

WORLD
NATION

- 51 dead, more than 100 injured in nightclub fire in North Macedonia
- Iran denies aiding Yemen's Houthi rebels after US strikes, threat from Trump
- Jyoti Basu rejecting PM post not factor: Karat
- Mann will complete 5 years as Punjab CM, says Kejriwal



26 YEARS OF DEDICATED JOURNALISM

www.thehillstimes.in

THE HILLS TIMES

Voice of the hills people

PUBLISHED SIMULTANEOUSLY FROM GUWAHATI & DIPHU

Vol .No. XXVI

Issue No. 064

RNI-ASSENS/2000/12862

DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG, MONDAY, MARCH 17, 2025

PAGES 12

PRICE ₹ 8

India, China competition should never turn into conflict, says PM Modi



NEW DELHI, March 16: Despite past tensions with China, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has favoured dialogue over discord and said differences between India and China were natural but stronger cooperation was in the interests of the two neighbours and for global stability.

In a podcast with Lex Fridman, Modi said India and China were working to restore the conditions along the borders as they were before the clashes along the Line of Actual Control in 2020, the first since 1975 that resulted in deaths of security personnel on both sides. "However, after my recent meeting with President Xi, we have seen a return to normalcy at the border. We are now working to restore conditions to how they were before 2020," Modi said referring to his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in October last year.

"Slowly but surely, trust, enthusiasm, and energy should return. But of course, it will take some time, as there has been a five-year gap," the prime minister said. Modi said cooperation between India and China isn't just beneficial for the two nations, but also essential for global stability and prosperity.

"Since the 21st century is Asia's century, we want India and China to compete in a healthy and natural way. Competition is not a bad thing, but it should never turn into conflict," he said.

Modi said the relationship between India and China isn't something new as both nations have ancient cultures and civil-

izations. "Even in the modern world, they play a significant role. If you look at historical records, for centuries, India and China have learned from each other," he said.

"Together, they have always contributed to the global good in some way. Old records suggest that at one point India and China alone accounted for more than 50 per cent of the world's GDP. That's how massive India's contribution was. And I believe our ties have been extremely strong, with deep cultural connections," Modi said.

During his over three-hour interaction, the prime minister said there was no real history of conflict between India and China if one looked back over centuries.

"It has always been about learning from each other and understanding one another. At one time, Buddhism had a profound influence in China, and that philosophy originated in India," Modi said. "In the future too our relationship should remain just as strong and continue to grow. Differences are natural. When two neighbouring countries exist, occasional disagreements are bound to happen," he said. Even within a family, not everything is always perfect, he said, adding "but our effort is to ensure that these differences don't turn into disputes".

"That is why we actively work towards dialogue. Instead of discord, we stress on dialogue, because only through dialogue can we build a stable cooperative relationship that serves the best interests of both nations," Modi said. (PTI)

Union Home Minister attends 57th annual conference of ABSU Bodo Accord brought peace to BTR: Shah

KOKRAJHAR, March 16: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday said that the Congress had made fun of the Bodo Accord but it brought peace and development to the region.

The youth of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) now "carry the tricolour instead of guns", and this has been made possible by the signing of the accord in January 2020, Shah said at the open session of the 57th annual conference of the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) at Dotma in Assam's Kokrajhar district.

"Peace, development and enthusiasm prevailing in BTR have been possible because of ABSU, a signatory of the accord. Had ABSU not taken the initiative, there would have been no accord or peace in the region," he said.

"The Congress may have laughed at us, saying there will be no peace in BTR and this agreement will be a joke but 82 per cent of the clauses of the Bodo Accord have been implemented. In the next two years, there will be 100 per cent implementation under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, bringing long-lasting peace in the region," he said.

"According to the terms of the accord, we brought the entire BTR region out of the purview of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in 2022," Shah said.

The NDFB, also a signatory to the peace accord, has given up arms to return to the mainstream and both the central and state governments have taken several initiatives to rehabilitate the cadres, he added.



"In the last three years, 4,881 NDFB cadres have surrendered their firearms and ₹ 287 crore has been spent on their rehabilitation, with 90 per cent given by the Narendra Modi government at the Centre," the Union home minister said.

He said the surrendered cadres were also being trained in various skills with the help

of non-governmental organisations. Shah also appreciated Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's initiative to induct 400 of these youth into the state commando force.

"When the Bodo Accord was signed, there was happiness not only in BTR and Assam but in the entire country," he said.

The Bodo Peace Accord was signed on

January 27, 2020 between the Centre, state government and Bodo groups including the ABSU and the NDFB.

"There was a time when there was only talk of insurgency, separatism and conflict but now education, development and industries are being discussed," Shah said. In Assam, altogether (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Shah takes stock of implementation of new criminal laws in NE states

GUWAHATI, March 16: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday took stock of the implementation of three new criminal laws -- BNS, BNSS and BSA -- across the northeast (NE) in a review meeting with the chief ministers and DGPs of the states in the region.

As the President's rule is imposed in Manipur, its Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla took part in the meeting.

"Hon'ble Union Home Minister Shri @AmitShah is currently chairing a conference of Chief Ministers from the North Eastern States in Guwahati on the implementation of the new criminal laws," the Office of Assam CM said in a post on X.

The meeting is being attended by seven CMs of the northeast region, while DGPs of five states are present, except those of Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur.

Chief secretaries of several northeastern states are also present in the meeting. Each of the eight states is making pre-

sentations to update the union home minister on the implementation of Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam (BSA).

"The meeting has begun sometime back. It started with the opening remarks by Union Home Secretary Govind Mohan after the arrival of Shah," an official told PTI.

The conference is about reviewing the implementation and the present status of various new provisions related to police, prisons, courts, prosecution and forensics in the Northeastern states, another senior official said.

After his speech, Shah released a book -- "New Criminal Laws: Standard Operating Procedures and Rules", prepared by the Assam CID and published by the Assam government, he added.

"The final presentation will be made by Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D) Director General Rajeev

Kumar Sharma. He will update the home minister and others on the status of implementation of the three new laws in the northeastern states," the official said.

Following the updates by all parties, there will be a general discussion on their presentations, he added.

"At the last, Shah will address the gathering on the three laws and how better those can be implemented. He will give his suggestions and feedback," the senior official said on condition of anonymity.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and his counterparts Conrad K Sangma from Meghalaya, Neiphiu Rio from Nagaland, Pema Khandu from Arunachal Pradesh, Manik Saha from Tripura, Lalduhoma from Mizoram and Prem Singh Tamang from Sikkim are attending the meeting with other senior officials.

From the Centre, several top officials are present along with Director of the Intelligence Bureau Tapan Kumar Deka among others. (PTI)

Himanta, Rio discuss issues of mutual interest in Guwahati

GUWAHATI, March 16: Chief Ministers of Assam and Nagaland discussed issues of mutual interest on Sunday, ahead of a meeting of all CMs of Northeastern states with Union Home Minister Amit Shah later in the day.

"HCM Dr. @himantabiswa met his Nagaland counterpart, Shri @Neiphiu_Rio, at Hotel Radisson Blu, Guwahati, this morning," the Assam Chief Minister's Office (CMO) posted on X.

It added that the discussion focused on matters of mutual interest for Assam, Nagaland and the entire Northeastern region, along with warm exchanges of greetings.

The chief ministers of the region are scheduled to closeted in a meeting to be chaired by Shah here later on Sunday.

The Union Home minister will review the implementation of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), which replaced the Indian Penal Code (IPC), in the region, officials said. Shah will be concluding his three-day tour of Assam and Mizoram on Sunday evening. (PTI)

Two arrested with drugs worth ₹ 24 cr

GUWAHATI, March 16: Two persons were arrested on Sunday with yaba tablets worth around ₹ 24 crore in Assam's Sribhumli district, located along the inter-state border with Mizoram, police said.

On the basis of a tip-off, a truck coming from Mizoram's Champhai district was intercepted at Puwamara bypass, Superintendent of Police Partha Protim Das said.

"On thorough search of the vehicle, police recovered 80,000 yaba tablets from a secret chamber in the truck," he told PTI.

Das said the arrested persons hail from the Cachar district in Barak valley of the state. "We have initiated legal action to find out the forward and backward links in the drug cartel," he said. Another senior officer said the total value of the seized (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Prohibitory orders imposed in Karbi Anglong amid threats Cong hits out at govt over air quality report putting India as 5th most polluted country

DIPHU, March 16: District Administration of Karbi Anglong has issued Prohibitory Order under Section 163 of Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) to prevent disturbances to public peace and tranquility in the district.

The order comes in response to reports of potential threats from certain organisations and anti-social elements engaging in activities that could disrupt communal harmony and public order.

As per the order from Karbi Anglong district magistrate Nirola Phanchopi on Sunday, any form of obstruction, picketing, or rally, including Mashal processions, in front of offices, public places, or locations of public importance is strictly prohibited.

"The gathering or assembly of five or more persons without prior permission has also been restricted. Additionally, carrying firearms, explosives, or any substances that may pose a threat to public safety is not allowed. The use and throwing of firecrackers

in public places such as roads, bus stations, and railway stations have also been banned to prevent disturbances," the order read further.

It further said that holding public meetings, rallies, processions, or dharnas without the approval of the district magistrate is not permitted. The order also restricts the delivery of inflammatory speeches, including communal, anti-state, or anti-national statements, as well as the display of banners, posters, or wall writings that could incite unrest. "The use of loudspeakers or microphones without prior authorisation is also prohibited," it added.

Given the urgency of the situation, the order has been passed ex-parte and has come into immediate effect. Any violation will result in prosecution as per the provisions of BNSS. However, an exception has been granted to police, paramilitary, and military personnel regarding restrictions on gatherings. The District Administration has urged all citizens to comply with the order and cooperate in maintaining peace and harmony in Karbi Anglong.

NEW DELHI, March 16: The Congress on Sunday attacked the government after a world air quality report ranked India as the world's fifth most polluted country, and demanded that all "anti-people" environmental law amendments over the past 10 years be rolled back.

In a statement, