

6
WORLD

8
NATION

- Israeli strikes across Gaza hit multiple homes, killing 58 Palestinians, medics say
- Zelenskyy and Putin have agreed to a limited ceasefire
- Seems 'two anti-farmer parties' have joined hands against farmers: Kharage
- '45 projects underway, 73 more identified for conservation of heritage sites in J-K'

Vol .No. XXVI

Issue No. 068

RNI-ASSENG/2000/12862

DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG, FRIDAY, MARCH 21, 2025

PAGES 12

PRICE ₹ 8

Assam: Class 11, 9 papers leaked; Exams cancelled

GUWAHATI/BARPETA, March 20: The Class 11 Mathematics paper of the Assam state board and Class 9 English paper of Barpeta district were leaked, forcing the authorities to cancel the respective examinations on Thursday and lodge police complaints, officials said.

Education Minister Ranaj Pegu in a post on X shared a notification of Assam State School Education Board (ASSEB), which postponed the Mathematics examination without giving any explanation.

"The Higher Secondary First Year Mathematics exam, scheduled for March 21, 2025 (Afternoon Session), has been postponed due to unavoidable reasons," he added.

The new date and further updates will be notified soon, the minister said. When contacted, a senior ASSEB official told PTI that the Mathematics paper has been leaked and that is why the examination was cancelled.

"We are enquiring about the matter and will take legal action soon," he added. The Higher Secondary first year or Class 11 examination

began on March 6 and will be over on March 29.

Earlier in the day, the class 9 English annual exam in Assam's Barpeta district, scheduled for Thursday, was cancelled after the question paper leaked on social media, officials said. Barpeta Inspector of Schools Ratul Kumar Das issued an order to all the school heads in the district and intimated about the cancellation of the examination.

"I would like to inform you that the English paper of class 9 annual examination which is scheduled to be held on 20/03/2025 is hereby postponed due to unavoidable circumstances," he said in the order.

The next date of the examination will be intimated shortly, Das said without sharing details.

Meanwhile, an official of the District Level Internal Examination Committee (DLIEC) told PTI on condition of anonymity that they came to know about the paper leak on Wednesday evening. "We suspect that the paper went viral on social media. We are verifying all claims. Still, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Now, shops to remain open for 24-hrs in Guwahati, Dibrugarh and Silchar

Namrup Fertilizer Plant: Cabinet expresses gratitude to PM, Union Cabinet ● Fighter aircraft to land on Dibrugarh-Jorhat NH, says CM

HT Bureau

DIBRUGARH, March 20: Assam cabinet on Thursday approved a policy allowing shops and business establishments to operate 24 hours a day in Guwahati, Dibrugarh and Silchar, except liquor outlets, said state chief minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma.

"Today, in a cabinet meeting we have taken a decision to allow shops and business establishments to operate 24 hours a day in



Guwahati, Dibrugarh and Silchar," said Sarma while addressing a press conference here.

He further said that earlier, there was a mandatory closing day for business establishments imposed by the state government

but from now on, there will be no restrictions for keeping business establishments open for seven days in a week. With this development, in rural areas, shops can be kept open till 11 PM in the night.

The chief minister also argued that this decision will help in expanding business of small establishments. However, he announced that no shops or any other business establishments can force a labourer to work for more than 9 hours.

"In a week, staffers in the small business houses will not work for more than 48 hours and not more than 9 hours in a day. If a shop remains open for 24 hours, the owner must employ at least three staff to work in three shifts and each shift will get over in 8 or maximum 9 hours," Sarma said, adding that the decision was taken to boost employment in the small scale business establishments.

"I hope that during festivals like Bihu or Puja, this decision will help in promoting business in the state," the CM stated.

Besides this, Sarma further announced that fighter aircraft will be able to land on the national highways in the state and the administration is gearing up to make this happen in the later part of this year.

"We are making the national highway between Dibrugarh and Jorhat at par with international standards. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

30 Naxalites killed in two encounters in Chhattisgarh

BIJAPUR/KANKER, March 20: In a fresh offensive against Naxals, security forces killed at least 30 members of the banned CPI (Maoist) in two separate encounters in Chhattisgarh's Bastar region on Thursday.

While 26 Naxalites were killed in Bijapur district, four Maoists were gunned down in Kanker by a joint team of the BSF and District Reserve Guard (DRG) personnel of the state police. A police jawan was also killed in the encounter in Bijapur, the officials said.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah said the security forces have achieved another big success in their march to make the country Naxal-free with the two encounters.

"The Modi government is moving forward with a ruthless approach against Naxalites and is adopting a zero tolerance policy against those Naxalites who are not surrendering despite all the facilities being offered to them, ranging from surrender to inclusion. The country is going to be Naxal-free by March 31 next year," Shah wrote on 'X' in Hindi.

An official said a gunfight broke out around 7 am in a forest along the border of Bijapur and Dantewada districts when a joint team of security



personnel was out on an anti-Naxalite operation in Gangaloor police station area in Bijapur.

The bodies of 26 Naxalites besides firearms and explosives were recovered from the spot, Inspector General of Police, Bastar Range Sundarraj P told PTI.

A jawan of the DRG unit was also killed in the gunfight, he said.

Another encounter took place in the morning in a forest along the border of Kanker and Narayanpur districts when a joint team of the

DRG and Border Security Force (BSF) was out on an anti-Naxal operation, Kanker Superintendent of Police Indira Kalyan Elesela said.

The bodies of four Naxalites and automatic weapons were recovered following the action, he said. Search operations were underway at both the encounter sites, police said.

With the latest action, 113 Naxalites have been killed in encounters in the state so far this year. Of them, 97 were eliminated in the Bastar division comprising seven districts including Bijapur and Kanker.

According to a statement issued by the Union Home Ministry in New Delhi, as many as 104 Naxals were arrested in different parts of the country and 164 have surrendered in 2025 so far. In 2024, 290 Naxalites were neutralized, 1,090 were arrested, and 881 surrendered. A total of 15 top Naxal leaders have been neutralised so far.

Between 2004 and 2014, there were a total of 16,463 incidents of Naxal violence. However, during the tenure of the Narendra Modi government from 2014 to 2024, the number of violent incidents decreased by 53 per cent, dropping to 7,744, the statement said. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'Very good relationship with India, only problem it's among highest tariffing nations in world'

NEW YORK/WASHINGTON,

March 20: US President Donald Trump said he has a "very good relationship" with India, but the "only problem" he has with the country is that it is "one of the highest tariffing nations in the world." Trump reiterated his threat to impose reciprocal US tariffs on the country starting April 2.

In an interview with Breitbart News, an American news opinion, and commentary website, Trump discussed the US' relationship with India.

Asked about his summit with Prime Minister Narendra Modi last month, Trump said: "I have a very good relationship with India, but the only problem I have with India is they're one of the highest tariffing nations in the world. I believe they're going to probably be lowering those tariffs substantially, but on April 2, we will be charging them the same tariffs they charge us".

On the India-Middle East-Europe-Economic Corridor (IMEC), Trump said it was a "group of wonderful nations" banding together "countering other countries that look to hurt us on trade."

"We have a powerful group of

partners in trade," Trump said. "Again, we can't let those partners treat us badly, however, we do better in many ways frankly with our foes than we do with our friends."

"The ones that wouldn't be as friendly to us in some cases treat us better than the ones that are supposed to be friendly, like the European Union, which treats us terribly on trade. India and everybody would think of them as an ally," the US president said, adding, "I can say the same for others. But this is a group of wonderful nations that is countering other countries that look to hurt us on trade."

Trump has repeatedly criticised the high tariffs charged by India. He has said that India is a very high tariff nation and reiterated that reciprocal tariffs on countries that impose levies on American goods will kick in on April 2.

In the past, Trump has called India "tariff king" and a "big abuser". Last month, during a joint press conference with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the White House, Trump had said that India has "been very strong on tariffs", and "I don't blame them, necessarily, but it's a different way of doing business. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Police case against Assam doctor for selling infant to couple

GUWAHATI, March 20: A doctor in Sribhumi district of Assam allegedly sold an infant to a couple after an unmarried woman gave birth to the child, an official said on Thursday.

A police case has been registered against the doctor, who is currently absconding, she said.

According to the official of the district Child Protection Unit (CPU), they got information about an illegal adoption four-five days back.

"We started our investigation and found the news to be true. The doctor prepared false papers and handed over the newborn child to a couple from Sribhumi in exchange for a huge amount of money," she said.

As per preliminary investigation, a woman had come to the accused doctor around four months ago for an abortion, but he did not go ahead with it then as she was almost five months pregnant, the official said. "He then carried out a cesarean operation on the woman at a private hospital a few days ago and sold the child to the couple by preparing false documents," she said. The CPU rescued the baby and handed it over to the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) of Sribhumi.

"We have registered a police case against the doctor and other people concerned. The doctor is currently absconding," the official added. (PTI)

25 Indians awarded death sentence in UAE, judgement yet to be implemented: Govt

NEW DELHI, March 20: The number of Indian nationals who have been awarded a death sentence in the UAE, but the judgement is yet to be implemented, stands at 25, the government informed Parliament on Thursday.

Minister of State for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh said this in a written response to a query in Rajya Sabha.

The Ministry of External Affairs was asked whether many Indians are languishing in prison for years in foreign countries, as also details of Indians who are awaiting capital punishment in foreign countries, and efforts made by the Indian government to save their lives. "As per the information available with the Ministry, the

number of Indian prisoners, including undertrials, in foreign prisons at present is 10,152," he said. The government attaches high priority to the safety, security and well-being of Indian nationals in foreign countries, including those in the foreign jails, the minister said.

Singh shared tabulated data pertaining to eight countries, and the number of Indian nationals who have been awarded death sentence, but the judgement is yet to be implemented.

According to data, the figures stand as 25 (UAE), 11 (Saudi Arabia), six (Malaysia), three (Kuwait), and one each for Indonesia, Qatar, the US, and Yemen.

"Indian Missions/Posts abroad provide all possible as-

sistance to Indian nationals who have been sentenced, including with death sentences by the foreign courts. Indian Missions/Posts also provide consular access by visiting the jails and follows up their cases with Courts, Jails, Public Prosecutors and other concerned agencies. The jailed Indian nationals are also assisted in exploring various legal remedies including filing of appeal, mercy petition etc," the minister said.

The MEA was also asked whether any Indian has been executed or given capital punishment in foreign countries in the last five years.

The minister said such deaths were carried out in Malaysia, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

MBA Student from KU succumbs to injuries after road accident in Jorhat

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, March 20: Irina Boro, a fourth-semester MBA student from Sonitpur district and a student at Kaziranga University in Jorhat, who was severely injured in a road accident on March 12, succumbed to her injuries on Thursday morning.

She had been undergoing treatment at a private hospital in Jorhat.

It is worth mentioning that Irina, along with three other students from the same MBA batch, was traveling in a car when the vehicle collided with a divider in the Ajangaon area of National Highway 715 (formerly NH-37) on the western outskirts of Jorhat.

Two of the students, Mustafa Mujahid from New Bakurpara in Goalpara district and Afif Irfan Hussain from Sadar area near Cinnamara, Jorhat, died in the accident, while Khushbu Novhal from Cinnamara and Irina sustained injuries.

Irina was hospitalised in critical condition.

According to doctors at the hospital where Irina was being treated, she had been on life support, and the medical team did their best to save her, including performing surgery on her neck on March 17 to help her breathe properly. However, her condition worsened on Wednesday, leading to her death in the early hours of Thursday.

IIT Guwahati explores traditional Assamese fermented food for sustainable industrial applications

The research has been published in the prestigious journal



NEW DELHI, March 20: Researchers from Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Guwahati have analysed Panitenga, a traditional fermented food from Assam, to identify beneficial bacterial strains with potential industrial applications, according to officials.

Panitenga is a staple in Assamese cuisine, made by fermenting mustard seeds with acidic extracts from mangosteen, tamarind, or lime juice, the mixture is kneaded into a dough, wrapped in banana leaves and left to ferment in bamboo containers for one to two weeks.

The traditional preparation method not only en-

hances the flavour and texture but also promotes the growth of beneficial bacteria. While fermented foods are widely recognized for their probiotic benefits, such as aiding digestion and improving gut health, certain bacteria present in these foods also have the capability to produce valuable industrial chemicals or compounds.

The research team at IIT Guwahati, led by Lalit Mohan Pandey, associate professor, Department of Biosciences and Bioengineering, identified *Bacillus subtilis* SMP-2, as a significant bacterial strain present in Panitenga.

The research has been published in the prestigious journal "Food and Bioprocess Processing". "This strain has the unique ability to produce bio-surfactants, which are natural compounds with diverse industrial and environmental applications. Surfactants are substances that help mix materials that do not naturally combine, such as oil and water. They are commonly used in products such as soaps, detergents, and shampoos, allowing them to remove grease and dirt.

"Unlike chemical surfactants, which can be harmful to the environment, biosurfactants are biodegradable, eco-friendly, and effective even under extreme conditions," Pandey said. The potential applications of (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



ओ लोखिमन

सार्वजनिक एकजुटता महासम्मेलन-२०२४

चतुर्थ आश्रम समिति क्षेत्र

दिनांक: २३ मार्च, २०२५ (तिथि- नवमी, मास- चैत्र कृष्ण पक्ष, विक्रम संवत् २०८१)

स्थान : दीफू राजकीय बाल विद्यालय क्रीडा क्षेत्र, दीफू

Markets climb for 4th day; Sensex jumps 899 pts, Nifty reclaims 23k-mark

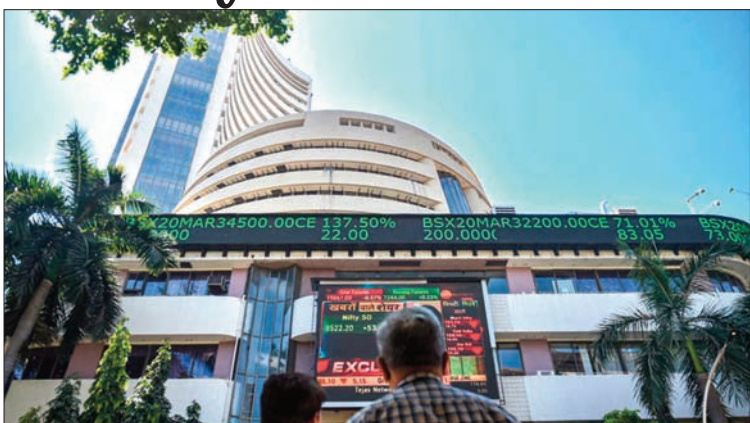
MUMBAI, March 20: Rallying for the fourth straight session, stock market benchmarks Sensex and Nifty surged over 1 per cent on Thursday, powered by across-the-board buying amid a mixed trend in global equities after the US Federal Reserve maintained its rate cut projections for this year.

Hectic buying in market heavyweights Reliance Industries, Bharti Airtel and IT stocks bolstered investor sentiment, traders said.

The 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex jumped 899.01 points or 1.19 per cent to settle at 76,348.06, regaining the 76,000 level. During the day, it soared 1,007.2 points or 1.33 per cent to 76,456.25. As many as 2,410 stocks advanced while 1,606 declined and 129 remained unchanged on the BSE.

The NSE Nifty surged 283.05 points or 1.24 per cent to reclaim the 23,000-mark to finish at 23,190.65. "Nifty surged by 283 points, marking gains for the fourth consecutive day as all sectors closed in the green. Optimism was driven by signals of two Fed rate cuts in 2025 and hopes of a halt in FII selling," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said.

Bharti Airtel was the biggest gainer in the Sensex pack, rising 4.17 per cent, followed by Titan, Tata Consultancy Services, Hindustan Unilever, Infosys, Nestle, Reliance Industries, Mahindra & Mahindra, HDFC Bank and Tata Motors. In contrast, IndusInd



Bank, Bajaj Finance and UltraTech Cement were the laggards.

Meanwhile, the Federal Reserve said the US economy still looks healthy enough to keep interest rates unchanged. The US central bank pointed out that it is expecting to cut rates twice this year even as inflation stays elevated.

"On Wednesday, the Federal Reserve announced its decision to keep the policy rate in the 4.25-4.50 per cent range. Policymakers anticipate two rate cuts in 2025, with economic growth projected at 1.7 per cent and inflation at 2.7 per cent for the year.

"Overall, this decision has mixed implications for currency movements, capital flows and market sentiment in India. Higher US interest rates could lead to foreign capital outflows from

Indian markets, whereas lower rates may attract investment," Ravi Singh, SVP, Retail Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said.

The BSE smallcap gauge climbed 0.73 per cent, and the midcap index rose 0.61 per cent.

All BSE sectoral indices ended higher, where telecommunication jumped 1.94 per cent, tech (1.89 per cent), oil & gas (1.56 per cent), energy (1.42 per cent), auto (1.39 per cent) and BSE Focused IT (1.23 per cent).

"The stability in global markets and moderation in FII selling have significantly improved sentiment. Notably, the recovery in banking and financial stocks, alongside strength in metal, real estate, and energy heavyweights, has played a crucial role in sustaining the momentum.

"Additionally, broader market participation and themes such as defence and railways have further eased pressure," Ajit Mishra, SVP, Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said.

In Asian markets, Seoul settled in the positive territory while Shanghai and Hong Kong ended lower. Japan's Nikkei was closed for a holiday.

European equity markets were trading lower. US markets ended significantly higher on Wednesday.

"Consistent falls of the US dollar index (DXY) have reduced the intensity of FII selling while DII buying continues to be strong, thus triggering the recent upside," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said. Global oil benchmark Brent crude rose 0.32 per cent to USD 71.01 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 1,096.50 crore on Wednesday after a day's breather, according to exchange data. Domestic Institutional Investors (DII) bought equities worth Rs 2,140.76 crore.

"Fed continues to project an additional two rate cuts this year, which may create a tailwind for global equities in the near term," Dhawal Ghanashyam Dhanani, Fund Manager at SAMCO Mutual Fund, said.

On Wednesday, the Sensex climbed 147.79 points or 0.20 per cent to settle at 75,449.05. The Nifty rose 73.30 points or 0.32 per cent to 22,907.60. (PTI)

Cognizant to set up 14-acre 'immersive learning centre' at Siruseri Campus, Chennai

NEW DELHI, March 20: IT company Cognizant on Thursday outlined plans for a 14-acre 'immersive learning centre' at its Siruseri campus in Chennai, that would be equipped to train one lakh individuals annually in advanced AI technologies.

The proposed centre, located within the company's 50-acre Siruseri campus, is expected to be completed in three years.

"Designed to train 100,000 individuals annually, the centre will feature 14,000 seats, smart classrooms, incubator hubs, client experience spaces, design thinking centres, along with residential accommodations and wellbeing facilities," according to a release. In a hub-and-spoke model, this centre will also support other learning centres being developed in a phased manner across campuses in Hyderabad, Pune, Kochi, and Coimbatore. The Siruseri learning

centre will advance Cognizant's learning and development ecosystem, integrating infrastructure with immersive learning, advanced AI-skilling, executive leadership and consulting programmes, the company said.

As the primary training hub for Cognizant's school graduate programme in India, it will also host intensive boot camps for fresh graduates.

Additionally, the centre will serve as a collaborative space for technology partners, academia, clients and communities to participate in innovative research and learning programmes, and contribute to industry advancements. "The capabilities to excel in an AI-driven world will differentiate the leaders from the followers," Ravi Kumar S, CEO of Cognizant, said. Since 2024, Cognizant has established new delivery centres in Bhubaneswar and Indore, with plans to open a

techfin centre in GIFT City, Gujarat later this year.

Additionally, the company has transformed nearly one million square feet at its Hyderabad delivery centre and modernised its 3-acre facility in Kolkata. "These centres have been designed to support the future of work, promote agility, collaboration and innovation, while providing best-in-class employee experience. Cognizant continues to partner with leading global organisations, transforming business processes, boosting productivity, and creating new value through AI and GenAI-powered solutions," the release said. The company has sharpened its focus on GenAI skills.

"In 2024, Cognizant empowered 277,000 associates through its learning ecosystem, with 168,000 completing a GenAI course. To date, 220,000 associates have been upskilled in GenAI," the release said. (PTI)

Investors' wealth surges ₹ 17.43 lakh cr in four days of market rally

NEW DELHI, March 20: Market investors kitty swelled by ₹ 17.43 lakh crore in four days of sharp rally in equities where the BSE benchmark Sensex jumped over 3 per cent.

On Thursday, the 30-share benchmark Sensex jumped 899.01 points or 1.19 per cent to settle at 76,348.06, regaining the 76,000 level. During the day, it soared 1,007.2 points or 1.33 per cent to 76,456.25. In four days, the Sensex zoomed 2,519.15 points or 3.41 per cent.

The market capitalisation of BSE-listed firms surged ₹ 17,43,418.8 crore to ₹ 4,08,61,851.73 crore (USD 4.73 trillion) in four days. "Benchmark indices got a Fed booster shot on Thurs-

day extending gains for fourth straight session, after the US Fed kept the forecast for two rate cuts in 2025 intact despite inflation risks from Trump's trade war. Broader mid and smallcaps also posted gains for the day. All major sectors also logged gains in broad-based rally with Nifty IT recovering from steep losses in recent weeks," Satish Chandra Aluri, Analyst, Lemonn Markets Desk, said. The US Fed is undoubtedly the driving force behind today's market rally as markets took comfort from the strong overnight gains in US indices, after Fed kept the projection for two rate cuts in 2025 unchanged, he added. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Assam: Class 11, 9 papers

"We cannot take any risk. So, we have cancelled the examination," he added. Later in the day, DLIEC lodged a complaint at Barpeta Sadar Police Station about the paper leak, an official said. The Class 9 examinations in Barpeta started on March 10 and were scheduled to be over on March 22. (PTI)

Now, shops to remain open

Soon, the fighter aircraft of the Air Force will land on the highway here. This year will witness many mega events for the state of Assam," he added. Later, taking an indirect dig at the opposition, Sarma said that some people feel bad "when we talk about the developments but it is true that the current regime is working for building underwater tunnels, the international standard highways and people will witness these things within a year."

The Assam cabinet unanimously passed a resolution thanking Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Union Cabinet for approving the ₹10,601 crore Namrup Fertilizer Plant.

30 Naxalites killed in two

Similarly, the number of casualties of security forces decreased by 73 per cent, from 1,851 to 509, and the number of civilian casualties decreased by 70 per cent, dropping from 4,766 to 1,495.

In 2014, there were a total of 66 fortified police stations, but under the Modi government's tenure their number has increased to 612, the statement said.

Similarly, in 2014, 126 districts in the country were affected by Naxalism, but by 2024, the number of such districts has drastically reduced to only 12. In the past five years, a total of 302 new security camps and 68 night landing helipads have been established by the government, the statement said. (PTI)

'Very good relationship with India

It's very hard to sell into India because they have trade barriers, very strong tariffs," Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal told a Parliamentary panel in New Delhi on March 10 that negotiations are still on and no agreement on trade tariffs has been reached so far between India and the US.

Trump has been criticising the high tariffs charged by India. India had said it was looking at deepening trade ties with the US, including by reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers, under a bilateral trade agreement. During Prime Minister Modi's visit to the US last month, both sides announced plans to negotiate a mutually beneficial, multi-sector Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). (PTI)

25 Indians awarded death

The number of Indian citizens executed or given capital punishment in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in 2024 stood at three each, while the corresponding figure for Zimbabwe was one. In 2023, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia executed five Indians each, Malaysia one.

"No data available as the same is not shared by the UAE authorities. As per the informal information available with the Mission, no Indians have been executed from 2020 to 2024," data for UAE revealed. (PTI)

IIT Guwahati explores traditional

biosurfactants include---Microbial-Enhanced Oil Recovery (MEOR) for improving oil extraction efficiency from underground reservoirs; bioremediation for cleaning up oil spills in oceans and soil and cosmetics and pharmaceuticals for replacing synthetic additives in skincare and drug formulations.

"We optimised environmental conditions to maximise biosurfactant production from *Bacillus subtilis* SMP-2. We found that the best conditions were a pH of 6, a temperature of 30°C, and a carbon-to-nitrogen ratio of 3:1, using glycerol as the carbon source and yeast extract as the nitrogen source. Moreover, the isolated bacteria exhibited a remarkable potential for crude oil degradation," Pandey said.

"This biosurfactant significantly reduced the surface tension of water, indicating its effective ability to break down oil and grease. Furthermore, it exhibited high stability across varying pH levels, temperatures, and salt concentrations. Its antimicrobial properties further make it a promising candidate for medical and healthcare applications," he added. Pal explained that research bridges traditional food knowledge with modern biotechnology. By unlocking the potential of microbes found in Panitenga, scientists are advancing probiotic research while opening new possibilities for eco-friendly industrial solutions.

"The team is further exploring integrating this process with a hydrophobic biosorbent system. The approach aims to enhance oil adsorption rate before facilitating its bioremediation using the bacterial strain. This innovative method holds promise for more efficient and sustainable management of oil spill waste in marine environments," he said. (PTI)

Punjab Police to transport 7 aides

sought transit remand, he added. The Punjab Police team, led by SP Harinder Singh Gill, was engaged in completing the legal formalities in Dibrugarh, to proceed with the transfer. The remaining three detainees, including Amritpal Singh, are also likely to be transferred by mid-2025, the official said.

Ten members of the pro-Khalistani outfit, including Amritpal who is now an Independent MP, and one of his uncles, have been housed in the Dibrugarh central jail since March 2023 after they were arrested under the NSA from different parts of Punjab following a crackdown on the outfit. In 2024, their detention period under the NSA was extended by a year. Amritpal Singh along with Papalpreet Singh and Varinder Singh Johal will continue to be held under NSA here, with their detention scheduled to expire in June. The radical preacher had contested the 2024 Lok Sabha elections as an Independent candidate and won from the Khadoor Sahib seat in Punjab.

His seven aides are being taken back after the Punjab government decided not to reinvoke the NSA at the end of their detention period, DGP Gaurav Yadav had said on Sunday. They would be formally arrested in the 2023 Ajnala police station attack incident and face the law, he had added.

Amritpal and his associates were booked on charges of spreading disharmony among classes, attempt to murder, attack on police personnel and creating obstructions in the lawful discharge of duty by public servants. (PTI)

Airtel augments network at Barsapara Stadium

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 20: Bharti Airtel has made comprehensive arrangements at the Barsapara Stadium Ahead of the Indian Premier League (IPL) tournament scheduled from March 22, said an official statement on Thursday.

"Efforts will ensure a seamless network experience for the anticipated crowd of nearly 100,000 cricketing fans during the matches," the statement stated.

It further said that Airtel has enhanced all of its existing cell sites and deployed an additional tower closer to the stadium and an additional Cell On Wheels (COW) in the vicinity.

"This augmentation will significantly improve voice and data connectivity for Airtel customers attending the matches. The network upgrades have been strategically planned to accommodate the expected high volume of spectators," it added.

Speaking on the readiness, Rabi Shankar Mishra, CEO - Assam and North East, Bharti Airtel, said, "We

have strengthened the network infrastructure at Barsapara stadium. This initiative will guarantee that our customers stay seamlessly connected, sharing their excitement with loved ones while being part of the exhilarating live-action."

"To offer a seamless and ubiquitous network experience across Guwahati city, extensive network optimisation has been conducted at the airport, railway stations, and key locations including Maa Kamakhya Temple, the Assam State Zoo cum Botanical Garden, the Navagraha Temple, and the Guwahati Planetarium, among others. All the 7 premium hotels in and around the city have also undergone comprehensive network assessments to enhance coverage," claimed the statement.

Airtel has taken measures specifically for the IPL and have augmented its network across all the stadiums in the country to cater to the cricket fever starting from March and continuing on till May 2025, it concluded.

Bandhan AMC introduces Vedartha

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 20: Bandhan AMC, an Indian investment management industry, announced its new alternate investment platform, "Vedartha" on Thursday.

An official statement from Bandhan AMC said that, the new platform seeks to offer products using listed equities and fixed-income solutions under Bandhan AMC's Alternative Investment Funds (AIF) as well as Portfolio Management Services (PMS).

Providing insights to the management team of "Vedartha", the statement said, "Equity-focused products offered under Vedartha will be managed by a team led by Mrinal Singh, Head - Alternates (Listed Equities), whereas Fixed Income products offered under Vedartha will be managed by a team headed by Bhupendra Meel, Head - PMS & Alternative - Fixed Income".

Vishal Kapoor, CEO, Bandhan AMC said, "Vedartha is supported by a dedicated and seasoned investment team with proven expertise, along with a senior management team with an average experience of 15-20 years. It is backed by Bandhan AMC's 25-year legacy and supported by Bandhan Group, GIC (Singapore), and ChrysCapital."

"Vedartha reflects our commitment to offering bespoke solutions that cater to the nuanced financial aspirations of our clients. By combining innovation, expertise, and purpose-driven strategies within the listed equity space, we aim to support our clients in their wealth creation journey," said Mrinal Singh, Head - Alternates (Listed Equities), Bandhan AMC.

"At its heart, Vedartha echoes our belief that wealth creation is a journey guided by knowledge, expertise, and purpose. In the PMS and Alternative space, Vedartha is designed to create unique solutions for our clients, simplifying the complexities of navigating dynamic markets with trust & confidence," added Bhupendra Meel, Head - PMS & Alternative - Fixed Income.

"Vedartha provides customised investment solutions that balance today's opportunities with tomorrow's possibilities. It provides a commitment to delivering an exceptional client experience through rigorous reviews, proactive insights, and personalised strategies," the statement concluded.

Investors can access further details at <https://bandhanamc.com/vedartha>.

Rupee settles 1 paisa higher at 86.36 against US dollar

MUMBAI, March 20: The rupee stayed firm and appreciated 1 paisa to close at 86.36 against the US dollar on Thursday supported by positive domestic equities. Forex traders said the Indian rupee has staged a counterattack against external pressures, gaining support from strong foreign inflows into debt markets.

However, uncertainty surrounding President Trump's tariff stance could pose challenges to the rupee's upward momentum. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.39 then touched an intraday high of 86.20 and a low of 86.41 against the greenback. The unit ended the session at 86.36 against the dollar, registering a gain of 1 paisa from its previous closing level. This is the fifth straight session of gain for the rupee, during which it has added 87 paise. On Wednesday, the rupee appreciated 19 paise to close at 86.37 against the US dollar. Dilip Parmar, Research Analyst, HDFC Securities, said the rupee's upward movement was supported by a favourable shift in market sentiment and increased dollar inflows into the debt markets. (PTI)

Kotak Mutual Fund launches Choti SIP facility

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 20: Kotak Mahindra Asset Management Company Ltd ("KMACM") / "Kotak Mutual Fund" announced the launch of the "Choti SIP" (small Systematic Investment Plan) facility on Thursday.

Choti SIP will be available for all eligible schemes of Kotak Mahindra Mutual Fund. SEBI and AMFI recently introduced the Choti SIP, offering an excellent opportunity to bring more Indians into the wealth creation journey.

Nilesh Shah, managing director, KMACM, said, "Only about 5.4 crore unique investors of India's population are mutual fund investors—leaving a massive, untapped opportunity for penetration and bringing the Indian saver closer to financial freedom. Systematic Investment Plans (SIPs) have been an excellent way to bring new investors and kick-start their mutual fund journey."

Speaking on the prospects of Choti SIP, Shah said, "With the launch of Choti SIP, a new investor can begin their wealth creation

journey with a minimum amount of ₹ 250."

This initiative enables new investors to invest via SIP with a minimum amount of ₹ 250.

The rationale behind "Choti SIP" is to make mutual fund investments more accessible to a wider audience, particularly first-time investors, by lowering the entry barrier.

The investor must not have previously invested in mutual funds (SIP or Lumpsum) at the industry level.

An official statement from Kotak stated that the investor must invest in the Growth Option and commit to a minimum of 60 instalments on a monthly basis.

The payment of instalments should be made through NACH or UPI auto-pay only.

Investors should consult their financial experts and tax advisors if in doubt about whether the plan is suitable for them.

However, Kotak Mahindra Asset Management Company Limited (KMACM) does not guarantee or promise any returns or futuristic returns, the statement concluded with advisory.

Govt asks ARAI to probe Ola Electric's sales figure mismatch, consumer complaints



NEW DELHI, March 20: The Heavy Industries Ministry has directed Automotive Research Association of India (ARAI) to probe the mismatch between Ola Electric's reported sales figures and actual vehicle registrations along with numerous consumer complaints against the Bhavish Aggarwal-owned electric two-wheeler maker and submit a report within 15 days, sources said.

While the total number of registrations by Ola Electric

on the Vahan portal for February stood at 8,652, the company had reported sales of over 25,000 units during February 2025. As of March 20, the company's registrations stood at 11,781 on the Vahan portal.

Ola Electric is a beneficiary of the FAME II and PM E-DRIVE schemes and its eligibility certificate has been provided by ARAI, a certification and testing agency under the administrative control of the ministry.

"It is the responsibility of ARAI to ensure that the guidelines of the PM E-DRIVE Scheme are followed. The ARAI will probe the sales figures mismatch and also the consumer complaints against Ola Electric. We have told ARAI to submit a report within 15 days," officials said, requesting anonymity.

Ola Electric has been facing regulatory heat with multiple authorities including consumer rights regulator CCPA ordering probes into complaints related to alleged "deficiencies" in services and electric two-wheelers manufactured by the company.

When contacted, Ola Electric declined to comment. However, sources said, due to negotiations with registration agencies, Vahan numbers for February have been temporarily impacted and the same was informed to the stock exchanges on February 19.

"The company's registration process is now back on track and daily registrations

of around 1,500 are almost double of the average daily sales of around 800. With this process in place, the company has fast-tracked the clearance of the registration backlog," a source said.

The company expects to register all the vehicles sold in February within March itself, the source said, adding that vehicles sold in the last week of March may have a registration spill-over in the first week of April 2025.

Last week, Ola Electric Mobility Ltd had said its vehicle registration service provider Rosmerta Digital Services Ltd had sought initiation of insolvency proceedings against its wholly owned arm Ola Electric Technologies Pvt Ltd.

Rosmerta Digital Services had submitted a petition before the National Company Law Tribunal Bengaluru Bench, alleging default in payment towards the services rendered by the operational creditor and seeking initiation of the corporate insolvency

resolution process (CIRP) against Ola Electric Technologies Pvt Ltd.

In February, Ola Electric Mobility had stated that it was renegotiating the terms of agreement with its agencies, Rosmerta Digital Services Pvt Ltd and Shinnit India Pvt Ltd, to reduce cost and enhance registration process efficiencies.

The company had stated that it would have a temporary impact on its Vahan registration.

Later, the company stated that its vehicle registration process transformation is in its final stages and its daily registrations have improved significantly, increasing to over 800 per day and crossing the average daily sales for January 2025 and February 2025.

The insolvency proceedings come at a time when Ola Electric Mobility is cutting around 1,000 jobs across different functions as part of a restructuring exercise to reduce losses. (PTI)

Narrow escape for overloaded boat in Dhubri, hundreds escape tragedy

HT Correspondent

DHUBRI, March 20: A major boat accident was narrowly averted on the Brahmaputra near Chalbanda Char in Dhubri, where hundreds of passengers escaped a tragic fate after an overloaded boat nearly capsized.

The incident occurred when an engine powered passenger boat, operating from Dhubri to Berkakali Char, began to sink in Chalbanda Char due to the excessive load of materials being transported along with the passengers.

As the boat approached Chalbanda Char, it started sinking in water, creating panic and chaos among the passengers. Sensing the danger, the boatman immediately steered the vessel toward a nearby char (sandbar), allowing the passengers to disembark safely.

Thanks to this timely intervention, all the passengers managed to reach the shore unharmed. However, despite efforts by a group of people to pull the sinking boat to safety, their attempts proved unsuccessful as the weight of the materials dragged the vessel further down.

Eyewitnesses reported scenes of panic and commotion as the passengers scrambled to safety. "It was a terrifying moment. The boat started tilting, and we thought it was going to capsize. Thankfully, the boatman managed to bring us to the shore just in time," said one of the survivors.

Authorities have been alerted about the incident, and an investigation is expected to determine the exact cause of the overload and prevent such mishaps in the future.

Asam Sahitya Sabha to hold third plenary session in Silchar in September

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, March 20: Aiming to enhance the relation between the people of Barak and Brahmaputra valley and to bring together the different ethnic groups of both the valley's the largest literary body of the state Asam Sahitya Sabha has decided to hold its third plenary session at Silchar.

The session is expected to be participated by more than five hundred delegates in the month of September this year. The first executive meeting chaired by Sabha prez Basanta Kumar Goswami at the central office of Asam Sahitya Sabha at Jorhat on March 9 last came up with the decision to hold the session at Silchar with a view to accelerate the process of cultural and literary integration among the people of different castes and communities of the valleys.

Goswami along with vice president Padum Rajkhowa and Principal Secretary Debajit Bora have been expecting cooperation and support from the government of

Assam for successful conduct of the three day programme where delegates from the different parts of the country and the abroad will take part. The Sabha is to come up with several land marking decisions in terms of culture, language, literature and ethnic integration.

On the other hand, welcoming the call of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma at Barak on Tuesday to hold Asam Sahitya Sabha biennial conference in Barak valley, in a press note the trio leaders of the Sabha expressed that Asam Sahitya Sabha has always been in a position to organise its conference in the Barak valley if the Sabha would get proper patronisation and solidarity from the government.

Meanwhile, noted litterateur of the state Dr Karabi Deka Hazarika is entrusted the responsibility of the Director of 'Prachya Vidyanawa Dr Maheswar Neog Asamtatwa Gabeshana Sangsthan' run by Asam Sahitya Sabha, the press note added.

Local passenger trains to be converted to Diesel Electric Multiple Unit (DEMU) services

Silchar station getting revamped under Amrit Bharat Stations Scheme



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 20: Union Railway minister Aswini Vaishnaw while replying to a question on development/upgradation of Silchar station, informed the Lok Sabha recently that Silchar station is among the 50 stations in the Assam approved for redevelopment under the Amrit Bharat Stations Scheme.

The redevelopment aimed to transform Silchar station into a world-class facility, enhancing passenger amenities and operational efficiency. Specific improvements include modernized infrastructure, upgraded platforms, improved waiting areas and enhanced accessibility features. This initiative is part of a broader effort to boost connectivity and promote economic growth in the region.

While replying to another part of the question the minister informed that, for

the convenience of passengers, Silchar Railway Station currently offers three double-bedded retiring rooms and one six-bedded dormitory. Additionally, several improvements have been made in recent years, including enhanced platform surfacing, upgraded waiting halls, installation of new platform shelters and improved circulating areas and approach roads, provision of lifts, etc.

As part of the Amrit Bharat Station Scheme, Silchar Railway Station has been selected for a long term phased development approach. The key enhancements under this scheme include better station access, upgraded waiting halls, toilets and the installation of free Wi-Fi. The scheme also envisions improved passenger information systems, kiosks for local products, eco-friendly landscaping, executive lounges and designated business meeting

spaces. Furthermore, efforts are being made to enhance multi-modal integration for seamless transportation.

In addition to passenger amenities, the railway administration is also addressing the accommodation needs of its employees. At present 243 railway quarters are available at Silchar Railway Station all of which are occupied by railway staff. To meet the growing demand, the Railway has planned the construction of 100 additional staff quarters. In the first phase, construction work for 22 new quarters has already commenced.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Railways is considering the conversion of Silchar's local passenger trains into Diesel Electric Multiple Unit (DEMU) services. However, this transition depends on operational feasibility, the availability of DEMU rakes and other competing railway requirements. Currently Silchar operates 30 train services.

The funding for these development projects has been made with a budget allocation of ₹ 547 crore for Northeast Frontier Railway in the financial year 2024-25. This investment highlights the government's commitment to upgrading railway infrastructure and ensuring better facilities for passengers and staff alike.

The comprehensive development of Silchar Railway Station under the Amrit Bharat Station Scheme, along with the construction of new railway quarters and the potential introduction of DEMU services, reflects the government's dedication to modernizing railway infrastructure. These efforts will significantly improve passenger convenience, enhance staff accommodation and contribute to the overall growth of railway services in the region.

Workshops on climate action for Charaideo held

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, March 20: The Assam Climate Change Management Society (ACCMS), department of environment & forest as part of their continuous effort to create awareness of climate change amongst all the stakeholders of the state.

It collaborated with the district administration, Charaideo and Jeeva Suraksha, a NGO, to organise a day-long district-level Capacity-building Workshop on Tuesday for the district-level officials at Conference hall, office of the District Commissioner, Charaideo.

Around 60 participants comprising the officials of various line departments, technical institutions, and representatives of Civil Society Organizations took part in the programme.

Ranjita Bania, President of Jeeva Suraksha welcomed the guests while Rizwan Uz Zaman, Technical Consultant, ACCMS gave an opening remark and spoke about the society and the objectives of carrying out the workshop.

Highlighting the Assam State Action Plan on Climate Change, Zaman, spoke on the Multi-disciplinary and collaborative effort of the line departments to fight against climate change issues and importance of mainstreaming the climate actions into the departmental planning process.

He also highlighted on the vision and mission of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma of making Assam one of the leading states in climate action with dedicated focus on decarbonising the energy sector of the state, tapping the vast green cover of the state for potential carbon sequestration, and transforming the expenditure through regular green budget tagging.

Inaugurating the workshop, the Chief Guest, District commissioner Dr Neha Yadav said that climate change is not a distant future anymore, and the impacts of climate change is more visible in increasing intensity of extreme events like floods.

She emphasized on the importance of creating climate change awareness among all the stakeholders including the departmental officers and the public.

KAAC CEM led delegation meets Union Tribal affairs minister

HT Bureau

DIPHU, March 20: A delegation headed by the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAC), Tuliram Ronghang, MP Amarsing Tisso; MLA Darsing Ronghang and Executive Member (EMs), KAAC Lunsing Teron, Ritesh Engli and Prabhat Chandra Taro, met the Union minister of Tribal Affairs Jai Oram and submitted a memorandum requesting the allocation of funds under Article 275(1) for hill tribes.

Article 275(1) of the Indian Constitution empowers Parliament to provide grants-in-aid of revenues to states deemed in

need of assistance, with different sums potentially fixed for different states, charged on the Consolidated Fund of India.

CEM Ronghang suggested to the Union minister of Tribal Affairs, Oram for the creation of a separate Executive Committee (EC) for hill districts, with the senior-most Secretary of the Hills Area Department as Chairman, and the Principal Secretaries of KAAC and Dima Hasao Autonomous Council as member secretaries.

The delegation looks forward to a positive response and swift action to benefit the tribal communities of the two hill districts.

Pramod Boro urges EMs to expedite developmental works

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, March 20: Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) govt has been pushing for fast track execution of developmental initiatives to ensure timely benefits for the people across the region.

In a review meeting held at the BTC Secretariat conference hall on Wednesday, the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of BTR, Pramod Boro urged all executive members (EMs) to expedite the implementation of their respective departmental works.

The review meeting, conducted as part of the 40th Executive Council meeting of the BTR government, focused on assessing the progress of various departmental initiatives. Several key matters were discussed, emphasizing the need for efficiency in governance and project execution.

Addressing the meeting, Boro highlighted the importance of timely implementation of schemes and projects, ensuring that people receive the benefits without unnecessary delays. He instructed all BTC executive members to accelerate their efforts in delivering developmental works across the region.

The meeting was attended by BTC executive members, the principal secretary, and senior officials from various departments.

Illegal IMFL seized

HT Correspondent

BOKAJAN, March 20: The police in a routine checking on the highway at Kaliram Basti under Khakhatipol station seized a large quantity of illegal IMFL from a truck bearing registration number AS-01PC 4897 on Thursday. The truck was heading towards Imphal. 840 cartons of IMFL were recovered which was meant for sale in the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Jharkhand. The contraband was concealed in the truck by 200 bags of wax. The estimated cost of the IMFL is about ₹ 1 crore.

In this connection Yumlembam Thoithoi Meitei (37), resident of Hayel Awang Leikai, Mayang police station, Imphal Imphal West district (Manipur) and handyman Seram Gokulchandra Meitei (22), resident of Terakhong, Moirang police station, Bishnupur district (Manipur) were arrested. Initial investigation found that the recovered contraband was brought from Jakhlabandha in Nagaon and was being taken to Imphal in Manipur. Further investigation is underway.

Bihar Divas observation opposed

HT Correspondent

BOKAJAN, March 20: Assam Jatiyatibadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), Karbi Anglong has opposed the proposed Bihar Divas to be observed on March 22 in Guwahati, said AJYCP CEC member Jitu Phukan here in Karbi Anglong.

In a Wednesday press conference at its office in Bokajan, Phukan said that things other than anything to do with indigenous things like Bihar Divas should not be held. The AJYCP will not agree to this, Phukan said. AJYCP said such things were not allowed in the states of Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram or Meghalaya. It further stated that the chief ministers of those states don't allow those things.

The AJYCP CEC member Phukan further said that in the neighbouring state of Nagaland, no other than organizations other than the Nagas could even form an organisation. In Karbi Anglong, Assam all sorts of organisations are formed. These need to be checked, he added.



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 20: The Principal Chief Electrical Engineer (PCEE) of Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) conducted a comprehensive statutory inspection from 17th to 19th March 17 to 19 across key sections including Dhekiajuli Road - North Lakhimpur, Rangapara North - Dekargaon, Balipara - Bhalukpong and Harmuti - Naharlagun.

This inspection covered a total of 264.35 Route Kilometers (RKM) and 338.3 Track Kilometers (TKM), underscoring NFR's commitment to reduce carbon emissions and improve energy efficiency. Subsequently, an electric locomotive trial was successfully executed at the maximum permissible sectional speed, reaffirming the infrastructure's readiness for enhanced operations.

Key features of the project include robust power supply installations, ensuring a steady energy source from the traction substations at Balipara and Gohpur. Safety enhancements have also been incorporated, with 130 level cross-

ings now equipped with height gauges to protect the overhead equipment (OHE). Additionally, signaling and telecommunication systems have been upgraded, with all stations and switching stations now featuring TPC communication systems. Maintenance facilities have been strengthened with two OHE cum PSI maintenance depots and a Tower Wagon Shed at Vishwanath Charali, further ensuring smooth operations.

As of March 20, NFR has electrified 3360 route kilometers (RKM), accounting for over 79% of its total network of 4260 RKM. This significant progress aligns with Indian Railway's mission to achieve 100% electrification and net-zero carbon emissions. The electrification efforts span various divisions with Assam leading at 1806 RKM followed by West Bengal 936 RKM, Bihar 319 RKM, Tripura 269 RKM and Arunachal Pradesh 11 RKM. Previous FY 2023-24, 921 RKM electrified and Current FY 2024-25 (upto 20th March), 777 RKM electrified.

Pegu inaugurates additional class rooms

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, March 20: Ranuj Pegu on Wednesday inaugurated a new class room in Sivasagar Govt MV School in the presence of a large gathering with district commissioner Ayush Garg IAS, among others.

The class room was built at a cost of ₹ 8.8 lakh under Samagra Siksha Mission 2024-25.

Two similar class rooms in 686 No Vyasdev LP School Desangmukh and Hafaluting Koibarta LP School through virtual mode were inaugurated. The minister in his speech said that the government built 4000 additional class rooms last year while amalgamating some other schools where there are few students. He said that the middle schools with good enrollment will be upgraded to high schools in due course of time.

Vocational training on commercial planting

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, March 20: Krishni Vignyan Kendra, Nagaon organised a five day long vocational training programme on commercial planting material production of major Horticultural crops at Krishni Vignyan Kendra premises from Thursday onwards.

Navajyoti Bora, director of Rudseti, Nagaon ceremonially inaugurated the programme in the morning session. Dr Niranjan Deka, principal scientist and the head of KVK, Nagaon welcomed the guests as well as other attendees and participants and also spoke on the prospect and importance of the programme in context to the current situation.

Essential items for Men Football Team distributed

HT Correspondent

BISWANATH CHARIALI, March 20: The selection trials for the Assam men's football team, organized by Assam Rifles, were held on March 11 at Polo Football Ground, Tezpur, stated a press release. The trials aimed to recruit 18 players, along with one manager and one coach, under the supervision of five authorized representatives (AR Persons).

Players underwent rigorous physical fitness tests, technical skill assessments, and match simulations to ensure a fair selection. After careful evaluation, the best talents were chosen to represent Assam. The selected team will now compete in the Assam Rifles Sentinel Cup 2025 at ARTC & S, Dimapur, gaining valuable exposure and strengthening Assam's football presence.



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 20: The Assam Public Service Commission (APSC) has scheduled the Screening Test (OMR & Written) for the post of Assistant Accounts Officer in Assam Power Distribution Company Limited (APDCL) on March 23, 2025.

The examination will be held across multiple venues in Cachar district, with strict security measures put in place by the district administration to prevent any form of malpractice.

The designated examination centers in Silchar include Gurucharan College, Cachar College, and Government Girls HS & MP School, where a total of 1,580 candidates will appear for the test in two shifts—from 9:00 am to 12:00 Noon and 1:30 pm to 4:30 pm.

To maintain order and discipline during the examination, the District Magistrate of Cachar, Mr. Midul Yadav has issued an order under Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, en-

forcing strict restrictions around the examination venues.

To maintain law and order and prevent any potential malpractice, the order restricts gatherings within a 100-meter radius of the examination centers, allowing only candidates, scribes, and designated officials.

Additionally, candidates are strictly prohibited from carrying mobile phones, electronic gadgets, smartwatches, health bands, Bluetooth devices, microphones, calculators, pen drives, textual materials, or any item that could facilitate unfair means inside the examination halls.

The administration has expressed concerns that unscrupulous elements may attempt to disrupt the examination process, leading to obstruction, annoyance, or threats to public tranquility.

In light of these possibilities, stringent measures have been enforced to deter any external influence and ensure the integrity of the examination.

The District Magistrate has warned that any violation of this order will be dealt with firmly under relevant legal provisions. Authorities have urged candidates and the general public to adhere to the guidelines to facilitate a smooth and disciplined examination process.

1st zonal rank in International Mathematics Olympiad 2024-25 for AMRS student



HT Correspondent

NAGAON, March 20: Mehraj Barbhuyan, a student of 9th standard of Ajmal Modern Residential School

(AMRS), Hojai has achieved 1st Zonal Rank along with Scholarship, Zonal Gold Medal and Certificate of Zonal

Excellence in the International Mathematics Olympiad (IMO) 2024 - 25 conducted by the Science Olympiad Foundation (SOF) in New Delhi.

As per results declared recently, a total of 21 students of AMRS, Hojai cracked the Level - 2 of SOF International Mathematics Olympiad

(IMO); National Science Olympiad (NSO) and International English Olympiad (IEO). All the successful students were awarded with the Certificate of

Zonal Excellence and 11 students were conferred with Scholarships from the SOF, New Delhi.

Khusbu Akhter Masud (class IX) and Sahavan Langhassa (class IX) secured Zonal Rank - 2 with Scholarship, Zonal Silver Medal and Certificate of Zonal Excellence in the National Science Olympiad (NSO) 2024-25 and International Mathematics Olympiad (IMO) 2024-25 respectively.

The authority concerned of the educational institution congratulated all the successful students, their parents, the Olympiad coordinator and the dedicated teaching staff for their invaluable contributions in bringing infinite laurels & accolades to the institution.

Areef Ahmed, Principal, Ajmal Modern Residential School (AMRS), Hojai further mentioned that SOF, a leading organisation with the aim of promoting Science, Mathematics, Computer Education, English, Social Studies, General Knowledge and professional courses. SOF has been striving for over 26 years to promote scientific attitude and temperament through innovative activities and use of IT in learning process that involve school students across the globe.

The Managing Trustees of Ajmal Foundation Maulana Badruddin Ajmal and Sirajuddin Ajmal, MLA

Binnakandi along with Dr Khasnul Islam, Director, Ajmal Foundation; Dr MRH Azad, General Manager, Ajmal

Foundation and Abdul Kadir, Project Head, Ajmal Super 40 have also extended their cordial greetings and best wishes to all the successful students, parents, teachers, Olympiad coordinator and the Principal, Areef Ahmed for shaping such breakthroughs in AMRS, Hojai.

BTR gears up for the 12th Baokhungri Festival



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, March 20: The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) has been making extensive preparations to successfully host the 12th Baokhungri Festival, scheduled to commence on April 12 at Baokhungri Hill, Kokrajhar.

To review the arrangements and finalise the event schedule, a preparatory meeting was held on Thursday at Harinaguri High School near Baokhungri Hill. The meeting, chaired by BTC Executive Member (EM) for Tourism, Dharma Narayan Das, focused on ensuring meticulous planning, effective publicity, security measures, traffic management, and necessary precautions for the convenience of guests and participants.

Participating in the meeting, BTC Joint Secretary for Tourism Pami Brahma, Chairperson of Kokrajhar Municipal Board, Senior officers of District and Police Administration, Forest, Tourism, Sports, PWD and local villagers shared valuable insights and suggestions based on past experiences to enhance this year's festival.

Speaking at the meeting, EM Dr. Dharma Narayan Das described Baokhungri Hill as "a hidden jewel of India, offering unparalleled natural beauty, cultural richness, and a deep connection to history and mythology." He invited everyone to experience the Baokhungri Festival, where nature, heritage, and spirituality converge in a mesmerizing celebration from April 12 onwards.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

The pleasures of love are always in proportion to our fears. - Stendhal

Israeli massacre in Gaza

Words wilt in the face of the fresh murderous horrors being unleashed on the people of Gaza by the depraved state of Israel once more. Cynically breaking a ceasefire agreement it had itself signed up to, Netanyahu and his cohorts massacred more than four hundred Palestinians a few days back. As throughout the genocide against the Palestinian people it has been conducting, most of the victims appear to be women and children. Palestinians, multiply displaced since the start of the Israeli military offensive nearly 18 months ago and who had just returned to their ruined homes, are to be forced to flee again. And it appears that the Israeli armed forces are additionally targeting government leaders across Gaza in an attempt to behead the Palestinian resistance. The Israeli government is the immediate culprit for this outrage. It was clearly unwilling to move to phase two of the ceasefire agreement, which mandated the departure of its troops from Gaza in return for the release of the remaining Israeli captives held there.

Had Netanyahu stuck to the terms of the agreement it might have precipitated the collapse of his government as fascist groups withdrew their support. That would have left the Israeli Prime Minister further exposed to judicial proceedings against him for corruption. Palestinian lives are as nothing to him set against these considerations. He had already ensured that there was no true ceasefire across occupied Palestine as he took advantage of the pause in military action in Gaza to unleash an intensified reign of terror across the West Bank. And he ordered the Israeli military to block all forms of aid from reaching the beleaguered people in Gaza. Throughout the aim is clearly genocidal, to eliminate the Palestinian people as an entity and to complete the seizure of their land that began in 1948, if not earlier. Under this scenario millions more Palestinians would be expelled from their homes with any remaining deprived of all political rights.

However, Israel does not bear responsibility for these crimes alone. Clearly Netanyahu has been emboldened by the unstinting and unconditional support offered by the Trump gang in Washington. The new administration has not merely maintained the anti-human Biden policy but actually intensified its worst aspects, militarily, diplomatically and rhetorically. Let this put an end to the foolish illusions of a few on the left that Trump, based on his self-serving manoeuvres to end the Ukraine conflict while grabbing Ukraine's resources for the US, is somehow a man of peace. Then there is the full complicity of the British government in the genocide, even now extending to arms sales to Netanyahu and practical support for the onslaught against Yemen because it has the temerity to back the Palestinians in their struggle. David Lammy was ready to concede that Israel is breaching international law, a fact which has been plain since the very start of the present Gaza conflict. Yet this belated insight has been swiftly disowned by a Starmer government terrified of offending the Trump thugs.

Promoting cultural tourism in Assam: The untapped potential

By: Mowsam Hazarika

Assam, the gateway to Northeast India, is a land of unmatched natural beauty, rich heritage, and a unique cultural tapestry. While its lush tea gardens, mighty Brahmaputra, and wildlife sanctuaries attract tourists, Assam's vibrant cultural heritage remains a largely untapped resource in the realm of tourism. Promoting cultural tourism in Assam could significantly boost the state's economy while preserving its age-old traditions for future generations.

Assam's cultural identity is deeply rooted in its festivals, dance forms, traditional crafts, and diverse communities. The state is home to over 20 ethnic tribes, each with its own distinct language, attire, cuisine, and customs. This diversity provides a treasure trove of experiences for tourists seeking authentic cultural encounters. Festivals like Bihu, Ambubachi Mela, and Jonbeel Mela are vibrant celebrations that highlight Assam's agrarian roots, spiritual ethos, and communal harmony. The Sattriya dance, a UNESCO-recognized classical dance form, showcases the Vaishnavite cultural tradition propagated by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva. The exquisite craftsmanship of Assamese handloom, especially the iconic Mekhela Chador, and the intricate bell metal work of Sarthebari, further reflect the region's artistic excellence.

Cultural tourism offers travelers an immersive experience, enabling them to connect with the soul of a place. For Assam, this means showcasing its living traditions, historical landmarks, and artistic heritage to a global audience. By developing this sector, Assam can foster economic growth, as cultural tourism can provide livelihoods for local artisans, performers, and entrepreneurs, boosting the rural economy. It can also preserve heritage, as increased interest in cultural assets can lead to better preservation efforts for historical sites, traditional art forms, and endangered languages. Furthermore, it can enhance global recognition, placing Assam on the global map and encouraging more travelers to explore the region.

While Assam's cultural potential is immense, much remains underutilized. Developing guided tours of Assam's historical sites, such as the Ahom-era monuments in Sivasagar and the archaeological remains of Madan Kamdev, could attract history enthusiasts. Creating experiential hubs where tourists can witness traditional weaving, pottery, and dance performances can offer an authentic glimpse into Assamese life. Packaging festivals like the Ambubachi Mela or the Rongali Bihu into larger tourism campaigns could draw international crowds. Promoting Assamese cuisine, including delicacies like pitha, tenga, and apong, through food festivals and culinary tours, can appeal to gastronomes. Additionally, combining cultural tourism with eco-tourism by promoting the traditions of riverine and forest-dwelling communities like the Mishing and Bodo tribes could create unique experiences for travelers.

Despite its potential, Assam faces several hurdles in developing cultural tourism. Poor connectivity and lack of quality accommodations in remote areas deter tourists from exploring cultural hubs. Assam's cultural offerings are not adequately marketed, both domestically and internationally. Moreover, rapid modernization and urbanization threaten the survival of traditional art forms and historical sites.

To unlock the untapped potential of cultural tourism in Assam, a multi-pronged strategy is required. Improved roads, better transport facilities, and world-class accommodations are essential to support tourism growth. Leveraging social media, virtual reality, and storytelling can help create global awareness of Assam's cultural riches. Collaborations between the government, private enterprises, and local communities can drive sustainable tourism initiatives. Training programs for local guides, artisans, and performers can enhance the overall tourist experience. Additionally, encouraging eco-friendly and culturally sensitive tourism practices will ensure the sustainability of the sector.

Assam stands at the cusp of a transformative opportunity. By promoting cultural tourism, the state can not only boost its economy but also preserve its rich heritage. As the world increasingly seeks authentic travel experiences, Assam has all the ingredients to become a cultural tourism hotspot. It is now up to policymakers, entrepreneurs, and local communities to come together and unlock this untapped potential, ensuring that Assam's cultural treasures shine brightly on the global stage. *(The author is a columnist, poet, Science Journalist, Sustainability Advocate, Former Director, Assam Seed & Organic Certification Agency and Ex-Joint Director of Agriculture, Assam)*

US aid suspension triggers economic crisis in Mena and South Asia

US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent on Sunday declined to rule out the possibility of recession hitting the US economy shortly. "There are no guarantees" when it comes to a potential recession hitting the United States. "Like who would have predicted COVID?"

Bessent told NBC's Kristen Welker when asked on "Meet the Press" whether he could reassure Americans about the country's economic future. "I can predict that we are putting in robust policies that will be durable," Bessent added, including trying to "wean our country off" of "massive government spending." His comments came as other members of President Donald Trump's administration, including the president himself, have similarly hesitated to make promises about what's to come for the nation's finances.

Meanwhile, consumer confidence has plunged, and 54% of voters in a recent NBC News poll say they disapprove of Trump's handling of the economy. J.P. Morgan's chief economist said last week that there's a 40% chance of a U.S. recession in 2025. "I hate to predict things like that," Trump told Fox host Maria Bartiromo last week when asked about the possibility of a recession this year.

"There is a period of transition," the president continued, "because what we're doing is very big." Bessent this weekend said he believes there's "no reason" that an adjustment period has to mean recession. "I can tell you that if we kept on this track, what I could guarantee is we would have had a financial crisis," Bessent said, referring to spending levels and policies prior to Trump taking office. "We are resetting, and we are putting things on a sustainable path."

The Treasury secretary said he is also not worried about the stock market, coming out of a particularly tumultuous week. U.S. stock markets closed down sharply last week amid mounting uncertainties arising from Trump's frequently shifting policies, including tariff threats against the biggest U.S. trading partners.

"I've been in the investment business for 35 years, and I can tell you that corrections are healthy. They're normal," Bessent told NBC. The broad S&P 500 index dropped into correction territory on Thursday, after Trump escalated risks of a trade war with the European Union. A correction is at least 10% down from a record high, which for the S&P 500 was set on February 19. "One week does not mean the market make," Bessent said Sunday.

During his election campaign last year, Donald Trump promised Americans he would usher in a new era of prosperity. Now two months into his presidency, he's painting a slightly different picture. He has warned that it will be hard to bring down prices and the public should be prepared for a "little disturbance" before he can bring back wealth to the US. Meanwhile, even as the latest figures indicate inflation is easing, analysts say the odds of a down-



turn are increasing, pointing to his policies. So is Trump about to trigger a recession in the world's largest economy?

In the US, a recession is defined as a prolonged and widespread decline in economic activity typically characterised by a jump in unemployment and fall in incomes. A chorus of economic analysts have warned in recent days that the risks of such a scenario are rising. A JP Morgan report put the chance of recession at 40%, up from 30% at the start of the year, warning that US policy was "tilting away from growth", while Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics, upped the odds from 15% to 35%, citing tariffs. The forecasts came as the S&P 500, which tracks 500 of the biggest companies in the US sank sharply. It has now fallen to its lowest level since September in a sign of fears about the future.

The market turmoil is being driven partly by concerns about new taxes on imports, called tariffs, which Trump has introduced since he took office. He has hit products from America's three biggest trade partners with the new duties, and threatened them more widely in moves that analysts believe will increase prices and curb growth. The latest official inflation figures in the US showed the rate of price increases cooling in February, however. Prices were up 2.8% over the 12 months to February, down from 3% in January, the Labour Department said.

Still, Trump and his economic advisers have been warning the public to be prepared for some economic pain, while appearing to dismiss the market concerns - a marked change from his first term, when he frequently cited the stock market as a measure of his own success. "There will always be changes and adjustments," he said last week, in response to pleas from businesses for more certainty. The posture has increased investor worries about his plans.

Goldman Sachs last week raised its recession bets from 15% to 20%, saying it saw policy changes

as "the key risk" to the economy. But it noted that the White House still had "the option to pull back if the downside risks begin to look more serious". "If the White House remained committed to its policies even in the face of much worse data, recession risk would rise further," the firm's analysts warned.

For many firms, the biggest question mark is tariffs, which raise costs for US businesses by putting taxes on imports. As

Trump unveils tariff plans, many companies are now facing lower profit margins, while holding off on investments and hiring as they try to figure out what the future will look like. Investors are also worried about big cuts to the government workforce and government spending. Brian Gardner, chief of Washington policy strategy at the investment bank Stifel, said businesses and investors had thought Trump intended tariffs as a negotiating tool. "But what the president and his cabinet are signalling is actually a bigger deal. It's a restructuring of the American economy," he said. "And that's what's been driving markets in the last couple of weeks."

The US economy was already undergoing a slowdown, engineered in part by the central bank, which has kept interest rates higher to try to cool activity and stabilise prices. Retail sales fell in February, confidence - which had popped after Trump's election on several surveys of consumers and businesses - has fallen, and companies including major airlines, retailers such as Walmart and Target, and manufacturers are warning of a pullback. Some analysts are worried a drop in the stock market could trigger a further clampdown in spending, especially among higher income households. That could deliver a major hit to the US economy, which is driven by consumer spending and has grown increasingly dependent on those richer households, as lower income families face pressure from inflation.

The head of the US central bank, Jerome Powell, offered as-

surances in a speech last week, noting that sentiment had not been a good indicator of behaviour in recent years. "Despite elevated levels of uncertainty, the US economy continues to be in a good place," he said. But the US economy is currently deeply linked to the rest of the world, warned Kathleen Brooks, research director at XTB. "The fact that tariffs could disrupt that at the same time that there were signs that the US economy was weakening anyway ... is really fuelling recession fears," she says.

The unease in the stock market isn't all about Trump. Investors were already jittery about the possibility of a correction, after big gains over the last two years, driven by the sharp run-up in tech stocks fuelled by investor optimism about artificial intelligence (AI). Chipmaker Nvidia, for example, saw its share price jump from less than \$15 at the start of 2023 to nearly \$150 in November of last year. That type of rise had stirred debate about an "AI bubble" - with investors on high alert for signs of it bursting, which would have a big impact on the stock market, regardless of the dynamics in the wider economy.

Now, with views of the US economy darkening, optimism about AI is getting even harder to sustain. Tech analyst Gene Munster of Deepwater Asset Management wrote on social media this week that his optimism had "taken a step back" as the chance of a recession increased "measurably" over the past month. "The bottom line is that if we enter a recession, it will be extremely difficult for the AI trade to continue," he said.

A recession is generally defined as a broad-based, persistent decline in economic activity. The more popular metric is that a recession is two straight quarters of negative economic growth, although in fact there's more to it than. Recessions are identified by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), a non-profit, nonpartisan research group that dates U.S. business cycles. To determine if the economy has entered a recession, NBER evaluates six key indicators: real personal

income; non-farm payroll employment; employment as measured by the household survey; personal consumption; manufacturing and trade sales; and industrial production. More specifically, NBER looks at the depth of the changes in these indicators, how broadly a slump is affecting different industries and how long a downturn lasts. The upshot: In a recession, the decline in economic activity must be significant, sustained and widespread, rather than limited to a particular sector.

For now, economic data suggest that's unlikely. Although layoffs around the country are rising, the U.S. labour market continues to create jobs at a decent clip. Despite economic growth slowing, it's not expected to fall off a cliff. In fact, Julia Pollack, chief economist at career site ZipRecruiter, notes that four of the six signals tracked by the NBER point to continued economic expansion.

"Right now, things feel uncomfortable given the significant amount of policy uncertainty, the federal layoffs, and we've seen business, consumer and investor sentiment fray," Ryan Sweet, chief U.S. economist at Oxford Economics, told CBS MoneyWatch. "So to some it feels like the economy is in a recession, but we are not there yet."

Still, cracks are appearing that could portend a sharper downturn down the road. Retail spending, which is the lifeblood of the economy, is waning, while measures of consumer confidence show a sharp deterioration of late. Investor concerns about the Trump administration's barrage of tariffs on other nations has also slammed stock prices, which could further pressure spending.

The clearest sign would be a steady increase in job losses and a jump in unemployment. In a recession, consumers pare spending and businesses pull back on investment. That typically leads to a slowdown in hiring and rise in layoffs. The nation's unemployment rate did tick up last month, to 4.1% from 4%, though that is still quite low. But employers added 151,000 jobs, a sign that businesses are still seeking to hire workers and enough payroll growth to keep unemployment in check. Many economists monitor the number of people who seek unemployment benefits each week, a gauge that indicates whether layoffs are worsening. Weekly jobless claims remain low.

Most Americans would feel the impact of a recession in one way or another, for weaker hiring to tepid wage gains. Among people who are employed, those who entered the labour market last tend to be the first to lose their job in a recession, noted Alex Jacquez, chief of policy and advocacy at the Groundwork Collective, a left-leaning economic think tank. "So you see the people who are hardest to reach as we reach full employment are the first to get laid off. That includes lower wage workers, black workers, Latino workers. Those who have the hardest time getting a job when times are good are first to lose jobs when times are bad," he said. (IPA Service)

Pakistan's ailing economy getting big boost from Russian assistance

By: Ashis Biswas

Pakistan is urgently seeking financial and other help from Russia and China, even as it faces a double-edged threat to its own territorial security from the Balochistan Liberation Army and Afghanistan-based Taliban.

Present indications suggest that the response from Russia has been more encouraging in recent months despite the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. As for China, which has already made major investments in Pakistan exceeding \$50 billion in building the ambitious CPEC highway project, authorities in Beijing are currently studying Islamabad's request for a fresh \$1.4 billion loan.

Pak-based analysts have warned Islamabad about the risks involved in seeking Chinese financial help. The country is heavily indebted to China already, occasionally finding it difficult to maintain its repayment schedule. This has often led to the Chinese authorities slowing down the pace of ongoing power supply projects and tourism-related schemes coming up along the CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) highway. The impressive infra development project seeking to link the Xinjiang region with the Gwadar port off Karachi remains a matter of bilateral pride.

While welcoming the flagship

project as a whole which has helped Pakistan increase its power generation of late, there is some concern in Pak Media reports that Islamabad has already sunk into a debt trap via-a-vis China. They point to the double-edged nature of Chinese financial help, where long standing defaults are often written off in exchange for the lenders securing an equity in the completed projects. This gives them a considerable power in controlling local economic assets as well as earning major profits, bringing a loss to the local economy!

Analysts mostly refer to the experience of Sri Lanka some years ago as it failed to make its loan repayments in time. The Chinese responded by acquiring functional control of some seaports/airports on long lease. The Sri Lankans are currently better off after suffering a brief spell of near bankruptcy, not least because of urgent financial assistance from India and Western agencies like the IMF.

The problem with Pakistan is that in the present situation, it cannot very well approach the IMF or World Bank for much relief, while seeking Indian assistance remains out of the question.

Against this background, the Russian assistance in various sectors have certainly brought some relief for Pakistan. Incidentally it is the much maligned former Prime Minister Imran Khan, cur-

rently serving a prison sentence, who had made a decisive break with the US and directly establishing contact with Russia. He had even managed to meet President Vladimir Putin briefly to organize assistance for ailing Pakistan economy.

Observers noted that both countries were taking a hard time the US/EU-led Western power bloc, along with a financial blockade. Therefore both countries were keen to increase mutual trade and general co-operation.

International isolation apart, Russia had already begun a diplomatic reset in its regional diplomacy in South Asia, despite its close links and active partnership with India within the BRICS group. The groundwork for developing closer Pak-Russian ties was laid by then Prime Minister Z.A. Bhutto who visited the Soviet Union in 1974, the first Pak leader to do so. For Russia, Alexei Kosygin made a trip to Pakistan.

A brief look at the extent of bilateral trade and business between the two countries shows that Russia remains the stronger partner, with latest export figures for wheat (\$658 mil), crude oil (\$47 mil) and other assorted items (\$161 mil) to Pakistan. Its exports had risen on a y-to-y basis by an average 22% during the last 5 years, rising from \$328 million in 2018 to \$884 in 2023. Pakistan also bought Rail-



way equipment EVs, cosmetics, toilet items, perfumes, glass items etc. It exported to Russia among other items, halal meat, solar energy-related equipment, mobiles and accessories. Exact export figures for Pakistan were not available, but the volume of overall bilateral trade crossed \$1 billion in 2024. Both countries were hopeful

that trade/business would rise majorly in 2025. . .

Russia was also providing expertise, financing and other help in helping Pak build 3 major highways linking Peshawar, Sukkur and other regions, apart from assuring its smaller neighbour of continuing supplies of crude oil at discounted prices. (IPA Service)

Weathering the storm of US trade winds

By: Mriganka M Bhowmick

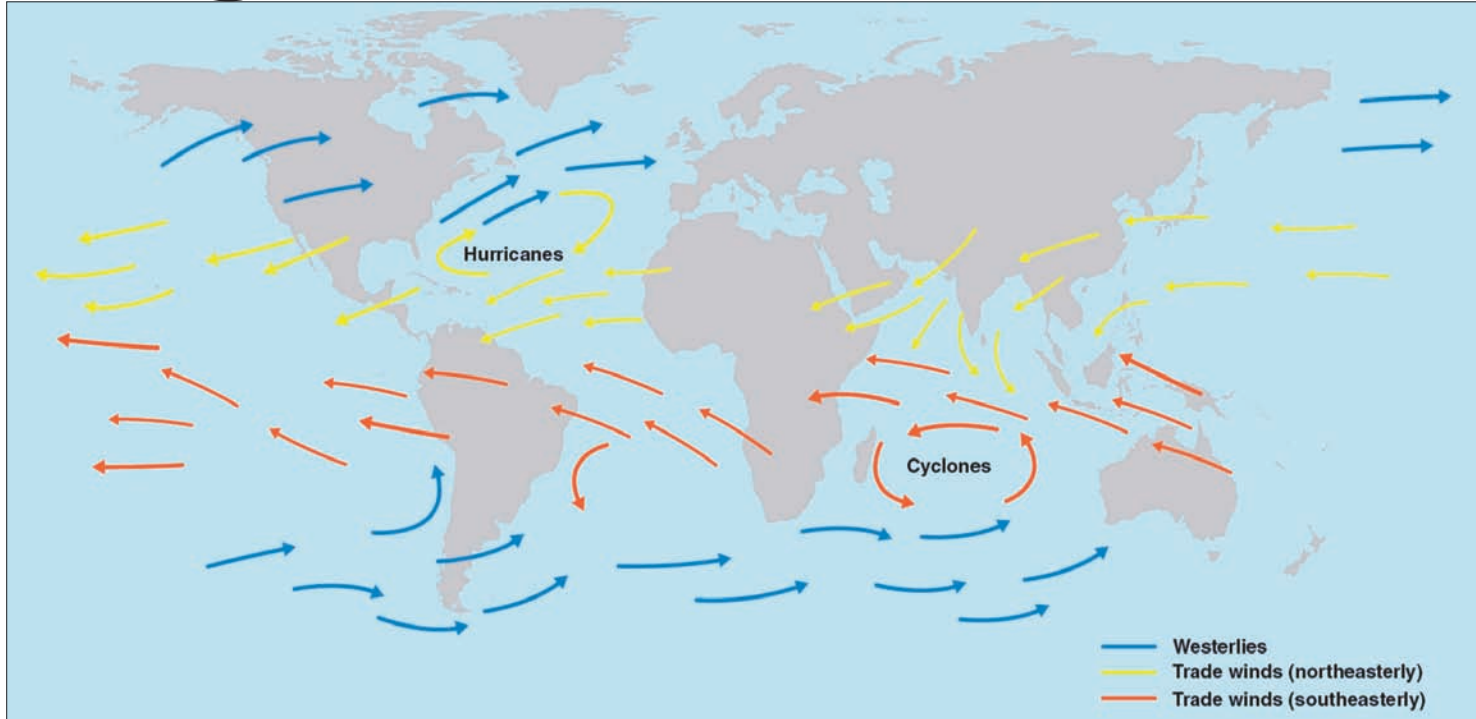
The world is facing an uncertain and challenging time. The reciprocal tariff model introduced by the new Trump administration's economic policies has disrupted the seamless flow of global trade and commerce. This poses a significant economic challenge for developing nations, as it undermines the World Trade Organization (WTO) model, which upholds the principle of higher tariffs imposed by developing nations on imports from developed nations to protect their domestic industries.

The immediate consequences include the crippling of these industries, creating an unequal playing field. Rising unemployment and a slowdown in export-driven growth appear inevitable. India is not immune to this trade war, where global cooperation is being overshadowed by forced trade negotiations favoring the stronger party. A new world order is taking shape, and India must navigate this landscape not cautiously, but courageously.

Between April 2024 and November 2024, India, the second-largest trading partner of the US, exported goods worth USD 52.89 Billion while importing USD 29.63 Billion, resulting in a trade surplus of USD 23.26 Billion in India's favor. This trade imbalance is at the heart of the issue. India's key exports include diamonds, medical appliances and accessories, jewelry, agricultural products, refined petroleum, rice, textiles and apparel, automotive components, chemicals and petrochemicals, and machinery.

Meanwhile, India's imports from the US primarily consist of mineral fuels and oils, pearls, precious and semi-precious stones, nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery, electrical equipment, crude petroleum, petroleum products, electronic components, and gold.

A closer look at these product categories reveals that India has room to further expand its market share in these sectors by enhancing cost efficiencies and quality standards. In contrast, the US has limited options for in-



creasing its exports to India, apart from pushing crude oil and defense products—both heavily supported by the US government. This is due to the cost and consumption limitations of US goods in the Indian market. Consequently, the US, in its bid to reduce the trade deficit, will likely attempt to penetrate new segments currently dominated by Indian domestic industries, such as automobiles.

This is not just a trade negotiation, it is a full-fledged trade war aimed at capturing market share with little regard for global cooperation or diplomatic considerations. The reciprocal tariff strategy is a veiled attempt to lower tariffs and open new markets for the US. The true agenda is now apparent.

The concept of reciprocal tariffs, introduced under the Trump administration's "Fair and Reciprocal Plan," seeks to impose high

import duties on trade partners in an effort to reduce trade deficits. The administration argues that exporting countries impose high tariffs on US products. However, this is not a product-to-product reciprocity but a nation-to-nation policy. The term "reciprocal" itself is misleading, as there is no defined framework governing its application. Instead, it grants the US government the flexibility to impose tariffs arbitrarily, leaving exporting countries guessing about their potential impact and forcing them to react after the tariffs are already in place. In a world marked by unequal wealth distribution, economic development, and technological progress, these tariffs are more punitive than reciprocal, disproportionately harming developing nations.

In international trade, the true meaning of reciprocal tariffs, as governed by the WTO,

differs significantly from what the US administration is advocating. Under Article 22.4 of the WTO's Dispute Settlement Understanding, reciprocity serves as the basis for tariff retaliation when a country fails to comply with a WTO ruling. Additionally, Article XXVIII of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) establishes legal guidelines for recalibrating trade agreements and calculating compensation. What the US is currently promoting deviates from these principles. As global trade policies continue to be shaped by dominant economies, the US's reciprocal tariff strategy is expected to cause significant disruptions until countermeasures emerge to stabilise the situation. However, the key question remains: Will this retaliatory tariff policy achieve its intended goal for the US? The likelihood is low. A closer analysis

reveals that the US trade-to-GDP ratio stands at just 26.9 per cent, compared to 38.4 per cent for China, 46.8 per cent for Japan, and 50 per cent for India. Moreover, US import intensity is nearly three times higher than its export intensity. The real issue behind the US trade deficit is not high foreign tariffs but the poor performance of US merchandise trade, which accounts for only 8.3 per cent of global exports.

In contrast, the US enjoys a USD 200 Billion trade surplus in the services sector, making it the global leader in both imports and exports of services. The primary constraints on US merchandise exports stem from supply-side limitations and a failure to achieve economies of scale, not unfair tariff structures. Given the strong global demand for US service exports, why should the US merchandise trade struggle to compete?

With a population of 1.4 Billion, India must support its citizens through various welfare programs funded by budgetary allocations. These expenditures rely heavily on trade and commerce, with export-driven industries playing a crucial role. India's ability to produce low-cost goods sustains its economy and provides employment to millions. Protecting these industries is imperative.

Allowing an influx of US products into new market segments could disrupt domestic industries in the short term and erode supply chains in the long run if US manufacturers fail to achieve economies of scale in affordable segments. While India can afford to reduce its diamond exports to the US, it cannot risk destabilising its domestic industries.

It is time for India to adhere strictly to WTO guidelines and advocate for a globally accepted trade policy to counter coercive trade deficit measures. A production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme to boost domestic industries, along with stronger ties with alternative trading partners, can help mitigate the impact of reciprocal tariffs. India must remain vigilant—this phase is temporary, but its long-term economic stability depends on strategic resilience. (Courtesy: The Pioneer)

Paris Summit showed that policy makers ignore how AI is harming people everyday

By: Erika Guevara Rosas

In February 2025, France hosted the third global artificial intelligence (AI) summit. Despite promises of strengthening an international dialogue to steer regulation of evolving technologies, it was ultimately a major lost opportunity for meaningful and honest discussions on AI's risks and human rights harms.

For human rights defenders, the summit underscored that policymakers lack an understanding of and ignore how AI systems are harming people every day and how corporate greed and power are destroying our world.

Since the dawn of ChatGPT, which has led to an inflated AI hype phenomenon, policymakers are constantly influenced by narratives shaped by tech titans as a way of deflecting meaningful human rights-centric regulation.

For instance, in preceding AI summits in the United Kingdom and South Korea, existential doomsday narratives – primarily pushed by industry – dominated discussions. Equally, the Paris summit discussions, mainly driven by states, made AI sovereignty a central theme of the event, with officials promoting their countries as the "next place" to invest in AI while emphasising how an independent local technological landscape helps us achieve greater public good.

In both cases, the discourse was shaped by some powerful actors without addressing any human rights harms exacerbated by AI-driven technologies.

A charade of economic progress was also part of the mix during the French summit, promoted by the host country itself. During his opening speech, President Emmanuel Macron made his own sales pitch, focusing on France's potential supremacy in AI development. Not once did the French president acknowledge the human rights harms posed by these technologies or the necessary steps toward binding regulation.

At a more global level, it was also alarming to witness J.D. Vance's first foreign policy speech urge ever more AI deregulation. Similarly, the European Commission has recently made a U-turn from the promises it made about ensuring an AI regulatory framework based on human rights.

While the EU has made a name for itself as a champion of "trustworthy" and regulated AI development and deployment, the European Commission's current agenda has seen a drastic pivot. Both Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and executive vice-president Henna Virkkunen promised the EU would cut red tape for business.

The Commission has made good on its promise by axing the development of AI liability rules and downgrading corporate accountability rules.

The facts now clearly indicate that global competitiveness and independent sovereign tech capabilities are the key priorities for states, even if that means rolling back regulatory gains. It is unfortunate that this is happening despite countless investigations exposing how AI is amplifying biases and raising serious human rights concerns in areas such as policing, warfare, social protection, employment and more.

For instance, in the United Kingdom, Amnesty International has exposed how predictive policing systems are supercharging racism by unfairly profiling immigrant communities under the guise of "crime prevention."

In New York City, a police-owned facial recognition system is eroding civil rights to privacy and disproportionately impacting marginalised groups, including Black Lives Matters protestors. In warfare, autonomous weapons systems operate without any human oversight, functioning as mass-killing machines. In welfare provision, algorithmic decision-making is depriving people of necessities like food, healthcare and shelter.

The list of harms is endless – just like the number of people affected. The next summit will be hosted in India, and this is also a cause for concern. Given the country's track record of abusing AI technologies, it's unlikely that human rights regulation will be high on the agenda.

Amnesty International has documented how the use of a facial recognition system in the city of Hyderabad is leading to mass surveillance, making it impossible to walk down the street without risking exposure to facial recognition technology.

Following media reports, Amnesty International also exposed how an automated system called Samagra Vedika in the Indian state of Telangana is preventing eligible people from receiving welfare.

During the next summit, state officials must acknowledge that we are now at a critical juncture where we need to counter the uninhibited push by both billion-dollar corporations and state officials to fuel unchecked AI economies and build extensive AI-driven state machinery by embracing deregulation and monstrous AI investments.

Governments must recognise that the need for a human rights-centric roll-out of these technologies is more urgent than ever and that fundamentally, this means that if a tech system is perpetuating human rights harms, it should never be deployed.

In a rapidly changing global environment where we are witnessing a backlash against civil liberties every day, states must confront and tackle the harms caused by AI instead of writing the rules of our future with tech giants. They must respond to calls from civil society groups and impacted communities and work together to ensure that corporations are subject to enforceable and binding AI regulations that protect us all. (Courtesy: The Wire)

Army watched as Bangladesh plunges into turmoil

By: Sandip Mitra

The Interim Government of Bangladesh, led by Nobel laureate Dr. Mohammed Yunus, assumed office in August 2024 and has now completed seven months of governance. This period has been one of the most tumultuous in Bangladesh's 54-year history as an independent nation. Following the removal of a deeply entrenched government through a student-led agitation that turned violent, Bangladesh has experienced prolonged lawlessness. Despite the deployment of the Army, unrest continues unabated.

A particularly disturbing incident occurred on February 5, 2025, when violent mobs destroyed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's historic residence-turned-museum, an act of vandalism that security forces failed to prevent.

The Bangladesh government blamed the destruction on former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's virtual address to the Chhatra League, claiming it incited the violence. Subsequently, Operation Devil Hunt was launched, ostensibly to restore law and order, but in reality, it targeted Awami League workers, who have been subjected to brutal crackdowns since their leader's ouster.

The initial euphoria following Hasina's removal has faded, giving way to a stark reality. Despite criticisms of her administration—including allegations of corruption and electoral malpractice—even her detractors acknowledge the socio-economic progress made during her tenure. Food scarcity, once a persistent issue, was largely addressed, but recent developments suggest a return to uncertainty, with Bangladesh seeking large rice imports from India.

Economic instability has become a major concern. Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserves have depleted from over \$40 billion in 2021 to \$20 billion in March 2025. The government has imposed import restrictions and sought international financial assistance, but this has hampered import-dependent manufacturing, curtailed production, and increased unemployment. Inflation remains high at over 9%, and rising costs of essentials are severely affecting ordinary citizens, particularly during Ramadan. On the political front, significant developments have unfolded. One of the first actions of the Interim Government was to lift the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami (Jei) and its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir, imposed by the previous government due to alleged terrorist links.



This move allowed these groups to intensify their political activities, particularly targeting Awami League supporters. Although the Jei remains technically barred from contesting elections, it is only a matter of time before this restriction is lifted.

Following Hasina's fall, the Jei rapidly expanded its influence, using Chhatra Shibir to dominate university and college campuses, sidelining the BNP's student wing, Chhatra Dal. Despite these advances, the Jei remains uncertain about its ability to challenge the BNP in parliamentary elections. The BNP, having severed ties with Jei, is eager for early elections to capitalize on its organizational strength. However, delays could erode its advantage.

Historically, Bangladeshi politics has been dominated by an Awami League-BNP binary, which the Jei aims to disrupt. By embedding itself in the Interim Government, strengthening its foothold in key institutions, and advocating for local body elections before general elections, the Jei seeks to divide and weaken the BNP.

The BNP has grown wary of these manoeuvres and insists that constitutional changes must be made by an elected Parliament. It has urged the Interim Government to honour its promise of holding early elections. Meanwhile, a new political entity, the National Citizen Party (NCP), emerged on February 28, 2025, spearheaded by Nahid Islam, a former government coordinator. The NCP claims to champion an inclusive, discrimination-free Bangladesh, but its ideological leanings remain ambiguous. Critics suspect it aligns with Jei and is part of a broader strategy to undermine the BNP.

The NCP's demand for constitutional reforms and an elected Gana Parishad to draft a new constitution has

raised concerns. Its statements suggest an inclination towards an Islamic state rather than a secular democracy. The party's position on the Liberation War remains unclear, further fueling speculation about its right-wing affiliations.

Bangladesh now faces a deep ideological divide. With the Awami League sidelined, the BNP remains the primary advocate of centrist, pro-liberation ideals, while the Jei and other Islamist factions push for an Islamic state. The NCP, though officially non-aligned, is expected to side with right-wing forces. Despite prevailing narratives, dismissing the Awami League's potential resurgence would be premature. It remains a formidable political force and, so far, is neither banned nor barred from contesting elections.

A strategic alliance between the BNP and Awami League, given their shared ideological background, could disrupt existing political calculations. The leftist parties, traditionally opposed to the Jei, would likely align with the BNP rather than the NCP. Beyond party politics, the role of the Army remains a crucial factor. Bangladesh has a history of military coups, and the current lawlessness raises concerns about another intervention. On February 25, 2025, General Waker-Uz-Zaman, the Army Chief, warned politicians against infighting and urged national unity to safeguard sovereignty. He highlighted the deteriorating security situation and expressed concerns about the police's inability to function effectively. He also decried the tendency in certain quarters to undermine the Army and the security and intelligence apparatus. Although he denied political ambitions, observers think he gave enough hints of intervention should chaos persist.

Speculation is rife about internal power struggles within the Army, particularly with the promotion of General Muhammad Faizur Rahman, known for his Jei sympathies, to QuarterMaster General. Reports suggesting his secret meetings with Pakistani officials and suspicions of an impending coup have added to the unease.

Bangladesh stands at a crossroads, grappling with economic turmoil, political instability, widespread lawlessness and ideological divisions. The coming months will be critical in determining whether the nation can navigate these crises through democratic means or if another power shift, possibly through military intervention, looms on the horizon. Either way, the path ahead remains fraught with uncertainty. (Courtesy: The Citizen)

Gaza reconstruction opens an Arab-Trump faultline

By: Kabir Taneja

Arab leaders met in Cairo, Egypt, for an emergency meeting to come up with an alternative plan to the one promoted by United States President, Donald Trump, for the Gaza Strip's reconstruction. Trump's proposition of Egypt and Jordan taking in the Palestinian population of the Strip while it is turned into some kind of 'riviera' has, if nothing else, pushed Arab leaders to take notice and push back with their own alternative.

The outcome from Cairo was close to what was expected, which was, much like Trump, a mere Arab-led band-aid to the Palestine issue and the war between Hamas and Israel. The future of Hamas in the Gaza Strip should be at the core of both a political future and the proverbial reconstruction effort. While the summit endorsed a US\$53 billion plan to devise a new blueprint for Gaza's rebuilding, it shied away from the more contentious political questions, including Hamas as the main political and military actor and the question of offerings towards Israel's security dilemmas. The Arab proposal's main aim was to create a buffer and present a united front against not just Trump's plan against Egypt and Jordan but also to be seen not as bystanders around a growing narrative of forced displacement. Both the US and Israel have rejected the Arab proposal.

Previously, it was also reported that the Egyptian plan involved developing a Governance Assistance Mission to replace the Hamas-led government, take over man-

agement of humanitarian aid, and serve as the core body to outline how Gaza would be governed. Hamas has, as expected, rejected the idea, even as it welcomed the Arab-led proposal since it did not challenge its political and military control over Gaza. Whether changes were made regarding how best to address the issue of Hamas in the twilit hours before the Cairo deal was offered remains unknown.

For the Arab world, marking a balance between their regional aims, which include working-relations with Israel translating to international and regional economic prominence and those of the Palestinian crisis, is critical. Hamas's attack against Israel in October 2023 set back multiple agendas in capitals such as Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and over the past two years have pulled Arab actors back into play on the Palestine issue despite their desire to enjoy a level of neutrality, as the contest between Israel and Iran was given prominence as the core regional fissure. Israel, for example, has made it clear that projects such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) require Riyadh's participation to deliver their full potential. The consistency with which both Israel and the US promoted the idea of a Saudi-Israel normalisation being inevitable may have ended up being counter-productive as Riyadh has been forced to strengthen its position demanding a sovereign Palestinian state before such a normalisation takes place.

Another underlying fear could be that a forced dismantling of Hamas in Gaza might not only turn the Palestinian group

against some of their Arab partners, but further turn the proverbial Arab street in favour of Hamas's narratives, Iran's push for a pan-sectarian identity, and give a new lease of life to ideologies such as those built around political Islam—a theological posture both the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have spent years to make redundant. A looming threat remains that such ideologies can resurge and rebuild, giving a new lease of life to ultra-conservative versions of Islam, which stand at odds against designs being employed to liberalise regional economies and make them globally palatable. The success of this endeavour also depends on the re-branding of states such as Saudi Arabia and how they have been perceived, particularly in the West, over the past decades. Scholar Hesham Alghannam highlights in his work that the Kingdom "aims to foster warmer international relationships by moving away from a religious approach that earned the royal family legitimacy; however, it is adopting measures to minimise the potential price paid for this realignment." Undoing these sensitive projects undertaken in the Middle East can have global repercussions.

Meanwhile, Trump continues to seek for his 'deal' to stop the conflict. Driven by a need for personality first rather than policy, a core deliverable for the US president towards his constituency is to end wars that he believes were started by traditional American political structures, and this includes both Democrats and Republicans. To this effect, Trump has even begun direct consultations with Hamas it-



self, delivering a stark message to Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that even the ironclad Israel-US relationship is not beyond Trump's appetite to cut deals towards an accelerated demand for peace. As per reports, the Israelis only came to know about the Trump administration's direct talks with Hamas via 'other channels' and not the White House.

For the Arab leaderships, the US and Israel deciding the outcome of the Gaza issue may well be unpalatable. While the Arab states would ideally like to see the back of Hamas in Gaza, what kind of alternative can be constructed that can satiate the multiple interests at place, both regional and global, is a question that no one seems to have an answer to, yet. The Gaza crisis is not new, and expecting it to be resolved at a heady pace, only due to the disruptive nature of Trump's political candour and lack of tact, can lead to bad choices and forced opportunities. (Courtesy: ORF)

India ranks 118th in World Happiness Report, Afghanistan last

LONDON, March 20: India ranked 118th in the World Happiness Report 2025 published Thursday, up from the 126th position in the previous year but below countries such as Nepal, Pakistan, Ukraine and Palestine.

The report, released coinciding with the International Day of Happiness that falls on March 20 each year, focuses on the impact of caring and sharing on people's happiness, including how sharing a meal increases happiness.

Finland is ranked as the happiest country in the world for the eighth consecutive year and other Nordic countries — Denmark, Iceland and Sweden — continued to remain in the top four, in that order.

The annual report, published by the Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford in partnership with Gallup, the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network ranks the countries according to the self-assessed life evaluations by those polled averaged over the years 2022–2024.

Country rankings for the three benevolent acts covered by the Gallup World Poll — donating, vol-

unteering, and helping strangers — vary depending on cultural and institutional differences, the authors of the report said.

While India ranked 118th overall, in terms of the 'Country rankings for six measures of benevolence', it was listed much higher at 57 for (how people) donated; at 10 for how people volunteered; 74 for helping a stranger, and in case of wallet returned by a neighbour (115), stranger (86) and police (93).

In India's neighbourhood, Afghanistan is again ranked as the unhappiest country in the world, this year 147th against last year's 143rd rank (last). While Nepal with 92nd rank (93 in 2024) and Pakistan, with 109th rank (108 in 2024) remained much ahead of India, Sri Lanka, with 133rd rank (128 in 2024) and Bangladesh 134th position (129 in 2024) lagged behind.

China was ranked in 68th position this year, down from the 60th last year. State of Palestine is ranked 108th (103 in 2024) while Ukraine is at 111 rank (105 in 2024).

According to the World Happiness Report web-



site, the annual report and much of the growing interest in happiness research "exists thanks to Bhutan," which had sponsored a resolution for considering happiness for a holistic approach to development.

Bhutan's resolution was adopted by the UN General Assembly on July 19, 2011 and the first World Happiness Report was brought out in 2012.

After the UN General Assembly adopted and declared March 20 as the International Day of Happiness, the World Happiness Report is released around that day each year.

However, Bhutan, which focuses on Gross National Happiness, does not feature in the ranking of the 147 countries in this year's World Happiness Report.

Explaining the methodology for this year's report, the authors wrote: "Our measurement of subjective wellbeing continues to rely on three main wellbeing indicators: life evaluations, positive emotions, and negative emotions. Our happiness rankings are based on life evaluations, as the more stable measure of the quality of people's lives."

The Gallup World Poll remained the principal source of data in this report. Typically, around 1,000 responses are gathered annually for each country. The United States dropped to its lowest-ever position at 24.

"There are many ways in which we care and share with each other. Perhaps the most universal

example is sharing meals. People who eat frequently with others are a lot happier and this effect holds even taking into account household size. "The increasing number of people who eat alone is one reason for declining wellbeing in the United States," the report said.

Apart from the rankings, other findings of the report this year include how during 2024, the COVID-era surge in benevolent acts fell significantly but remained more than 10 per cent higher than 2017–19 levels almost everywhere and how in 2024, helping strangers remains significantly higher than in 2017–19 in all global regions, by a global average of 18 per cent.

The report's global happiness ranking is based on a single question from the Gallup World Poll: "Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?" (PTI)

The strike killed at least 16 people, mostly women and children, according to the nearby European Hospital

Israeli strikes across Gaza hit multiple homes, killing 58 Palestinians, medics say

DEIR-AL-BALAH (GAZA STRIP), March 20: Israeli strikes killed at least 58 Palestinians across the Gaza Strip overnight and into Thursday, according to three hospitals.

The strikes hit multiple homes in the middle of the night, killing men, women and children as they slept.

Israel resumed heavy strikes across Gaza on Tuesday, shattering a ceasefire that had halted the war and facilitated the release of more than two dozen hostages. Israel blamed the renewed fighting on Hamas because the militant group rejected a new proposal that departed from their signed agreement. More than 400 Palestinians were killed on Tuesday alone, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. There have been no reports of Hamas firing rockets or carrying out other attacks. One of the strikes early Thursday hit the Abu Daqa family's home in Abasan al-Kabira, a village just outside of Khan Younis near the border with Israel. It was inside an area the Israeli military ordered evacuated earlier this week, encompassing most of eastern Gaza.

The strike killed at least 16 people, mostly women and children,



according to the nearby European Hospital, which received the dead. Those killed included a father and his seven children, as well as the parents and brother of a month-old baby who survived along with her grandparents.

"Another tough night," said Hani Awad, who was helping rescuers search for more survivors in the rubble. "The house collapsed over the people's heads."

Israeli ground troops advance
On Wednesday, Israeli ground troops advanced in Gaza for the first time since the ceasefire took

hold in January, seizing part of a corridor separating the northern third of the territory from the south.

Israel, which has also cut off the supply of food, fuel and humanitarian aid to Gaza's roughly 2 million Palestinians, has vowed to intensify its operations until Hamas releases the 59 hostages it holds — 35 of whom are believed dead — and gives up control of the territory. The Trump administration, which took credit for brokering the ceasefire, says it fully supports Israel.

Hamas has said it will only release the remaining hostages in exchange for a lasting ceasefire and a full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, as called for in the ceasefire agreement they reached in January after more than a year of mediation by the United States, Egypt and Qatar. Hamas, which does not accept Israel's existence, says it is willing to hand over power to the Western-backed Palestinian Authority or a committee of political independents but will not lay down its arms until Israel ends its decades-long occupation of lands the Palestinians want for a future state. There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military on the latest strikes. The military says it only targets militants and blames civilian deaths on Hamas because it is deeply embedded in residential areas.

The European Hospital in the southern city of Rafah said it received 36 bodies after the overnight strikes, mostly women and children. The Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis received seven and transferred four to European, which were included in its count. In northern Gaza, the Indonesian Hospital said it had received 19 bodies. (AP)

Trump to order plan to shut down US Education Department

WASHINGTON, March 20: President Donald Trump plans to sign an executive order Thursday calling for the shutdown of the US Education Department, according to a White House official, advancing a campaign promise to eliminate an agency that's been a longtime target of conservatives.

The official spoke on the condition of anonymity before an announcement.

Trump has derided the Department of Education as wasteful and polluted by liberal ideology. However, finalising its dismantling is likely impossible without an act of Congress, which created the department in 1979.

A White House fact sheet said the order would direct Secretary Linda McMahon "to take all necessary steps to facilitate the closure (of) the Department of Education and return education authority to the States, while continuing to ensure the effective and uninterrupted delivery of services, programs, and benefits on which Americans rely."

The Trump administration has already been gutting the agency. Its workforce is being slashed in half and there have been deep cuts to the Office for Civil Rights and the Institute of Education Sciences, which gathers data on the nation's academic progress.

Advocates for public schools said eliminating the department would leave children behind in an American education system that is fundamentally unequal.

"This isn't fixing education. It's making sure millions of children never get a fair shot. And we're not about to let that happen without a fight," the National Parents Union said in a statement.

The White House has not spelled out formally which department functions could be handed off to other departments, or eliminated altogether. At her confirmation hearing, McMahon said she would preserve core initiatives, including Title I money for low-income schools and Pell grants for low-income college students. The goal of the administration, she said, would be "a better functioning Department of Education."

The department sends billions of dollars a year to schools and oversees \$1.6 trillion in federal student loans. (AP)

Turkiye detains 37 over 'provocative' social media posts following arrest of Istanbul mayor

ISTANBUL, March 20: Turkish authorities detained 37 people for sharing "provocative" content on social media, the interior minister said Thursday, pressing ahead with a crackdown on dissenting voices that escalated with the arrest of the mayor of Istanbul, a potential challenger to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu was arrested after a dawn raid on his residence on Wednesday as part of investigations into alleged corruption and terror links. Several other prominent figures, including two district mayors, were also detained.

The detention of a popular opposition leader and key Erdogan rival deepened concerns over democracy and sparked protests in Istanbul and elsewhere, despite a four-day ban on demonstrations in the city and road closures. Several people were detained following a student protest in the capital, Ankara, that continued into the night. It also caused a shockwave in the financial market, triggering temporary halts in trading to prevent panic selling.

Critics see the crackdown as an effort by Erdogan to extend his more than two-decade rule following significant losses by the ruling party in local elections last year. Government officials reject claims that legal actions against opposition figures are politically motivated and insist that the courts operate independently.

Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya said authorities identified 261 social media accounts that shared provocative posts inciting public hatred or crime, including 62 that are run by people based abroad. At least 37 of the suspected owners were detained in a operation police and cyber crime teams, he wrote on the X social media platform. Efforts to detain other suspects were continuing, he said.

Imamoglu's arrest came just days before he was expected to be nominated as the opposition Republican People's Party's presidential candidate in a primary

scheduled for Sunday. The party's leader has said the primary will go ahead as planned.

Prosecutors accused Imamoglu of exploiting his position for financial gain, including the improper allocation of government contracts.

In a separate investigation, prosecutors also accuse Imamoglu of aiding the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, by allegedly forming an alliance with a Kurdish umbrella organisation for the Istanbul municipal elections. The PKK, behind a decades-long insurgency in Turkey, is designated a terrorist organization by Ankara, Washington and other allies.

It was not clear when authorities would begin questioning the mayor, who can be detained without charges for up to four days. Analysts say Imamoglu could be removed from office and replaced by a "trustee mayor" if he is formally charged with links to the PKK.

Before his detention, Imamoglu already faced multiple criminal cases that could result in prison sentences and a political ban. He is also appealing a 2022 conviction for insulting members of Turkey's Supreme Electoral Council, a case that could result in a political ban.

This week, a university nullified his diploma, citing alleged irregularities in his 1990 transfer from a private university in northern Cyprus to its business faculty, a decision Imamoglu said he would challenge. The decision effectively bars him from running for president, since the position requires candidates to be university graduates.

Imamoglu was elected mayor of Turkey's largest city in March 2019, a historic blow to Erdogan and the president's Justice and Development Party, which had controlled Istanbul for a quarter-century. Erdogan's party pushed to void the municipal election results in the city of 16 million, alleging irregularities. (AP)

Indian student detained in US for allegedly opposing America's foreign policy towards Israel

NEW YORK, March 20: An Indian national enrolled as a postdoctoral fellow in the US has been detained by immigration authorities, said a media report, less than a week after a Columbia student from India self-deported following allegations of activities supporting Hamas.

Badar Khan Suri's lawyer claimed that he is being punished "because of the Palestinian heritage of his wife — who is a US citizen — and because the government suspects that he and his wife oppose US foreign policy toward Israel."

He is a former student of Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

Suri is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at the Edmund A Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington DC.

A report in Politico said that Suri, who was studying and teaching on a student visa, has been "detained by federal immigration authorities amid the Trump administration's crackdown on student activists whom the government accuses of opposing American foreign policy."

The report said that "masked agents" arrested Suri from outside his home in Virginia Monday night. A petition filed by his lawyer Hassan Ahmad said that he was taken to a facility in Virginia and is "expected to be transferred soon to a detention centre in Texas."

The Politico report said that Suri's lawyer has filed a lawsuit for his immediate release.

"The agents identified themselves as being with the Department of Homeland Security and told him the government had revoked his visa," the lawsuit says, according to the Politico report.



The report added that according to Suri's petition, he was put in "deportation proceedings under the same rarely used provision of immigration law" that the government has invoked to try to deport Mahmoud Khalil, the Columbia University graduate and legal per-

manent resident arrested for his role in leading campus protests at Columbia against Israel.

The petition says the couple has "long been doxxed and smeared" on anonymously run, far-right websites due to their support for Palestinian rights. The petition



United States can recover" the plant. The call, which Zelenskyy described as "fruitful," came just weeks after a disastrous Oval Office meeting between the two leaders that led to Trump temporarily pausing intelligence sharing and military aid to Ukraine.

During the call, Zelenskyy requested additional Patriot defense missile systems. Rubio and Waltz said Trump "agreed to work with him to find what was available, particularly in Europe."

On Tuesday, Putin told Trump that he would agree not to target Ukraine's energy infrastructure but refused to back a full 30-day ceasefire that Trump proposed.

According to the Kremlin, Putin made clear to Trump that there must be a cessation of foreign military aid and intelligence sharing as part of any deal. But White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt on Wednesday underscored that U.S. "intelligence sharing in terms of defense for Ukraine" would continue. The Kremlin says Kyiv isn't upholding its end of the bargain.

Prior to his call with Trump, Zelenskyy said Putin's limited ceasefire pledge was "very much at odds with reality" after Russia launched an overnight barrage of drone strikes across Ukraine, including some that struck Ukrainian energy facilities. Russia responded by saying it had halted its targeting of Ukraine's energy facilities and accused Kyiv of attacking Russian equipment near one of its pipelines.

"Unfortunately, we see that for now there is no reciprocity on the part of the Kyiv regime," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

The White House described Tuesday's call between Trump and Putin as the first step in a "movement to peace." But there was no indication that Putin is ready to back away from his conditions for a prospective peace deal, which are fiercely opposed by Kyiv. Zelenskyy even while agreeing to work on the limited ceasefire said Putin is not seriously pursuing peace talks, and wants to prolong the war until he is in a stronger position.

Technical experts to gather soon in Saudi Arabia

The White House also confirmed that technical experts from the U.S., Ukraine and Russia would gather in Saudi Arabia in

the coming days to discuss implementing the partial ceasefire.

It was not immediately clear if the U.S. would meet together or separately with the Ukrainian and Russian officials. Waltz spoke with his Russian counterpart, Yuri Ushakov, on Wednesday to discuss the coming talks.

<h2>Ukraine and Russia trade accusations</h2>Shortly after the call between Trump and Putin on Tuesday, air raid sirens sounded in Kyiv, followed by explosions as residents took shelter.

Despite efforts to repel the attack, several strikes hit civilian infrastructure, including two hospitals, a railway and more than 20 houses, Zelenskyy said. Russian drones were reported over Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Sumy, Chernihiv, Poltava, Kharkiv, Kirovohrad, Dnipropetrovsk, and Cherkasy regions. The Russian Defense Ministry said its military had launched seven drones at power facilities related to the military-industrial complex in Ukraine's southern Mykolaiv region, but that it shot them down after receiving Putin's order to not hit energy infrastructure.

Moscow accused Ukraine of targeting its energy facility in the Krasnodar region bordering the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia annexed in 2014, several hours after the Putin and Trump talks. The ministry said three drones targeted oil transfer equipment that feeds the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, causing a fire and leading one oil tank to lose pressure.

"It is absolutely clear that we are talking about yet another provocation deliberately concocted by the Kyiv regime, aimed at derailing the peace initiatives of the U.S. president," the Russian Defense Ministry said.

Russia said its air defenses intercepted 57 Ukrainian drones over the Azov Sea and several Russian regions — the border provinces of Kursk and Bryansk and the nearby regions of Oryol and Tula.

Zelenskyy said that "words of a ceasefire" weren't enough.

"If the Russians don't hit our facilities, we definitely won't hit theirs," Zelenskyy said.

Meanwhile, the two combatants said Wednesday that they had each swapped 175 prisoners in one of the largest exchanges of the war. (AP)

adds that Suri's wife Mapheze Saleh has been alleged to have "ties with Hamas" and once worked for Al Jazeera.

The petition further notes that Suri has no criminal record and has not been charged with a crime. Ahmad said he had not been able to contact Suri as of Wednesday evening. "We're trying to speak with him. That hasn't happened yet," Ahmad said. "This is just another example of our government abducting people the same way they abducted Khalil."

According to his profile on the website of Georgetown University, Suri completed his PhD in Peace & Conflict Studies from Nelson Mandela Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi in 2020.

He wrote his thesis on "Transitional Democracy, Divided Societies and Prospects for Peace: A Study of State Building in

Afghanistan and Iraq" in which he underlined the complexities involved in introducing democracy in ethnically diverse societies; as well as challenges to project state building. He has travelled extensively in the conflict zones of India, Pakistan, Balochistan in Iran, Turkey, Kurdish Areas in Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and its southern region, Egypt and Palestine.

The Politico report quoted a statement from a Georgetown spokesperson as saying that Suri is an "Indian national who was duly granted a visa to enter the United States to continue his doctoral research on peacebuilding in Iraq and Afghanistan."

"We are not aware of him engaging in any illegal activity, and we have not received a reason for his detention. We support our community members' rights to free and open inquiry, deliberation and debate, even if the underlying ideas

Tripura indigenous student body calls indefinite strike from March 21 over Kok Borok script issue



HT Correspondent

AGARTALA, March 20: The Twipra Students Federation (TSF), an indigenous students' organization of Tripura affiliated with the North East Students Organisation (NESO), has announced an indefinite statewide strike starting March 21.

The protest will involve blocking all national highways to press their demand for the implementation of the Roman script for Kok Borok examinations. Additionally, they are seeking a rescheduled exam for board candidates who struggled to write their Kok Borok paper after the question paper was set in Bengali script.

Addressing the media, TSF General Secretary Hamalu Jamatia expressed frustration over the prolonged neglect of their demands.

"For years, we have been protesting, submitting mem-

oranda, and engaging with authorities over the script issue. Last year, we held a strike and met the Governor. We also submitted memoranda to the Tripura Board of Secondary Education (TBSE) and CBSE, urging them to ensure Kok Borok question papers are available in both scripts. Despite assurances, on March 17, during the board exam, the Kok Borok paper was set only in Bengali script," Jamatia stated.

He further claimed that several students, including those from private schools, were unable to read the question paper, leaving them unable to write their exam.

"This has caused panic among students. We have consulted students and their parents, and they are distressed. In response, TSF has decided to launch an indefinite strike on March 21, demanding the adoption of the Roman script for Kok Borok. The government and education boards must acknowledge the sentiments of the indigenous community and respect our language. We urge students and the public to support our movement," he added.

TSF has repeatedly called on the government to address their concerns, but their appeals have gone unanswered. Jamatia warned that unless the authorities engage with them directly and resolve the matter, the agitation will continue.

"The government must reschedule the exam and give Class 10 and 12 students another chance to write their Kok Borok paper. The Class 12 board exam for Kok Borok is scheduled for tomorrow, and we fear the question paper will once again be in Bengali script," he said.

Situation in Manipur's Churachandpur district still tense

Schools, shops remain shut



and imposition of curfew in the district the next day.

Meanwhile, several displaced people from the Kuki community in relief camps were moved to safer locations.

Churachandpur town is mainly home to Zomi people, with Hmar

and Kuki communities living in some areas.

Hours after a shutdown was imposed by a student body in Churachandpur district on Wednesday, a group of MLAs and tribal organisations separately appealed for peace.

In a joint statement, at least 12 Kuki-Zomi and Hmar organisations based in Churachandpur district have called for peace among communities and agreed to form a joint peace committee to monitor the situation and prevent misunderstandings in the future.

Six MLAs from Churachandpur and Pherzawl districts have also issued a joint appeal for peace and harmony, urging the administration to take necessary measures to restore law and order.

Notably, more than 250 people have been killed and thousands rendered homeless in Manipur in ethnic violence between Meiteis and Kuki-Zo groups since May 2023.

The Centre had imposed President's rule in the state on February 13 after N Biren Singh resigned as chief minister. The state assembly, which has tenure till 2027, has been put under suspended animation. (PTI)

Final political agreement shall be a negotiated political settlement: Muivah

DIMAPUR, March 20: On the occasion of the re-affirmation and declaration of the 'NSCN/IM' (NSCN-IM) Collective Leadership

i.e. the Chairman, the Vice-Chairman and the General Secretary, on Thursday, Th Muivah assured the Naga people that the "final political agreement shall be a negotiated political settlement that is according to the letter and spirit of the Amsterdam Joint communiqué of July 11, 2002 and the Framework agreement of August 3, 2015". At the same time, Muivah also said, "On behalf of Nagalim and the Naga people I also proclaim that we will not surrender our unique history and our sovereignty whether in the battlefield or in the negotiating table".

This "thanksgiving speech" of Th. Muivah, General Secretary of the NSCN-IM, on the occasion of re-affirmation and declaration of the 'NSCN/IM' (NSCN-IM) Collective Leadership, was made available to Newmai News Network this evening by the 'ministry of information and publicity' (MIP), NSCN-IM.

Th. Muivah began his speech by saying, "On this auspicious day, the twentieth of March, 2025 I am thankful to God Almighty and the members and the rank and file of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) for reaffirming the leadership of the Collective leadership, NSCN/IM". He also said, "I am thankful to God the Almighty for I humbly understand that according to the holy scriptures, 'exaltation comes neither from the east nor from the west nor from the south. But God

is the Judge: He puts down one, and exalts another' Psalm 75: 6-7 and it is He who changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings. Daniel 3: 21. I will praise and thank God forever for His faithfulness".

Muivah then said he knew that for every generation "God chooses a person within His will and purpose". For Nagalim, according to Muivah, God chose people like "Uncle Phizo" and Imkongmen at the right time. Under their leadership 'Nagalim belongs to the Nagas and the right of the Nagas to decide their own future is inalienable' has been the mission statement of Nagalim, he also said. "Today, together with my late friend Isak Chishi Swu and Khadao Yanthan, I am proud to be a part of my Naga people's history and I am committed to the freedom and sovereignty of Nagalim, come what may. The right to decide one's own freedom is the sovereign right of the Naga people given by the God Almighty. This sovereign birthright is non-negotiable".

Muivah then said Nagalim is also indebted to the countless freedom fighters and fearless generals like Thinsolie M. Keyho and committed soldiers like Captain. Phungtha who fired the first shot in Wung Tangkhul Region. President Scato Swu and Ato Kilonser Sukhai were also some of the tall leaders in the Nagalim national independence movement, he added. "Time and space restrain me to mention several others but it is a historical fact that no Naga tribe and family has failed to dedicate and sacrifice their sons and daughters for the

Nagalim national freedom struggle. The good Lord will remember, bless and reward them all," Muivah further added.

Muivah also said he was deeply indebted to the Naga people, including the Naga tribes and all the civil societies, wherever they are, and the international community who supports the Nagalim national independence and liberation movement. In the early years of the Nagalim national independence and liberation movement China was substantially responsible for the success of "our national struggle and today to every one who supports the Nagalim national independence and liberation movement I wish to reiterate that 'we will pay back what you have done for us but in terms of victory'" Muivah stated. On behalf of Nagalim and the Naga people "I also proclaim that we will not surrender our unique history and our sovereignty whether in the battlefield or in the negotiating table", he assured.

Muivah further expressed his gratitude to God "for using an obscure person like me and many others within His plan and purpose for the Naga nation". He added by saying, "Not that we are able but it is Christ in us who has sustained us and led us all these years. Who am I? Who are we? Therefore, I praise and thank the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel who is faithful and has not failed Nagalim and the Naga people".

Muivah then said that, in spite of the several disappointments in "our national struggle, our God Almighty has been faithful to Nagalim and the Naga people". He stated that, today,

in the ongoing political negotiation between the Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN), Nagalim unique history and sovereignty have been officially recognized and acknowledged in the Amsterdam Joint communiqué of July 11, 2002 and the Framework agreement of August 3, 2015. "Let me assure the Naga people that the final political agreement shall be a negotiated political settlement that is according to the letter and spirit of the Amsterdam Joint communiqué of July 11, 2002 and the Framework agreement of August 3, 2015. Therefore, the sovereign Nagalim national flag and the sovereign Nagalim national constitution shall be an integral part of the political agreement. Together with the sovereign Nagalim national flag and the sovereign Nagalim national constitution, the sovereign Nagalim territory is also non-negotiable," he asserted.

The NSCN-IM leader then said, "My Dear Naga people, God's sovereignty overrules all human thinking, plans and history. And I know that in the end we shall overcome God's perfect will and purpose. We hope in faith that His will shall be done for Nagalim. And it is for us to believe in the sovereign purpose and promise of God for Nagalim and the Naga people".

Muivah then said that the scripture also "assures us that: 'For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry' Habakkuk 2:3". (NNN)

ANSAM organises peace rally against scrapping of FMR

IMPHAL, March 20: Naga students in Manipur under the aegis of the All Naga Students' Association, Manipur (ANSAM) organised a "peace rally" at N Satang village in Tengnoupal district on Thursday against the "imposed border fencing and scrapping of the Free Movement Regime (FMR) along the Indo-Myanmar border", a press release by the ANSAM said.

The "People's Movement Against Scrapping of FMR and Imposed Border Fencing in Naga Homeland" saw the student bodies, comprising 19 Naga student bodies from across Manipur who are federating and subordinate bodies of the ANSAM, raised their voice in one calling for the reinstatement of FMR and stopping the construction of the border fencing, the press release of the ANSAM also said.

Shouting slogans such as 'Reinstate FMR', 'Respect Framework Agreement', 'Stop Imposed Border Fencing', the student bodies stated that they have "the right to move freely within our own land and that they do not need ID cards to do so", it added.

Giving the presidential speech, Th. Angtshang,

president, ANSAM, said that Nagas beyond borders are being separated by the "Indian government via an imaginary line". Today, the Naga leaders have gathered here at Satang village along with the neighbouring Naga villages for a peaceful demonstration to show our opposition to the Indian government, the scrapping of FMR and constructing of Indo-Myanmar border fencing, he also said.

The ANSAM leader also questioned if it was right for one to show ID or Aadhar cards to prove their identity to enter their own land. "Is it right for the Nagas to show their ID cards or Aadhar cards as proof of identity to enter their own land?" he further questioned.

He also said that the demonstration has been held as part of the people's movement against the scrapping of FMR and "imposed border fencing" as a strong message to the government of India to respect the framework agreement signed between them and

the Nagas, the press note also stated.

All the leaders from the 19 Naga student bodies echoed the president's statement and called for unity among the Nagas to oppose the scrapping of FMR and "imposed" border fencing tooth and nail. They said it was time for the Nagas to come together and take a stand against the action of the Indian government.

"These lands have been given to us Naga by God and our forefathers had fought and protected it. Now, it is time for us to fight and protect these lands as no one will come to help us, they said", the press statement also said.

The Naga student leaders also demanded that the government of India respects article 36 of UNDRIP which states that "indigenous peoples, in particular those divided by international borders, have the right to maintain and develop contacts, relations and cooperation, including activities for spiritual, cultural, political, economic and social purposes, with their own members as well as other peoples across borders". The article further states that "States, in consultation and cooperation with indigenous peoples, shall take effective measures to facilitate the exercise and ensure the implementation of this right", the press release also stated.

Sr. Andria Anal, speaker of the ANSAM also hailed the eastern Maring community and the villagers of Satang for their spirited efforts and fight against the construction of the border fencing. It is because of your spirit that the fight is continuing, that the victory will be won, he said.

The speaker also echoed that these lands belong to the Nagas and "we must stand and fight to protect it".

The demonstration began at the village and proceeded towards the area where the clearing had been done for the construction of the border fencing. While shouting slogans, they also held banners and placards that demonstrated their feelings towards border fencing and scrapping of the FMR, the press release of the ANSAM further added. (NNN)

Arunachal Dy CM inaugurates historic war memorial honouring Adi warriors

ITANAGAR, March 20: Arunachal Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein has inaugurated the 1894 Mirem Batum Lingkar War Memorial at Adi Pasi in Upper Siang district. The memorial commemorates the bravery of Adi warriors from Pasi Village, who defended their homeland against a British expedition during the third Anglo-Abor War of 1893-94.

Speaking at the event on Wednesday, Mein described the occasion as historic and emotional, honouring the unsung heroes who resisted colonial rule, an official communiqué informed here.

The deputy chief minister emphasised that the war memorial will serve as a lasting tribute to their sacrifices, embedding their contributions in the history of India's freedom movement. Mein commended the local community for constructing the memorial through their contributions, calling it an inspiration for other communities.

Highlighting the deep connection between state's people and their land, the deputy chief minister

stressed the importance of balancing development with environmental preservation.

"True progress is measured not just by infrastructure and industry, but by how well we protect our forests, rivers, and biodiversity," he said, emphasising sustainable development to ensure future generations inherit a thriving environment.

The deputy chief minister called on the people of the state to take pride in their cultural heritage, preserving traditional knowledge, languages and customs.

"Our festivals, rituals and traditions define us. Just as our ancestors defended their land with courage, we must safeguard our identity and resources with equal dedication," he remarked. Addressing concerns over development projects, Mein spoke about the significance of the proposed Upper Siang Multipurpose Project and the challenges posed by China's proposed 60,000 megawatt dam over the Yarlung Tsangpo River. (PTI)

ArSRLM successfully concludes two-day Job-Fair 2025 in Itanagar

HT Correspondent

ITANAGAR, March 20: The Arunachal State Rural Livelihoods Mission (ArSRLM) successfully concluded a two-day Job Fair 2025 at Hotel Obsidian, Itanagar on Thursday.

The event witnessed enthusiastic registrations from 250 trained candidates under the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY).

During the job fair, a total of 110 appointment letters were issued to successful candidates.

The initiative proved highly successful, generating significant interest from additional trained candidates who expressed their willingness to participate in upcoming placement drives.

Ruzing Bellai (COO Skills, ArSRLM) has encouraged all trained DDU-GKY candidates to actively apply for placement opportunities,

as the mission continues to collaborate with numerous employers across various sectors.

It is noteworthy that the overall coordination was efficiently managed by Nabam Ompi, State Mission Manager (MPB), ArSRLM, along with the ArSRLM placement team and TSA team.

This job fair effectively met the objectives of both employers and candidates.

Employers were able to identify skilled resources aligned with their workforce requirements, while candidates secured promising job opportunities matching their skills and preferences.

ArSRLM remains committed to empowering youths through skill development and sustainable livelihood opportunities, ensuring enhanced employability and improved socio-economic conditions in Arunachal Pradesh.

Nagaland's GSDP grew to ₹35,933.96 cr in 2022-23

HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, March 20: Nagaland's gross state domestic product (GSDP) at current prices grew from ₹26,527.42 crore in 2018-19 to ₹35,933.96 crore in 2022-23, the state accountant general's office said in a release on Thursday, quoting the CAG of India report on the state finances of Nagaland for the year 2022-23.

As per the report, the budget outlay of the state grew at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6.26% from ₹20,469.97 crore in 2018-19 to ₹26,092.48 crore in 2022-23. It said during 2022-23, the GSDP of Nagaland increased by 12.60% from ₹31,912.54 crore in 2021-22 to ₹35,933.96 crore in 2022-23. The state had a revenue surplus of ₹688.90 crore which was 1.92% of GSDP. The fiscal deficit was ₹1,562.63 crore during 2022-23, which was 4.35% of GSDP, and primary surplus was ₹569.40 crore, which was 1.58% of GSDP.

During the period, the state's revenue receipts increased by ₹648.12 crore (4.82%) from the previous year's ₹13,451.14 crore.

The state's own tax revenue increased by ₹160.80 crore (12.36%), non-tax revenue increased by ₹174.82 crore (57.59%), grants-in-aid from the Centre decreased by ₹212.43 crore (3.05%) and state's share of union taxes and duties increased by ₹524.92 crore (10.77%) respectively over the previous year.

The state's revenue surplus decreased from ₹1,634.06 crore in 2021-22 to ₹688.90 crore in 2022-23, while revenue receipts increased by ₹2,661.85 crore (23.27%) from ₹11,437.41 crore in 2018-19 to ₹14,099.26 crore in 2022-23 at a CAGR of 5.37%.



Habitat Centre in New Delhi.

Skoch Awards, known for recognizing excellence in governance, environmental sustainability, and technological innovation, assessed nearly 400 projects from 27 states before selecting Tripura's Biotechnology Department for the honor.

Currently, 17 College Biotech Clubs operate in various degree colleges across

Tripura, with plans to establish four more in the upcoming financial year. In a significant expansion, the initiative will now extend beyond general degree colleges to include medical, veterinary, agricultural, fisheries, and other specialised institutions. The financial support for each biotech club has also been increased to Rs 2.5 lakh, aiming to boost research and innovation in these fields.

Tripura's Bio-Village: 24 new projects underway, Skoch Award for Biotech Department

HT Correspondent

AGARTALA, March 20: Tripura is making significant strides in sustainable rural development with the expansion of its Bio-Village 2.0 initiative. The state government has already begun work on 24 new Bio-Village 2.0 projects and is set to implement six more in the 2025-26 financial year, strengthening its commitment to eco-friendly and self-sustaining rural communities.

During a press conference, Tripura Science and Technology Minister Animesh Debbarma highlighted the growing interest in the initiative, revealing that a private organization from Pune, Maharashtra, has shown keen interest in executing the project and has already surveyed existing Bio-Village sites.

"Our goal is to establish 5 to 10 Bio-Villages in every block of the state. This initiative is crucial for promoting sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, and eco-friendly livelihoods," he stated.

Meanwhile, the state's Biotechnology Department has gained national recognition, securing the prestigious Skoch Award-2025 for its innovative College Biotech Club project. The award ceremony is scheduled for March 29 at the

Naga Students' Federation observes 39th Martyrs' Day

KOHIMA, March 20: The Naga Students' Federation (NSF) on Thursday commemorated the 39th anniversary of the deaths of two students during a protest against the extension of the Disturbed Areas Act (DAA) and the introduction of IPS cadre into Nagaland. During a commemoration event, NSF president Medovi Rhi paid tribute to the two students, calling their sacrifice a loss as well as a turning point in the Naga struggle for rights. He urged the current generation to honour their legacy through continued efforts for unity, justice and peace. On March 20, 1986, a peaceful demonstration called by the NSF in the state capital turned deadly when police fired indiscriminately, resulting in the deaths of Kekuajalie Sachtu of Kohima Village and Vikhozo Yhoshti of Kigwema Village, both from Kohima district. As part of the observance, the NSF and Angami Students' Union flagged off a 178-day NSF Martyrs' Memorial Trophy Tour across Naga-inhabited areas in Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Myanmar.

Arunachal minister welcomes 73rd Miss Universe

HT Correspondent

ITANAGAR, March 20: Arunachal Sports & Youth Affairs, Social Justice Minister Kento Jini welcomed and felicitated 73rd Miss Universe Victoria Kjaer Theilvig on her arrival in India at New Delhi. Minister Jini was accompanied by Lekang Mia Likha Soni and State Director for Miss Universe Arunachal Takam Anju.

Miss Universe Victoria is a Danish Model and beauty pageant title holder who was crowned Miss Universe 2024.

Speaking to the media, Minister Jini acknowledged the role of beauty pageants especially pertaining to Arunachal Pradesh and other Northeastern states which have vast potential in context to beautiful landscape, tourism potential and fashion among tribal women folk in North East India.

Minister Jini also hinted on Tawang to be the next destination to host the second edition of Miss Universe Arunachal Pradesh.

Thupten Lhamu from Tawang was crowned Miss Universe Arunachal Pradesh 2024 in the first edition led by Takam Anju State Director for Miss Universe.

Miss Universe Victoria speaking to media expressed her gratefulness to the fans in India for the warm welcome and felicitations by dignitaries in Delhi. She thanked Miss Universe India organisation for arranging her visit in India to encourage women folk in the country to participate in international beauty pageants.

ELECTRICAL WORKS
Tender Notice No.: RNY-EL-T-18-2024-25. Dated : 18-03-2025. E-tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following work. Tender No.: RNY-EL-T-18-2024-25. Name of Work: Electrical works for installation of split type AC for all remaining offices including ministerial staffs with separate wiring for all ACs including existing AC's for complete DRM building and capacity enhancement of existing sub-station at CRM building including concealment of existing wiring excluding inside rooms/branch offices in all DRM building. Advertised Value: ₹1,19,84,807.88; Earnest Money: ₹2,10,000.00. E-tender will be closed at 13:00 hrs. on 11-04-2025. The complete information with the tender document of above e-tender is available at www.irps.gov.in. Sr. DEE/Rangliya

AFFIDAVIT

My actual name is Rohit Bora and the actual name of my wife is Sashi Prava Deka Bora. But my name as well as the name of my wife are recorded as Ruhit Bora and Sashi Prava Bora Deka in the birth certificate of my daughter Aditi Nandini Bora. Hence, through a court affidavit, I have declared that Ruhit Bora and Rohit Bora is the name of one and single person. Similarly, Sashi Prava Deka Bora and Sashi Prava Bora Deka is the name of one and single person.

Rohit Bora,
S/O Atul Chandra Bora
Vill: Chechamukh
P.O: Palasoni
Dist. Nagaon (Assam)

Seems 'two anti-farmer parties' have joined hands against farmers: Kharge

NEW DELHI, March 20: Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Thursday attacked the BJP and AAP over eviction of farmers from Shambhu and Khanauri protest sites, saying it appears that "two anti-farmer parties" have now joined hands against the country's food providers.

Kharge alleged that both the BJP and the AAP were "intoxicated" with the arrogance of power and are guilty for their actions against farmers.

"It appears that two anti-farmer parties have now joined hands against the country's food providers! First the Punjab government called the farmers for talks and then forcibly removed them from the protest site," the Congress president said in a post in Hindi on X.

The forcible detention of senior farmer leaders Jagjit Singh Dallewal and Shri Sarwan Singh Pandher by the Punjab Police cannot be condemned enough, he said.

"The country has not forgotten - Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh, when



farmers were fired upon during BJP rule. How the son of a minister of the Modi government crushed the farmers in Lakhimpur Kheri. How a farmer from Rajasthan hanged himself in Kejriwal's rally in 2015 and he remained a silent spectator," Kharge said.

"Whether it is Modi Ji's promise of MSP to farmers or Aam Aadmi Party's swift implementation of the three black laws in Delhi, both these parties have betrayed our

farmers of the country," he alleged.

The 62 crore farmers of the country will never forgive these "anti-farmer parties", Kharge said.

Following the eviction of protesting farmers from the Shambhu border, Haryana security personnel on Thursday morning started removing cemented barricades, which were erected to prevent the Punjab farmers from heading to Delhi.

At the Shambhu border, JCB and other machines have been de-

ployed to remove the concrete blocks to clear the Shambhu-Ambala road, which remained closed for over a year.

Haryana security officials had fortified the state border with Punjab with cement blocks, iron nails and barbed wire to scuttle any attempt by the farmers from Punjab to move towards the capital as part of their 'Delhi Chalo' programme.

Punjab Police also resumed its operation to dismantle the remaining temporary structures on the Punjab side of the Shambhu border on Thursday to clear the road.

Meanwhile, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha announced to hold dharnas outside the offices of deputy commissioners in protest against the Punjab Police crackdown.

Both the bodies, which spearheaded the farmers' stir at Shambhu and Khanauri border points, slammed the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in Punjab for evicting the protesters and detaining farmer leaders on Wednesday. (PTI)

Govt says 12.55 lakh refunds made for faulty toll collection on NH in 2024



NEW DELHI, March 20: The government on Thursday said 12.55 lakh refunds were made in 2024 for faulty toll collections on National Highways.

In a written reply to the Lok Sabha, Union Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari said penalties of more than Rs 2 crore have been levied so far on the user fee collecting agencies for incorrect user fee deduction cases.

"National Payment Corporation of India (NPCI), which provides the Central Clearing House (CCH) services of National Electronic Toll Collection (NETC) Programme, has reported 12.55 lakh transactions where refunds were made due to incorrect user fee (toll) deductions in the year 2024 out of a total of 410 crore FASTag transactions in the same year which represents 0.03 per cent of all FASTag transactions," Gadkari said.

He further said if toll agencies are found responsible for incorrect user fee deduction, as per Clause-15 of Contract Agreement, a 30-50x penalty on excess user fee will be imposed on the fee collecting agency.

Vehicles are sometimes charged toll fees even without travelling on a National Highway/Expressway when user fee-collecting agencies enter incorrect Vehicle Registration Number (VRN) in the system while manually creating VRN-based transactions. The double charging sometimes happens due to multiple readings by FASTag readers.

Responding to a separate ques-

tion, Gadkari said state-owned NHAI is also considering the installation of audit cameras at high-value toll plazas to independently monitor the accurate count and classify vehicles using Artificial Intelligence (AI).

User fee rates are determined as per NH-Fee Rules, 2008, which are displayed at each fee plaza.

The minister said an Advanced Traffic Management System (ATMS) has been installed across 325 National Highway projects with a total length of around 20,000 km.

He said the government envisions development of Wayside Amenities (WSAs) at approximate intervals of 40-60 km along NHs.

The "...Ministry of Road Transport & Highways has planned to award around 700+ WSAs," Gadkari said, adding that a total of 393 WSAs have been awarded so far, out of which 94 are operational. Replying to another question, Gadkari said the National Highways Authority of India (NHA) has raised Rs 6,661 crore through TOT (Toll, Operate, and Transfer) Mode for the financial year 2024-25 till date.

In addition, the bids for the projects under TOT-15 (land parcels) are under evaluation, he added.

As of March 17, 2025, a total of 26,367 public EV charging stations are deployed across the country, the minister said, adding that 10,019 public EV charging stations have been deployed during fiscal year 2024-25 across the country. (PTI)

UP govt recovered 64,000 acres from land mafia since 2017: CM

BAHRAICH, March 20: Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Thursday highlighted that his government has resolved 33 lakh pending revenue-related cases in Uttar Pradesh since 2017, bringing relief to thousands of citizens.

Speaking at the inauguration of the new tehsil building in Mihipurva (Motipur), he emphasized the importance of an efficient administrative system in ensuring justice and transparency in land-related matters. Adityanath noted that before 2017, Uttar Pradesh had over 33 lakh unresolved revenue disputes, including cases of land mutation, demarcation, and usage rights.

"Such a backlog led to frequent disputes, violence, and illegal land grabbing, making life difficult for common citizens," he said.

"Previous governments allowed corruption and dishonesty to thrive, leaving the poor without hope for justice. However, we set strict timelines for resolving cases at all administrative levels, from sub-divisional magistrates to tehsildars and revenue officers, ensuring accountability."

The chief minister further stated that the government's crackdown on land mafia through the Anti-Land Mafia Task Force has resulted in the recovery of 64,000 acres of illegally occupied land.

He also pointed out that with improved law and order, Uttar Pradesh has become a major destination for investment.

Adityanath stressed that village-level gover-

nance has been strengthened through the establishment of Gram Sachivalayas (village secretariats) with internet connectivity.

"Now, villagers can obtain essential documents like income and residence certificates without having to visit distant offices. This initiative will ensure timely services at the grassroots level," he said.

He also announced the digitization of land records to eliminate manipulation in land demarcation.

"Now, land measurement will be conducted digitally, ensuring transparency and fairness. No poor person will lose even an inch of their land due to fraudulent practices," he assured.

During the event, Adityanath also inaugurated residential quarters for tehsil officials and employees, emphasising that government officers should reside near their workplaces to facilitate efficient service delivery.

"The goal is to ensure that officials are accessible to the people at all times," he said.

Reflecting on his previous visit to Bahraich after the monsoon, the chief minister recalled how a pack of wolves had created panic in the region.

"Although wild animals generally do not harm people under normal circumstances, the situation had worsened, leading to tragic incidents, including the loss of children's lives. The state government had already categorized human-wildlife

conflict as a disaster, and we promptly provided ₹ 5 lakh in compensation to affected families from the disaster relief fund," he said.

Adityanath highlighted Bahraich's historical and geographical significance, calling it a land rich in resources, located between two rivers, with fertile soil and vast forests.

"Bahraich has immense tourism potential. A medical college has already been established here, and the victory memorial of Maharaja Suheldev is also ready for inauguration," he announced.

He stressed that while Bahraich once suffered from administrative disorder, the current government has ensured that law and order prevail.

"No one can create chaos in the district anymore," he asserted.

Linking heritage with development, the chief minister announced that Kartaniya Ghat in Bahraich would be developed as an eco-tourism hub, enhancing the region's tourism potential.

He also confirmed the approval of a bypass road for Bahraich, aimed at improving infrastructure.

Adityanath also highlighted Bahraich's economic progress, noting that before 2017, the district's GDP stood at ₹ 6,924 crore, whereas by 2023-24, it had surged to ₹ 25,000 crore.

"This is the new Uttar Pradesh, where development and cultural pride go hand in hand," he added. (PTI)

Another Nitish-Rabri spat inside Bihar Council

PATNA, March 20: Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Thursday belittled his predecessor Rabri Devi, asserting that she was appointed to the seat of power by her husband Lalu Prasad upon "suspension".

Kumar referred to the RJD supremo's resignation in 1997 after a CBI charge sheet in the fodder scam, while intervening during a debate inside the state legislative council.

A heated exchange was witnessed on the floor of the Legislative Council where members of the ruling NDA and the RJD-led Mahagathbandhan traded charges on the worsening law and order situation.

Kumar said, "We look into any incident of crime that takes place and bring the guilty to justice. But these people, who did nothing worthwhile in power and were unable to handle Hindu-Muslim tensions, are after publicity".

Rabri Devi, a homemaker turned politician who is now the leader of the opposition in the Council, rose to register her protest, asserting that she could speak of achievements of her

eight-year-long tenure as the chief minister.

Kumar ticked her off with the Magahi phrase "chhoda na tohra kuchh maloom hai (you stay out of this. You know nothing about these matters)".

The JD(U) supremo, thereafter, resumed in Hindi and said, "Her husband made her the chief minister when he was placed under suspension (sic). It all remained in the family. They did nothing while in power. Their propensity for mischief led me to snap ties".

Kumar had tied up with the RJD in 2022, when he had dumped the BJP, vowing to dislodge the saffron party from power at the Centre. However, just a few months ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, he returned to the NDA, stripping the RJD of power and Rabri Devi's sons Tejashwi Yadav and Tej Pratap Yadav of their Cabinet berths.

Notably, it was the third occasion during the ongoing session for Kumar to engage in a verbal duel with Rabri Devi. Although Kumar sat down after a few minutes of fulminations, the

House witnessed more mudslinging, with minister Ashok Choudhary alleging that when the RJD ruled Bihar, its senior leaders were involved in kidnapping for ransom.

This infuriated Rabri Devi, who got up to remind Choudhary that as a former Congress leader, he had served in her cabinet and accused him and his wife of involvement in "firauti" (the business of demanding ransom). Choudhary, who had crossed over to JD(U) in 2017, broke into sobs, challenging Rabri Devi to come up with proof, even as RJD members slammed him for engaging in "flattery" (chamchagiri) of his current political bosses".

Chairman Awadhesh Narain Singh rose and admonished the opposition for not allowing the House to run and told them that they could leave if they could not behave.

He also remarked with disgust: "It is my fourth tenure as the Chairman and never have I been accused of partisanship. But today a derogatory term like chamchagiri has been hurled at me". (PTI)

Congress veteran Shivraj Patil meets PM Modi



LATUR, March 20: Senior Congress leader Shivraj Patil met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Delhi recently along with family members, his daughter-in-law Archana Patil said on Thursday.

She did not specify the date of the meeting, which took place at the PM's official residence, but sources said it happened a week ago.

Archana Patil, who was the BJP candidate in last year's Maharashtra assembly election from Latur, lost to Amit Deshmukh, the son of former chief minister and Latur strongman late Vilasrao Deshmukh.

Shivraj Patil, 89, was Union Home Minister from 2004 to 2008 and the 10th Speaker of the Lok Sabha from 1991 to 1996. He was Governor of Punjab and also served as Administrator of the Union Territory of Chandigarh from 2010 to 2015.

"We had an unforgettable meeting with PM Modi. It was energizing for all of us," Archana Patil posted on X.

She said Modi recalled the proposal made by Shivraj Patil when he was the Speaker of the Lok Sabha for the construction of a new Parliament House.

During the meeting, issues like proposed delimitation of Lok Sabha constituencies, women's participation in politics, solar energy mission, One Nation, One Election and women's empowerment were discussed, she said.

She said that during the hour-long meeting, Modi also spoke about his visit to the Puttaparthi Ashram of Sathya Sai Baba. "We invited the Prime Minister to visit Latur," she said. (PTI)

Gates Foundation to partner with Maharashtra govt

MUMBAI, March 20: The Gates Foundation will partner with the Maharashtra government to make the state malaria-free, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis said on Thursday. The organisation, a private philanthropic body founded by Bill Gates, co-founder of Microsoft, and Melinda French Gates, is focused on improving global health, reducing poverty, and expanding access to education.

Fadnis met Bill Gates at the Sahyadri guest house in south Mumbai and the two discussed the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the field of health, agriculture and infrastructure facilities, the CM's Office said in a statement.

Gates is currently on an India visit. He met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other central ministers in New Delhi earlier this week.

"We had a very good discussion on varied subjects, including Maharashtra's initiatives and schemes for youth, farmers, the poor, and women, such as Lakshmi Didi and Ladki Bahin Yojana, which has contributed immensely to the economic upliftment," Fadnis wrote on X. (PTI)

Indo-German partnership in science, education stronger than ever: Ackermann

NEW DELHI, March 20: Indo-German partnership in science and education is "stronger than ever" and it is one of the building blocks of the bilateral ties, Ambassador of Germany to India Philipp Ackermann has said.

Heads of leading German universities and representatives of academic institutions are visiting Hyderabad and New Delhi this month to enhance institutional partnerships and explore new academic collaborations between the two countries, according to an official statement issued on Thursday.

These institutions will be engaged in high level visits to Indian universities and research institutions, and jubilee celebrations of the Regional Office of DAAD in India.

DAAD - German Academic Exchange Service -- is marking its centenary this year.

Indo-German Forum: Research, Innovation and Transfer and DAAD jubilee celebrations in New Delhi are slated to be held in the presence of the German envoy, DAAD Regional Office here said in

a statement.

"The Indo-German partnership in science and education is stronger than ever. It is one of the building blocks of our bilateral ties. We have almost 50,000 Indian students in Germany, the largest group of foreign students from any country. Indian scientists are contributing to our research landscape, with their talents, their ambitions, and their discoveries. It is pleasure to see this exchange grow so dynamically, from year to year."

Ackermann was quoted as saying in the statement. This month, representatives of over 80 German institutions of higher education and research are visiting India, it said.

The first in this exceptional lineup is the higher education policy information visit in Hyderabad and New Delhi from March 16-22, the statement said.

"The visit brings together 20 heads of leading German universities and representatives of academic institutions in Hyderabad and New Delhi to enhance institutional partnerships and explore new academic



collaborations between Germany and India," it said. Another highlight was the inaugural ceremony of an Indo-German collaboration project at the PSG German School of Technology. These visits aim to deepen bilateral relations, focusing on shared educational goals and opportunities for research and innovation in higher education, the statement said.

Parallely, representatives of German Universities of Applied Sciences gathered in Coimbatore for

the inauguration of the German School of Technology at PSG College of Technology, a new academic venture financially supported by DAAD.

"This initiative marks a significant milestone in enhancing India-Germany academic ties, particularly in the technological and engineering sectors, and will serve as a beacon of innovation and collaboration for future generations of students," it added.

The Indo-German Forum: Re-

search, Innovation and Transfer will serve as the pivotal gathering, where 250 representatives from German and Indian higher education and research institutions will convene, the DAAD Regional Office said.

Organised by the DWIH, New Delhi and DAAD Regional Office, this forum will reinforce the Indo-German ties, fostering academic and research cooperation and exploring new opportunities in education and research, it said.

The DAAD's jubilee will also be celebrated to mark 65 years of DAAD presence in India and a century of DAAD's commitment to building bridges through education and research.

"As we mark the centennial of DAAD and the 65 years of DAAD presence in India, we are building upon a robust partnership forged over many decades. The participation of over 80 German higher education institutions in India this March shows a growing interest in deepening our academic relations. These events demonstrate our com-

mitment to continue to enhance the academic and research exchange including partnerships in higher education, research and innovation between India and Germany," Katja Lasch, Director, DAAD Regional Office, New Delhi, was quoted as saying in the statement.

As part of its engagement, APAIE Conference 2025 is taking place from March 25 to 27 in New Delhi, and the DAAD will be present at the German pavilion with a large delegation from over 70 universities, it said.

This delegation will also visit various universities in and around Delhi.

"These events will serve as a catalyst for deepening academic ties, fostering global learning environments and contributing to scientific and academic development. The significant participation from German universities reflects the keen interest in expanding collaboration, reflecting Germany's commitment to strengthening educational and research partnerships with India," the statement said. (PTI)

Chief of US Indo-Pacific command holds talks with India's top civil, military brass

NEW DELHI, March 20: Ways to further advance the India-US military ties, including a likely renewal of a 10-year defence framework, figured prominently in talks Admiral Samuel J Paparo, the commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, held with India's top civil and military brass this week.

Paparo met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan, according to an American readout.

The top American commander visited India from March 16 to 19 to advance the US-India comprehensive global strategic partnership and attend the Raisina Dialogue, India's flagship conference on geopolitics.

Paparo's trip advanced the US-India initiative, COMPACT (Catalysing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce and Technology) for the 21st Century, the readout said.

In February, US President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Modi launched the COMPACT that seeks to drive transformative change across multiple pillars of cooperation, including defence, trade and investment, energy, technology and innovation, and people-to-people ties.



It is learnt that top defence and security officials of the Quad nations -- India, the US, Australia and Japan -- held extensive talks on the sidelines of the Raisina Dialogue.

"The work throughout the Raisina Dialogue enhances the mutual understanding and alignment of goals as the US and India seek to renew a 10-year framework for the US-India Major Defence Partnership that will propel cooperation through the next decade," the US readout said.

"The US-India Major Defence Partnership has become a cornerstone of global peace," it added.

In 2016, the United States designated India as a "Major Defence

Partner". Commensurate with this designation, India was accorded the "Strategic Trade Authorisation tier 1" that allowed the country to receive licence-free access to a wide range of military and dual-use technologies regulated by the US Department of Commerce.

The major defence partnership is up for renewal next year.

In New Delhi, Paparo also met with Chief of Staff of the Japan Joint Staff General Yoshihide Yoshida, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines General Romeo Brawner, Australian Chief of Joint Operations Vice Admiral Justin Jones, French Deputy Director General for International Relations and Strategy

Lieutenant General Eric Peltier and the United Kingdom's National Security Advisor Jonathan Powell.

At the Raisina Dialogue, Paparo spoke during a panel discussion on "Deepwater Perils: Securing Trade Through Red Zones", alongside top military officials from India, Australia, Japan and the Philippines.

They highlighted maritime threats, risks for global security and trade, the importance of working with allies and partners to ensure freedom of navigation, and integration of artificial intelligence and unmanned systems into military preparedness.

Paparo also participated in a US-India Strategic Partnership Forum event where discussions focused on the future of the strategic and security partnership between the two nations, including integration of artificial intelligence and defence cooperation.

During his trip, Paparo also visited Purana Qila.

Built in the 16th century, Purana Qila is one of Delhi's oldest monuments, linking both the ancient and medieval periods of India's history.

The US Indo-Pacific Command is the unified combatant command of the US military responsible for the Indo-Pacific region. (PTI)

TASMAC issue: HC directs ED not to proceed further

CHENNAI, March 20: In a temporary relief to TASMAC, the Madras High Court on Thursday directed the Enforcement Directorate (ED) not to proceed further pursuant to its searches at the state-run liquor retailer's headquarters in the city recently.

While giving an oral direction to ED in this connection, the HC also directed the central agency to produce copies of FIR and Enforcement Case Information Report (ECIR) along with any other materials which it relied upon against the Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation.

After conducting searches at TASMAC earlier this month, ED had recently claimed irregularities to the tune of about Rs 1000 crore.

A division bench comprising Justices M S Ramesh and N Senthilkumar posted to March 25, further hearing of the petitions filed by TASMAC and the Tamil Nadu government against the searches conducted by ED.

In its petition, TASMAC sought a direction to the ED not to harass its employees under the guise of investigation. It also sought a declaration that the ED's action of investigating the offence within the territorial limits of the State was violative of federalism. When the case came up for hearing, Advocate General P S Raman, appearing for the state government submitted the ED can conduct searches with the consent of the State. They cannot do it without getting consent from the state government.

When the bench orally expressed its dissatisfaction over the prayer, the AG sought time to file an application to amend the prayer.

Senior counsel Vikram Choudhry, appearing for TASMAC submitted the raids by the central agency ought to be transparent. They cannot enter into any premises, conduct search and seize digital devices. This was a total invasion of privacy, he added.

Referring to section 17 (1) of Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), he said search and seizure was to be conducted only when there was reason to believe money laundering offence was committed. Law requires reason to be recorded in writing and it should be communicated to the officers, he added. (PTI)

Pak, China borders CCS clears ₹ 7,000 cr deal for procurement of ATAGS



NEW DELHI, March 20: The Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved a mega deal to procure advanced towed artillery gun system (ATAGS) for the Indian Army at a cost of Rs 7,000 crore, marking a major step in indigenous manufacturing of such howitzers.

The ATAGS is the first indigenously designed, developed, and manufactured 155 mm artillery gun system and its procurement is set to enhance the operational capabilities of the Indian Army.

The gun system features a long 52-calibre barrel, allowing for extended strike range of up to 45 km.

The CCS cleared the proposal to procure the ATAGS on Wednesday, top sources said.

The defence acquisition council had accorded the initial approval to the procurement around two years ago. Under the deal, a total of 307 guns will be procured along with 327 gun-towing vehicles.

The deployment of the gun system along India's western (Pakistan) and northern (China) borders will provide the armed forces with a significant strategic edge, ensuring enhanced operational readiness and firepower, the sources said.

With its larger calibre, the gun system ensures higher lethality, delivering sizeable amount of explosive while enabling automated deployment and target engagement.

This approval underscores India's growing prowess in indigenous defence manufacturing and technological advancements, they

said.

A testament to the 'Make in India' initiative, ATAGS has been developed through collaboration between the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Indian private industry partners.

Over 65 per cent of its components are sourced domestically, including key subsystems such as the barrel, muzzle brake, breech mechanism, firing and recoil system, and ammunition handling mechanism, the sources said.

The induction of ATAGS is expected to play a crucial role in modernisation of the Indian Army's artillery by replacing outdated 105 mm and 130 mm guns.

The production of ATAGS will create a robust supply chain of spares and seamless life cycle maintenance, the sources said.

The domestically developed system ensures long-term product support, strengthening India's self-sufficiency in defence technology, they said.

One of the key advantages of ATAGS is its minimal reliance on foreign components, they added.

Critical subsystems on board the ATAGS such as the navigation system, muzzle velocity radar, and sensors are designed and sourced indigenously, reducing India's dependence on foreign technology and imports, the sources said.

The indigenous production of the gun system is expected to bolster India's position in the global defence export market, paving the way for future indigenous defence exports, they said. (PTI)

Govt says 12.55 lakh refunds made for faulty toll collection on NH in 2024

NEW DELHI, March 20: The government on Thursday said 12.55 lakh refunds were made in 2024 for faulty toll collections on National Highways.

In a written reply to the Lok Sabha, Union Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari said penalties of more than ₹ 2 crore have been levied so far on the user fee collecting agencies for incorrect user fee deduction cases. "National Payment Corporation of India (NPCI), which provides the Central Clearing House (CCH) services of National Electronic Toll Collection (NETC) Programme, has reported 12.55 lakh transactions where refunds were made due to incorrect user fee (toll) deductions in the year 2024 out of a total of 410 crore FASTag transactions in the same year which represents 0.03 per cent of all FASTag transactions," Gadkari said. He further said if toll agencies are found responsible for incorrect user fee deduction, as per Clause-15 of Contract Agreement, a 30-50x penalty on excess user fee will be imposed on the fee collecting agency. Vehicles are sometimes charged toll fees even without travelling on a National Highway/Expressway when user fee-collecting agencies enter incorrect Vehicle Registration Number (VRN) in the system while manually creating VRN-based transactions. The double charging sometimes happens due to multiple readings by FASTag readers. Responding to a separate question, Gadkari said state-owned NHAI is also considering the installation of audit cameras at high-value toll plazas to independently monitor the accurate count and classify vehicles using Artificial Intelligence (AI).

User fee rates are determined as per NH-Fee Rules, 2008, which are displayed at each fee plaza. The minister said an Advanced Traffic Management System (ATMS) has been installed across 325 National Highway projects with a total length of around 20,000 km.

He said the government envisions development of Wayside Amenities (WSAs) at approximate intervals of 40-60 km along NHs. The "...Ministry of Road Transport & Highways has planned to award around 700+ WSAs," Gadkari said, adding that a total of 393 WSAs have been awarded so far, out of which 94 are operational.

Replying to another question, Gadkari said the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) has raised ₹ 6,661 crore through TOT (Toll, Operate, and Transfer) Mode for the financial year 2024-25 till date.

In addition, the bids for the projects under TOT-15 (land parcels) are under evaluation, he added.

As of March 17, 2025, a total of 26,367 public EV charging stations are deployed across the country, the minister said, adding that 10,019 public EV charging stations have been deployed during fiscal year 2024-25 across the country. (PTI)

Acid attack survivors can move state legal services authority for compensation: SC

NEW DELHI, March 20: The Supreme Court on Thursday said acid attack survivors could approach their respective state legal services authority in case there was a delay in receiving compensation.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna and Justice Sanjay Kumar took note of the submissions of the counsel of Mumbai-based NGO Acid Survivors Sahas Foundation that such survivors were finding it tough to receive compensation from authorities in Maharashtra.

"Just get in touch with the state legal services authorities (SLSAs)," the CJ said.

The bench added, "The victims will be at liberty to approach the state legal services authorities in case of delay in payment of compensation."

The SLSAs were further directed to maintain a chart, including details of the time the survivors or their family members sought the compensation and the day they received it. The bench said the delay in the disbursement of the compensation to acid attack survivors will be brought to its notice.

Observing the Centre and 11 states hadn't filed their replies to the petition, the court granted them four weeks and posted the hearing in the May 5 week.

The hearing related to a 2023 PIL of the NGO seeking the strict implementation of the court's directions issued in the famous Laxmi v. Union of India in 2014.

The order, among other things, said acid attack survivors should receive free treatment in both public and private hospitals and compensated with a minimum of Rs 3 lakh by the state government concerned as aftercare and rehabilitation cost.

The plea, filed through advocate Shashank Tripathi, underscored the continuing struggles of acid attack survivors despite the court's efforts to regulate acid sales, punish perpetrators, and provide medical, psychological, and social rehabilitation.

Seeking directions for enhancement of the compensation amount, the plea also sought that the acid attack survivors should be heard by a fast-track court. (PTI)

Delhi to get six new air quality monitoring stations ahead of winter pollution spike: Sirsa

NEW DELHI, March 20: As part of a broader strategy to tackle the expected winter pollution peak, the Delhi government will install six new air quality monitoring stations across the national capital over the next three months, Environment Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa said.

In an interview with PTI on Wednesday, Sirsa said, "This winter, we will ensure that Delhi sees more clean air days, and we are already working to minimize pollution. We will not wait until winter to take action. Our work to purify Delhi has already started, and as part of this, we will also add new ambient air quality monitoring stations."

"Delhi currently has 40 air quality monitoring stations, and six more will be added in the next three months, bringing the total to 46," Sirsa said. The minister did not specify the locations where the new stations will be installed but mentioned that the work is likely to be completed within three months. He added that these stations will help gather more detailed data on air quality.

Delhi's existing 40 air quality monitoring stations include locations such as Alipur, Anand Vihar, Aya Nagar, Bawana, Burari, Chandni Chowk, DTU, Dwarka, IGI Airport, IHBAS, ITO, Jahangirpuri, Lodhi Road, Najafgarh, Narela, and 25 other sites. These stations are spread across the city to calculate the capital's average Air Quality Index (AQI).

However, they are not evenly distributed, leaving many densely populated areas unmonitored. Several stations are located in less inhabited areas, such as IHBAS, Shri Aurobindo Marg, Karni Singh Shooting Range within the Asola Bhatti Forest Range, and Siri Fort near the Hauz Khas forest.

During the peak pollution season from November to January -- when the capital often turns into a gas chamber -- AQI levels frequently hit hazardous levels.

Last year, AQI crossed the 450 mark, breaching the maximum limit on the scale. On December 19, Delhi's air quality fell into the "severe plus" category, with a 24-hour average AQI of 451 recorded at 4 pm, according to CPCB data.

As per the CPCB, an AQI between 0 and 50 is considered "good," 51-100 "satisfactory," 101-200 "moderate," 201-300 "poor," 301-400 "very poor," 401-450 "severe," and above 450 "severe plus." The minister also outlined plans to enhance cleanliness and beautification in the capital, stating that several initiatives are already underway.

Addressing the challenges, he acknowledged three major hurdles in the Yamuna cleanup but assured that efforts are in progress to ensure only treated water flows into the river. The government, in collaboration with the Public Works Department (PWD), Water Minister Parvesh Verma, and the Haryana government, is working towards achieving this goal.

He emphasised that one significant challenge is dealing with the stagnant, oxygen-depleted water at the riverbed, which causes the sediment to become "dead."

To combat this, plans are being developed to restore oxygen levels and improve water quality. The minister also mentioned plans to create green belts along the Yamuna, transforming the area into a tourist destination.

Highlighting the importance of increasing Delhi's green cover, he announced that seven lakh plantation drives will be carried out in coordination with the forest department. (PTI)

Efforts on to settle issue of recovery of royalty, tax dues with certain states: Centre to SC

NEW DELHI, March 20: The Centre on Thursday told the Supreme Court that it was making efforts to resolve the issue of recovery of royalty and tax dues on mineral rights and mineral-bearing lands between it and several mineral-rich states.

The top court meanwhile deferred to April 24 the hearing on subsequent pleas of several mineral-rich states like Jharkhand seeking to recover royalty and tax dues on mineral rights and mineral-bearing lands worth thousands of crore of rupees from the Centre and the mining firms.

A special three-judge bench comprising Justices Abhay S Oka and MM Sundresh and Ujjal Bhuyan said it will decide on the sequence in which the pleas of several mineral-rich states would be heard. Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Centre, said efforts were on to find a settlement of the issue and the pleas may be listed in the first week of May.

Senior advocate Rakesh Dwivedi, appearing for Jharkhand, said a settlement can be arrived at



any stage and the hearing should not be delayed.

On July 25, 2024, a nine-judge bench headed by the then Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud (since retired), in a majority 8:1 verdict, had ruled that the legislative power to tax mineral rights vests in states and not Parliament.

In a subsequent order on August 14, the top court clarified that the judgement will not have prospective effect and permitted mineral-rich states recover from the Centre

and mining firms the royalty and tax dues on mineral rights and mineral-bearing lands worth thousands of crore of rupees since April 1, 2005 over a period of 12 years.

Later, a special bench headed by Justice Oka was set up to resolve the subsequent dispute between several states and the Centre.

Dwivedi had urged the bench to allocate states' pleas relating to recovery of dues and the legal impediments in realising them to a bench. Post the July 25, 2024

judgement that held that the states have the power to levy tax and royalty, Dwivedi had referred to legal impediments coming in the way of Jharkhand in levy tax on minerals and mineral-bearing lands.

He had said one issue still remained and that was Jharkhand's law to collect royalty on minerals and mineral-bearing land, which was set aside earlier, needed to be upheld now.

"Unless the Act is declared valid, we cannot collect taxes on minerals and mineral-bearing land. Please list it expeditiously before the appropriate bench," Dwivedi had said. He had referred to a decision of the Ranchi bench of the Patna High Court that had struck down Section 89 of the Mineral Area Development Authority Act of 1992 vide its judgment dated March 22, 1993.

Section 89 of the Mineral Area Development Authority Act empowered the state government of then undivided Bihar to levy tax on not only mineral-bearing land but also land used for commercial or industrial purposes. (PTI)

Capable women shouldn't ask for interim alimony: Delhi HC

NEW DELHI, March 20: The Delhi High Court has observed law doesn't promote idling and said qualified women with an earning capacity shouldn't claim interim maintenance from their husbands.

Justice Chandra Dhari Singh on March 19 said Section 125 (order for maintenance of wives, children and parents) of the CrPC carried the legislative intent to maintain equality among the spouses and provide protection to the wives, children and parents, but didn't promote "idleness".

The order, therefore, dismissed a woman's plea against a trial court order denying her interim maintenance from her estranged husband.

"A well-educated wife, with experience in a suitable gainful job, ought not to remain idle solely to gain maintenance from her husband. Therefore, interim maintenance is being discouraged in the present case as this court can see potential in the petitioner to earn and make good of her education," Justice Singh said.

The court, however, encouraged her to actively look for a job to become self-sufficient saying she had a wide exposure and was aware of the worldly affairs unlike other uneducated women, who were completely dependent on their spouses for basic sustenance.

The couple married in December 2019 and left for Singapore. The woman alleged owing to the cruelties meted out to her by the estranged husband and his family members, she returned to India in February 2021. She claimed to have sold her jewellery to return to India and due to the financial hardships, she started residing with her maternal uncle.

In June 2021, she filed a petition seeking maintenance from her husband. The plea was rejected by the trial court following which she moved the high court.

The woman claimed the trial court erred in rejecting her plea for maintenance as she was unemployed and had no independent source of income whereas her husband earned handsomely and led an affluent lifestyle.

The man opposed the plea saying it was an abuse of law as the woman was highly educated and capable of earning. He said the woman couldn't claim maintenance merely on the grounds of unemployment. (PTI)



Narendra Modi, nobody else: Jaya Bachchan on politician more popular than film stars

NEW DELHI, March 20: Can politicians ever match the popularity of actors? No, says actor and Samajwadi Party MP Jaya Bachchan. Not unless you are Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Addressing the 'She' conclave organised by India TV, the veteran star said many Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders win elections only because of Modi's name.

"I feel this very strongly. I belong to the opposition but the fact is that the ruling party leaders, whether they were film actors or non-film actors, emerged victorious only because of Narendra Modi's name, not for their own political capability," she added.

Bachchan also spoke at length about film stars entering politics.

"Maybe after being an actor and achieving success, and getting people

to be fond of you, you want to do something for them. If a political leader stands today, I am sorry, please forgive me for saying this, but apko dekhne chaar aadmi bhi nahi aenge (Not even four people will come to see you) until and unless you are a known person," she said.

However, audiences will come to see even a small bit player if they are actors. "Whether they give vote to you or not, that's up to them, but they will definitely come to see you. People in politics want the crowd to come and listen to them, but first, they have to come to see you, and only then can they listen to you," she added.

Asked if politicians can ever match the popularity of actors, Bachchan responded, "No. Until and unless you are Narendra Modi, nobody else." At the session, Bachchan was joined by

I feel this very strongly. I belong to the opposition but the fact is that the ruling party leaders, whether they were film actors or non-film actors, emerged victorious only because of Narendra Modi's name, not for their own political capability

Priyanka Chaturvedi, the Shiv Sena (UBT) leader.

When Chaturvedi said that celebrities should take a stand on important matters, Bachchan said, "It is easier said than done." "If the Enforcement Directorate (ED) arrives at your door. Even if you pay all the taxes dedicatedly and follow all the rules, but even if ED stands on your head, what creative work will you do? You will think before speaking 24 hours a day. I don't have such fears, I speak without any fear and that's how I am."

"But I know that it is a constant problem that celebrities are facing today. And it is not just only about film actors, all celebrities, whether they are in sports or in any other medium," she said. Bachchan also said that people find it very surprising that she regularly attends parliament sessions.

"They have told me, 'Arey, aap aaj bhi aayi hain? Aap roz aati hain?' ('Oh, you came today as well? Do you come every day?'). I find that very disturbing...I have not come here because I'm a film actor. I have come here be-

cause I want to do something socially. Also, if I'm able to do something good, then it will inspire other girls to do it as well," she added. When the host asked about films being made on government campaigns like Akshay Kumar-Bhumi Pednekar starrer "Toilet: Ek Prem Katha" in 2017, Bachchan said she would not watch a film with such a title.

"Abhi aap naam bhi dekhniye toh main aisi picturein khud kabhi na dekhne jau. Toilet: Ek Prem Katha, yeh koi naam hai? Yeh koi title hai? Aap logo me se kine log iss tarah ki title wali film dekhne jayenge? ('Just look at the name, I'd never go to watch such movies myself. 'Toilet: Ek Prem Katha', is that even a name? Is that even a title?') she said.

The actor then addressed the audience, asking them if they'd watch a film with such a title.

After a some people raised their hands, Bachchan said, "Among so many people, hardly four people want to watch the film; it's very sad. Yeh toh flop hai (It is a flop)." (PTI)

WARNER BROS IN TALKS FOR SALE OF JOHN CENA'S SHELVED MOVIE 'COYOTE VS ACME'

LOS ANGELES, March 20: Hollywood studio Warner Bros is in negotiations for the sale of its scrapped movie, "Coyote vs Acme", starring John Cena.

According to entertainment news outlet Deadline, Ketchup Entertainment is expected to land distribution rights for "Coyote vs Acme". Though the sale has not closed, the price tag will reportedly be in the USD 50 million range.

The decision comes more than a year after the studio surprised the film's team by pulling the plug on the project which had finished filming. The aim behind the move was to claim a tax-write off. Ketchup had last year rescued the same studio's "The Day the Earth Blew Up: A Looney Tunes Movie", which finally released in the US theatres earlier this month. Made on a budget of USD 70 million, "Coyote vs. Acme", a live action-animation hybrid starring John Cena and Lana Condor, was directed by Dave Green and produced by DC Studios co-chief James Gunn.

It was the third movie that Warner Bros has axed for tax incentives. The studio had earlier discarded its DC adventure movie "Batgirl", followed by "Scoob! Holiday Haunt".

At the time, Green had expressed his disappointment about Warner's decision to axe "Coyote vs Acme", a movie that took three years to make. "Along the ride, we were embraced by test audiences who rewarded us with fantastic scores. I am beyond proud of the final product," the filmmaker wrote on social media. (PTI)



Cate Blanchett wants award shows off TV: 'Have a great party where people can just let go'

LOS ANGELES, March 20: Two-time Oscar winner Cate Blanchett says she prefers Hollywood awards shows to remain off television.

During her appearance on the podcast Las Culturistas with Matt Rogers and Bowen Yang, Blanchett said award ceremonies, including the Academy Awards, should "go back to the day when it wasn't televised".

The conversation began when Blanchett, 55, highlighted how rare it is to find spaces that offer privacy these days. "There are so few spaces that you can go now, where you are private. That's

what I loved about the late '80s, going to all of the dance parties in Sydney for Mardi Gras. People were just there.

"They were so present, you know, they were just together, collectively, having a great time. It was non-aggressive. No one was being recorded. No one cared what anyone did," said the actor, who won Oscars for her performances in The Aviator and Blue Jasmine.

Rogers and Yang noted that privacy is harder in the TikTok era, with lip readers analysing celebrity moments at televised events.

"But now it feels like that

chasm between that kind of event, that ideal, is widening from the thing that's very common now at, like, an awards show where you've got lip readers, you're being photographed," Yang said.

To this, a confused Blanchett asked him, "Lip readers?"

The duo explained the trend, which sees TikTokers trying to guess what celebrities are saying to each other at awards shows.

"I know it's blasphemy, go back to the day when it wasn't televised. Bring that back and just have a great party where people can just let go," the actor said.

"I mean, the fashion is great, and all of that stuff. We'll find out in the end who won or who didn't win. But it would be so nice if that happened behind closed doors. Absolutely a very different evening," she added.

Blanchett currently stars in Black Bag, a spy thriller from acclaimed filmmaker Steven Soderbergh. The film also features Michael Fassbender, Tom Burke, Naomie Harris, Rege-Jean Page, and Pierce Brosnan. (PTI)



Ishaan Khattar, Nitin Bal, Nought One to headline BP Fashion Tour in Guwahati

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 20: Guwahati is set to witness an extraordinary fusion of fashion and music as the Blenders Pride Fashion Tour unveils its 'The One and Only' world in the city. This highly anticipated event promises a spectacular showcase of Athleisure x Glam, where bold, unconventional designs will take center stage, redefining contemporary fashion. With an impressive lineup of avant-garde designers—Nitin Bal Chauhan, Nought One by Abhishek Patni, and Pawan Sachdeva—attendees can expect a breathtaking display of creativity and innovation.

Adding to the allure, Bollywood actor Ishaan Khattar will walk the runway as the

showstopper, setting the stage on fire with his presence.

The night will also feature electrifying performances by rap sensations KRSNA and KARMA, amplifying the energy of the event. As fashion and music collide, the evening will be elevated with a world-class cocktail experience, making it an unforgettable celebration of luxury, spontaneity, and artistic expression - all set against a stunning resort backdrop.

The Blenders Pride Fashion Tour continues to push the boundaries of fashion and lifestyle, offering an immersive experience where style meets opulence in a laid-back, luxe spirit.

YOU HAVE STARLETS IN MEN TOO, I AM A SHINING EXAMPLE: RAHUL BOSE

NEW DELHI, March 20: Actor Rahul Bose on Wednesday said he was paid a fraction of what Kareena Kapoor earned for the 2003 film "Chameli" as she was the bigger star and could draw people to theatres.

Speaking at the 'Mardon Wali Baat', a national conference on men, masculinities and gender based violence, Bose humorously called himself a starlet.

"Men have also been starlets, and I am a shining example of that... I was the starlet in 'Chameli'. Kareena was the star; she gets more people into the theatre even today than I would. Simple as that. I was paid a fraction of what Kareena was paid. It's completely logical... The people who actually govern who will come in, you better take the ratio. It has happened. It has happened to me

throughout my career. I am never the guy who brings people into the theatre.

"I have produced two films. I would not pay me more than what I got. So I don't buy this (gender pay disparity); the film industry is super equitable in that way. You get the money, you get paid, you don't get the money, you get paid less..." said Bose, claiming that the number of women working in the film industry is more than any other industry.

Discussing the portrayal of masculinity and violence against women in Indian cinema, the 57-year-old actor acknowledged that cinema, being highly visible, often becomes the favourite "whipping boy".

Bose said it simply reflects the realities of society, for better or worse, and likened cinema to a

"faithful younger sibling" of society.

"As soon as the elder brother does something, we latch on to a trend. That's it. We don't create trends, we latch onto the trend.. We are looking to see where is the 'hawa', what is catching, and then we pick it up, sometimes you do it well, sometimes you don't," he explained.

Bose, star of acclaimed films like "Mr and Mrs Iyer", "The Japanese Wife", "Jhankaar Beats", said it all starts with society.

On the depiction of violence against women, he noted that since the '50s, the portrayal has been inconsistent, neither improving nor declining significantly.

"I think the depiction has been rocky, patchy, up and down," he added.

Bose has directed only two films

"Everybody Says I'm Fine!" and "Poorna: Courage has no Limit", but he would pick it over anything else he has done in filmmaking because "it's the most challenging and amazing thing to do in the world".

"You have to be part architect, part interior designer, part psychologist, part painter, part musician, part lyricist, part actor. It's asking you to do everything at that moment in five minutes," he noted.

Bose, like many, considers Satyajit Ray to be an inspiration.

"Ray was so great because he was a polymath, he could do 19 things. He did the camera work, he composed the music, he was working with Ravi Shankar, he is doing calligraphy. Ray Roman is a font, I mean, the guy was a dude, it's just amazing," he added. (PTI)



It's election day for the IOC, choosing a new leader in a hard-to-call, 7-candidate contest

COSTA (GREECE), March 20: A new president of the IOC will be elected Thursday, just the 10th leader in its 131-year history after one of the most open Olympic elections in decades.

The winner will get an eight-year mandate with key issues including steering the Olympics on a smooth path in politics and sports toward the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles and picking a host for the 2036 edition. That could go to India or the Middle East for the first time.

Voting by about 100 eligible International Olympic Committee members is scheduled to start at 4 p.m. local time (1400 GMT). The result should be known within 30

minutes.

Seven IOC members are on the ballot chasing an absolute majority of votes for victory at a resort hotel near the site of Ancient Olympia.

The strongest candidates in a hard-to-call contest seem to be IOC vice president Juan Antonio Samaranch and a pair of two-time Olympic gold medalists, Sebastian Coe and Kirsty Coventry.

Also in the race are Prince Feisal al Hussein of Jordan and three presidents of sports governing bodies: Johan Eliasch of skiing, cycling's David Lappartient and Morinari Watanabe of gymnastics.

Coventry, the 41-year-old sports minister of Zimbabwe, would be the first woman and the first

African to lead the IOC.

"Let's create some change, let's make sure that happens," she said Wednesday.

Coventry has long been seen as the preferred successor of outgoing president Thomas Bach, who formally leaves office on Olympic Day, June 23, having reached the maximum 12 years in office.

An emotional Bach was feted Wednesday on the first day of the IOC's annual meeting, getting lavish praise and the title of honorary president for life.

He will hand over a financially secure IOC, on track to earn more than \$8 billion in revenue through the 2028 LA Olympics, and with a slate of future hosts through 2034: in Italy, the United States, France,



Australia and the U.S. again, when the Winter Games return to Salt Lake City.

A signature Bach policy also has been gender parity, with equal quotas of men and women athletes at the 2024 Paris Olympics and giving a better balance of female members of the IOC and the executive board he chairs, which now has seven women among its 15 members, including Coventry.

The next president can oversee the IOC making a statement choice for its host for the 2036 Summer Games.

