he said.

"Anything outside off stump, he looked to access the offside, and he even struck sixes over cover against some of the best seamers in the world. Then, to take on Rashid Khan as well — that's one of the toughest challenges in the game.

"As a leader, to step in at No 3, set the tone, and take on the opposition's biggest threats was remarkable. That innings was truly out of this world," Williamson added.

The Kiwi batter also praised Shashank Singh for his whirlwind knock of 44 not out off only 16 balls, which pushed PBKS' total beyond the reach of the Titans.



"Shashank is coming off an outstanding breakout season last year. He's incredibly still at the crease, has beautiful hands, and doesn't move excessively, yet he possesses so many scoring options," he said.

"He has the time to adjust to

short-pitched deliveries — whether ramping it over the keeper or pulling off a length — but he can also hold his position and play powerful straight drives.

"The way he comes in during the death overs, with little time to settle, and takes on bowlers with

confidence is exceptional. Whether it's Rashid Khan missing his length slightly and Shashank slapping it back over square — that's an incredibly difficult shot against someone of Rashid's calibre. It just speaks to the quality of the player," he added. (PTI)