"There is one and one only," Samaranch said Wednesday when asked of challenges ahead. "We must concentrate (on) successful and relevant Olympic Games. The

rest comes with success in the games."

If the Spanish financier wins, he will follow his father, also Juan Antonio Samaranch, who was the IOC's seventh president from 1980 to 2001.

The voters in the exclusive invited club of IOC members include royal family members, former lawmakers and diplomats, business leaders, sports officials and Olympic athletes. Even an Oscar-winning actress, Michelle Yeoh. They will vote Thursday without hearing further presentations from the candidates in an election that should swing on a discreet network of friendships and alliances largely forged out of sight. (AP)

Right balance between use of data and gut-feel improves decision-making: RCB's Mo Bobat



BENGALURU, March 20: Relying on data science has become an integral part of IPL teams' planning and when blended with perfect balance of "gut-feel", it certainly improves decision making, feels RCB's Director of Cricket Mo Bobat.

Bobat, a former Performance Director at the England and

Wales Cricket, spoke about how one should be interpreting data and what should be used from the heap that is available currently in the cricketing ecosystem. "The balance between using the data or trusting your gut feeling at the moment, if you can strike it right, it will always help decision-making im-

prove," said Bobat, who has also worked as a consultant with RCB in the past.

Data is a "core currency" for leaders and how can make sense of the information available is key to success.

"My fascination is decision making and having superior data, better data than anyone

else, gives you a potential advantage for that. How you make sense of that information and data, and if you can apply it to the moment. "Executing your decision and how you follow through is very important. As a leader in sport, that's your core currency," Bobat said at the recently held RCB Innovation

Lab Indian Sports Summit Powered by Leaders. "Every time you go into a game, you're going to interrogate the information and the data in front of you, try and make sense of how you can expose the opposition's weaknesses and make the most of your strengths and then review yourself against that after the match. And then, you go again," he said. Bobat noted that one of the key concerns was how to interpret and use the data, especially when there is an abundance of it available at your fingertips.

"Not all decisions are the same. Take an auction for example, you might have six weeks to plan for an auction and a couple of weeks that would be intense. You can spend a lot of time going through quite a structured process.

"However, in-game decision-making is a lot harder, you don't have that same luxury of time. So, you have to think about how you want to make your decisions and what you're guiding principles are." There is no black or white case in decision making, said. "It's dangerous to assess your decision-making based on what's right or wrong or what works or doesn't work. It's not as binary as that." (PTI)

Himachal Pradesh High Court directs BFI to allow Thakur's nomination in its polls



SHIMLA, March 20: Former sports minister Anurag Thakur's bid to contest the Boxing Federation of India's presidential election was brought back on track after the Himachal Pradesh High Court stayed his disqualification from the Electoral College and directed the BFI to extend the date of nominations to enable his candidature.

Thakur, who is also a Lok Sabha MP from Hamirpur, was declared ineligible after a March 7 order by BFI President Ajay Singh which stated that only elected members were qualified to be a part of the electoral process.

Thakur was seeking to represent Himachal Pradesh Boxing Association in the EC and was declared not to be an elected member.

However, Justice Ajay Mohan Goel on Thursday ruled that the Electoral College approved by Returning Officer R K Gauba on March 13, which left out Thakur, "is prima facie bad and not sustainable in law."

"In this backdrop, balance of convenience is also in favour of the petitioners and if interim, as prayed for by the petitioners is not granted, then irreparable loss shall be caused to them," the order stated.

"...as an ad-interim measure, this Court stays the operation of Notice, dated 07.03.2025, as well as the rejection of nomination of one of the two nominated members...namely, Mr. Anurag Singh Thakur..."

The BFI chief said he would decide his next course of action after going through the 34-page order.

"We are still studying the order and based on legal advice, we will appeal the decision," Singh told PTI.

The court directed BFI to treat the names of Thakur and another HPBA official Rajesh Bhandari as "valid nomination for the Electoral College."

It stated that the BFI President issued the March 7 order "without any authority and without any power".

The court order paved the way for Thakur to contest the polls scheduled on March 28 as it directed the BFI to "extend the last date of submission of nomination" to enable him to file his papers.

Thakur has also been permitted to represent Himachal Pradesh in the Annual General Meeting and "fully participate therein."

HPBA has maintained that Thakur is an elected member of the state unit since 2008 and has served "in different capacities, including chairman".

The BFI elections have been significantly delayed and mired in endless controversy.

The body was originally supposed to hold elections before February 2 but swung into action only after the IOA appointed an ad-hoc committee. BFI challenged the move in Delhi High Court, which put a stay on the ad-hoc panel.

The Himachal Pradesh High Court's order comes a day after the Delhi High Court too stayed the March 7 order but allowed the election process to proceed as planned with the final outcome dependent on its decision on the plea filed by the Delhi Amateur Boxing Association. (PTI)

Mercedes' Russell believes McLaren capable of dominating F1 but doubts it

SHANGHAI, March 20: Mercedes driver George Russell believes McLaren could win every race this year and suggested its pace advantage is "bigger than Red Bull has ever had."

McLaren's Lando Norris qualified on pole position last weekend in Australia, and the next best car was a whopping 0.385 seconds behind. The best gap Red Bull ever achieved in Australia was 0.236 seconds in 2023, when it secured a F1-record 21 wins from 22 races.

But while Russell says McLaren has time in hand, he doesn't think its drivers

Norris and Oscar Piastri can match Max Verstappen's meteoromic performance.

"Their car is definitely capable of winning every race," Russell said on Thursday ahead of the Chinese Grand Prix weekend. "Their car

should win every race, but I don't think they will win every race this year. So, let's see, I think the gap they have on everybody this year is bigger than Red Bull has ever had."

Russell completed the podium in Melbourne but finished more than eight seconds behind the lead pair, winner Norris and runner-up Verstappen. He says closing the gap to McLaren's MCL39 is not possible.

"If you're talking about trying

to find that amount of lap time and downforce, that isn't going to happen in a season, and it's never happened in a season," he said.

"They're clearly doing something better than the rest, they're clearly substantially quicker than everybody when the tyres are getting hot. We saw that in the Bahrain test, we saw in sector three in qualifying, (when) they were four-tenths faster than everybody else."

McLaren, though, wasn't so convinced. Piastri was puzzled by Russell's comments, with the Australian stating, "If he wants to write off this season after the first

weekend then I'll let him do that."

Piastri added Melbourne's Albert Park circuit exaggerated the team's performance.

"George has come up with some funny things in the last couple of weeks, so we'll see, but it's just one race."

"It has been a track that's been competitive for us the last couple of years, even when our car wasn't even more dominant than a Red Bull. We'll go to different tracks where we will struggle more. That's for sure."

The first sprint weekend begins at Shanghai International Circuit on Friday with a single practice session at 11:30 a.m. local time (0330 GMT), followed by sprint qualifying at 3:30 p.m. (AP)

Mandaviya lauds para-athletes' belief, declares Khelo India Para Games open

NEW DELHI, March 20: Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya on Thursday inaugurated the second edition of the Khelo India Para Games here and lauded the country's para-athletes for showing steely resolve despite the many challenges they face.

Over 1300 athletes will compete for the top honours in the Games that will conclude on March 27.

Participants include several high-profile para-athletes like Paris Paralympics gold-medalist archer Harvinder Singh, club thrower Dharambir, and Khel Ratna-winning high jumper Praveen Kumar.

"Khelo India slowly and steadily established its importance. Today when I am here witnessing these athletes, I see

the fire in their eyes, I see the belief. It is indeed in the right direction," Mandaviya said during the opening ceremony of the Games here.

"It has made the nation believe, it has made the PM believe that these games, the platform has enabled us to showcase our talent and we will not disappoint anyone," he added.

Mandaviya cited India's Paris Paralympics performance to highlight the progress made in para-sports. India won 29 medals in the French capital last year, including seven gold, nine silver and 13 bronze medals.

"The biggest example of it is the Paris Paralympics performance of these athletes. These athletes may have seen something taken away from them but

they have never let it stop them," Mandaviya said referring to the often tragic circumstances that have resulted in disability for the athletes.

"I want to wish everyone good luck, do well. I now declare the Khelo India Para Games 2025 open," the minister added.

The event started with Paris bronze-medallist sprinter Simran Sharma, who is partially blind, Khel Ratna awardee Praveen Kumar, Paris gold-winning shuttler Nitesh Kumar, and two-time Paralympics medal-winning runner Preethi Pal handing over the Games torch to the sports minister.

Also present was Union Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment Virendra Kumar. (PTI)

LA Olympics head says 2028 games will be a catalyst for rebuild

COSTA (GREECE), March 20: After deadly fires devastated much of Los Angeles, organizers of the 2028 Olympics told the IOC on Thursday how the city will rebuild with help from the Games.

Count on Kendrick Lamar, too, to be part of "the greatest show on earth" in three years.

"The rebirth, the rebuild, maybe reimagining LA 2.0 — and the Olympics as a catalyst for all those things — we think is really part of our ethos," organizing committee chairman Casey Wasserman told The Associated Press.

"You can't have a natural disaster at that scale in a city as big and as important as Los Angeles and not have it be part of your core philosophy going forward," he said in an interview before giving sports leaders an update at the International Olympic Committee's annual meeting.

Lamar would be a globally popular part of the opening ceremony on July 14, 2028, after his stunning halftime show at the Super Bowl last month.

"Fortunately in my day job I represent Kendrick Lamar," said Wasserman, who heads an international talent and promotions agency. "He is truly an LA icon so I think it would be a pretty fair bet that Kendrick will be involved in the Olympics in Los Angeles in some way."

The wildfires in January have reset the daily life and global perception of the city.

"Everyone loves a comeback story," Wasserman told IOC members on Thursday.

Olympic venues and operational plans escaped serious damage.



"From purely an Olympics perspective we got very lucky. That's not the most important thing," Wasserman told the AP on Wednesday. "What's important is helping people get back into their homes, get back settled, get back with their lives."

Olympic athlete visasAnother expected challenge for LA organizers is ensuring athletes, officials and fans from every Olympic team feel welcome and safe going to the United States in what shapes to be a turbulent future for the world.

"Irrespective of politics today,

America will be open and accepting to all 209 countries for the Olympics," Wasserman said.

"LA is the most diverse city in the history of humanity and we will welcome the people from around the world and give them all a great time."

Updating IOC and sports leaders on Thursday, Wasserman said his team made "significant strides" with President Donald Trump's administration, which has security obligations for the Olympics and subsequent Paralympics. "I have met with President Trump and his team both prior to his inauguration and again last month," the LA Olympics leader said. "We have a regular cadence across all federal agencies with leadership from the president to make sure that these Games deliver for all our constituents." (AP)

RR regular skipper Samson's role limited by injury Riyan Parag to lead RR in first 3 IPL games

NEW DELHI, March 20: Rising star Riyan Parag will lead Rajasthan Royals in their first three IPL games as regular captain Sanju Samson has been told to avoid wicket-keeping duties by the BCCI due to a finger surgery, which means that he will only be available as a batter in these games.

Samson's finger was fractured after a Jofra Archer delivery hit him during the T20 International against England in Mumbai, following which he had to undergo a minor surgery last month.

While he has been cleared to bat, it is understood that medical and sports science teams at the BCCI's Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru have told to give his fingers some more rest before he starts keeping wickets.

Therefore, the 23-year-old Parag will have the distinction of being one of the youngest captains in IPL. Virat Kohli holds the top position in that list having captained Royal Challengers Bengaluru as a 22-year-old. "Rajasthan Royals have announced that Riyan Parag will lead the team for the first three matches of IPL 2025," RR said in a statement.

"The young all-rounder will take charge in the opening fixture against Sunrisers Hyderabad on March 23, followed by home encounters against defending champions Kolkata Knight Riders on March 26 and five-time champions Chennai Super Kings on March 30," the franchise stated.

Samson, an integral part of the Royals set-up, will remain a key contributor with the bat till he gets



cleared for wicket-keeping and fielding. He will return as captain once fully fit and could be used as an impact substitute in these three games.

The Royals management explained why the Assam cricketer got the nod ahead of another exciting and internationally more experienced Yashasvi Jaiswal.

"Rajasthan Royals' decision to hand Riyan the captaincy underscores the franchise's confidence in his leadership, a skill he has demonstrated through his tenure as Assam's domestic captain. "Having been a crucial member of the Royals setup over the years, his understanding of the team's dynamic makes him well-equipped to step into this role for the initial phase of the tournament," the team said. (PTI)

BCCI lifts saliva ban in IPL after getting captains' thumbs up

NEW DELHI, March 20: The BCCI on Thursday lifted the ban on use of saliva on the ball in the upcoming Indian Premier League after a majority of captains agreed to its proposal, making it the first major cricket competition to do away with the restriction that was a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The decision was taken at the captains' meeting in Mumbai ahead of the league starting on Saturday.

"The saliva ban has been lifted. Majority of captains were in favour of the move. Some had reservations about the re-introduction, some sat on the fence but majority of them supported the move," a top BCCI official told PTI.

The International Cricket Council (ICC) had banned the age-old practice of applying saliva to shine the ball as a precautionary measure during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which health practitioners advocated strict hygiene protocols and physical distancing.

In 2022, the world body made the ban permanent.

The IPL too included the ICC



ban in its playing conditions in the aftermath of the pandemic but its guidelines are outside the purview of the sport's governing body.

With the development on Thursday, the IPL became the first major cricketing event to re-introduce saliva's use after the pandemic.

The captains meeting, which was scheduled to begin at 12.30 pm in Mumbai, did not start on time due to a delay in arrival of a few team officials at the BCCI office.

Now that the ban is revoked in

the IPL, the ICC too might review its stance on the subject.

On the sidelines of the ICC Champions Trophy, senior India pacer Mohammed Shami had spoken about the need to use saliva on the ball in what has become a predominantly batters' game.

The likes of Vernon Philander and Tim Southee had backed Shami's call.

"We keep appealing that we should be allowed to use saliva so that we can bring reverse swing back into the game and it becomes

interesting," Shami had said during the 50-over event in Dubai, where India emerged victorious.

Also on the agenda of captains' meeting was the contentious Impact Player rule which the BCCI had already extended till at least 2027.

The likes of Rohit Sharma and more recently Hardik Pandya have expressed their reservations on the playing strategy.

"While a few have raised objections on the Impact Player rule, it has benefitted uncapped batters and bowlers who otherwise won't get to play," the official said.

The BCCI also approved the use of DRS for height wides and wides outside the off-stump.

"Hawk eye and ball tracking will be used to decide on the height wides and wides outside the off-stump," the official added.

It was also decided that one ball will be changed in the second innings of an evening game after the 11th over due to dew.

"This is not a rule change, it's just an understanding for this year between teams and umpires. The changed ball will have wear and tear," an official said. (PTI)

KKR-LSG clash on April 6 set to be shifted to Guwahati for lack of security arrangements

KOLKATA, March 20: Kolkata Knight Riders' home game against Lucknow Super Giants on April 6 is set to be shifted to Guwahati as police has expressed its inability to provide security for the IPL contest due to 'Ram Navami' celebrations in the city on the day, CAB president Snehasish Ganguly told PTI on Thursday.

BJP leader Suwendu Adhikari had announced that over 20,000 processions are being organised across West Bengal to celebrate the festival.

"We have informed the BCCI to reschedule the match, but there is no scope for rescheduling the game in the city later and I'm now hearing that it's going to be shifted to Guwahati," Cricket Association of Bengal (CAB) President Ganguly told

PTI. The clash between KKR and LSG, owned by RPSG Group chairman Sanjiv Goenka, was expected to draw a packed house, with both teams boasting strong local support.

An official statement from the IPL, however, is yet to arrive.

In season 2024 also, the IPL fixture between KKR and Rajasthan Royals had to be rescheduled due to lack of security arrangements on Ram Navami.

"I had several rounds of talks with the Kolkata Police and they said they won't be able to provide enough security on that day," Snehasish added.

"If there's no police protection, accommodating and managing a 65,000-strong crowd becomes impossible," Snehasish had said on Tuesday. (PTI)

PCB to be richer by USD 10 million after hosting Champions Trophy

LAHORE, March 20: The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) on Thursday claimed that it is set to earn approximately USD 10 million as profit by hosting the Champions Trophy, where the Indian team emerged champion.

PCB spokesperson, Aamir Mir and chief financial officer (CFO) Javed Murtaza addressed media following reports that Board had suffered financial losses by hosting the ODI tournament and spending enormous amounts on upgrading stadiums in Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi for the event.

"All expenses for the tournament were covered by the ICC," Mir said adding that the PCB generated revenue through gate money and ticket sales.

"Additionally, after the audit, we expect to receive another ₹ 3 billion from the ICC," he added. He also claimed that PCB had initially targeted ₹ 2 billion in earnings from the Champions Trophy, but they surpassed this goal. He also claimed that the PCB's total revenue for the 2023-24 fiscal year reached ₹ 10 billion—a 40% increase from the previous year.

India to host 11th Asian Swimming C'ship in Ahmedabad

NEW DELHI, March 20: India will host the 11th Asian Age Group Swimming Championship at Ahmedabad's Naranpura Sports Complex from October 1 to 15, the national federation announced on Thursday.

Swimmers from Japan and South Korea are expected to compete at the continental meet, marking the event's first-ever edition in the country.

"We have received in-principle approval from the Gujarat government and Asia Aquatics. The MoU is in its early stages and should be signed by March or mid-April," Swimming Federation of India Secretary-General

Monal Chokshi told PTI.

The 10th Asian Age Group Championships in 2019 was the last international swimming event hosted by India. The championship will feature swimming, diving, artistic swimming, and water polo. Ahmedabad remains central to India's 2036 Olympic bid, with the Naranpura Sports Complex — set for completion next month — designed as an Olympic-standard venue for multiple sports, including swimming and wrestling.

The national junior championship will serve as a test event for the Asian Championship. (PTI)

Bonus point system to be pondered over for WTC 2025-27 cycle

NEW DELHI, March 20: The International Cricket Council (ICC) is likely to ponder over a new bonus points system during its board meeting in April which could give more weightage to victories against higher-ranked teams during the next World Test Championship cycle.

The 2025-27 WTC cycle will begin with India's five-match away Test series against England in June.

As per the prevailing rules, the team winning by the smallest margin or by an innings gets 12 points, six points for a tie and four points for a draw.

But this could see a change as the global governing body, as per a report in Telegraph, is considering awarding bonus points for innings victories or for a win above a certain big margin such as 100 runs.

"In fact, issues such as giving bonus points for innings wins etc has been in continuous discussion from the beginning of the WTC, as many teams felt that due weight is not getting for wins against big teams," a source close to the development told PTI. "So, such topics have been a part of discussions, and this could again come up for deliberations," he said.

But this could now change as the ICC might bring

in bonus points for landslide wins, and extra points could be given to victories over frontline teams such as India, Australia and England, as per their rankings.

"Yeah, it's a good move if it really happens. The teams will be more motivated to go for results, as we could see some exciting games," a former India player told PTI on condition of anonymity.

The ICC is also mulling giving extra points for wins away from home. "Yeah, it will be a motivating factor for, you know, those 'smaller' teams. Look, when New Zealand beat India last year, it was a historic win for them as not many teams came here and beat us. But they did not get any extra points for it."

"While winning away from home in itself can act as a motivating factor, now the teams will have that carrot in front of them — extra points, if it really happens," he added.

Other than this, the ICC board meeting might also consider the two-tier Test system, which is vocally supported by Cricket Australia. "It needs a lot of discussion before putting into practice as some teams might feel deprived of regular chances to play against strong teams like India or Australia. (PTI)

Team India to get ₹ 58 crore cash reward from BCCI for CT victory

NEW DELHI, March 20: The BCCI on Thursday announced a cash reward of ₹ 58 crore for the Indian cricket team that won the ICC Champions Trophy earlier this month in Dubai.

The Rohit Sharma-led India defeated New Zealand by four wickets in the final to grab their third ICC Champions Trophy title.

The financial windfall will cover the players, coaching and support staff and members of the men's selection committee headed by Ajit Agarkar. The Board did not give a break-up of the reward in its statement. "Winning back-to-back ICC titles is special and this reward recognises Team India's dedication and excellence on the global stage," said BCCI president Roger Binny in a release.

Binny said the Champions Trophy triumph is a testament to India's strong cricketing eco-sys-

tem. "This was also our second ICC Trophy in 2025, following the ICC U19 Women's World Cup triumph and it highlights the strong cricketing ecosystem in place in our country," he said.

In fact, it was India's third ICC trophy in the last eight months as they had won the last year's T20 World Cup, beating South Africa in the final.

BCCI secretary Devajit Saikia said the victory justified India's top-ranking in white ball formats. "Their dominance in world cricket is a result of years of hard work and strategic execution. This victory has justified India's top ranking in white-ball cricket, and we are sure the team will continue to excel in the years to come," said Saikia.

India dominated the Champions Trophy from the start, registering four commanding victories en

route to the final.

India began their campaign with a solid six-wicket win over Bangladesh, then secured a convincing six-wicket triumph against Pakistan. They continued their momentum with a 44-run victory over New Zealand before overcoming Australia by four wickets in the semifinal.

"The dedication and commitment shown by the players have set a new benchmark, and we are confident that Indian cricket will keep raising the bar on the global stage," Saikia added. BCCI vice-president Rajeev Shukla said Indian players displayed excellent composure under pressure during the ICC marquee event.

"The players exhibited remarkable composure under pressure, and their success is an inspiration to aspiring cricketers across the country. (PTI)

Anil Chaudhary takes up commentary after working as umpire for 17 IPL seasons

NEW DELHI, March 20: Anil Chaudhary did the umpire's duty during the past 17 editions of the IPL but he has now slipped into the role of a commentator this season after turning 60 last week.

Effectively signalled his retirement from officiating the game. Chaudhary's farewell game happened to be the Ranji Trophy final between Kerala and Vidarbha last month at Nagpur and his last international appearance came in September 2023.

Overall, he officiated in 12 Tests, 49 ODIs and 64 T20s.

With retirement on the horizon, Chaudhary started planning for the future and got into regional commentary which has grown exponentially in the last two years.

He will be part of the Haryana feed in the IPL beginning March 22 with occasional stints in Hindi commentary.

"I have been commenting for the past three-four months. So, I was already in the transition phase. I have also been teaching umpiring and commentary via an online platform," he told PTI.

"As an umpire, I did around 15 games in a season, here I would be doing more than 50 (matches). On air, former cricketers look at the game in their own way and being

an umpire I have a different perspective on the game. It is fun," said the Delhi-based umpire who had been officiating in the IPL since its inception in 2008.

Chaudhary leaves the umpiring profession a satisfied man though he could never make the ICC elite panel. The elite panel only has one Indian umpire since 2020 -- Nitin Menon.

"I was an international umpire for more than 12 years. Have been doing IPL since 2008 and have done more than 200 games. Kuch na kuch toh reh hee jata hain life mein," said Chaudhary, who feels proud about officiating in five Ranji finals and the Asia Cup final in 2022.

Obsession with bookish knowledge harming standard of Indian umpires

India has become the engine of the game globally but the country has failed to produce elite panel umpires consistently. Chaudhary listed out the reasons why Indians are not excelling as umpires.

"We take a lot of stress on the field. Sometimes, our umpires don't eat properly. We are focussing too much on theory when we should worry about the practical implementation part.

"Some get too technical, quoting



the law all the time, that is not the best way to approach umpiring. Umpires who rely on bookish knowledge are harming the game. We need to understand the spirit of law. Just mugging up the law will not take you anywhere," said Chaudhary.

Do former players have a better chance at succeeding in the umpiring job?

"I always say one who has played the game, even at the club level, will be more suited to umpiring than someone who has not played at any level.

"Also, in modern cricket, umpires need to be extremely fit. We

have a lot of work to do on that front also."

Calls off Kuldeep Yadav' bowling very tough, Kohli was never an issue

An international umpire often finds himself under extreme pressure created by players on the field. Chaudhary has worked extensively with the likes of M S Dhoni, Virat Kohli and current India ODI and Test captain Rohit Sharma.

Chaudhary recalled his interactions with the India greats.

"We used to talk off the field as well, at the airport, at breakfast. That helps in building the rapport.

Consistency in decision making is something that players notice.

"You can't earn their respect with just a small talk. With Virat, I had the advantage of knowing him since his younger days. We used to joke around a lot on the field. There were times he did not like my decisions but then later applauded when he got to know it was the right call.

"Rohit is such a fine human being and his batting technique is such that it is easy to make decisions when he is batting.

"With MS, he never talks unreasonable stuff. If he is saying something, it warrants your attention. Once Robin Uthappa was batting, he moved across the stumps and I gave a wide. MS said 'he was moving', he was right at the time (it was not wide)."

On left-arm wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav, he added: "Kuldeep is very challenging among Indians. His variations, the bounce and carry he generates makes it tricky. When he is in rhythm, it is very tough to pick him."

"Among international players, David Warner and Stuart Broad made life tough for me on field but it was a lot of fun at the same time," he signed off. (PTI)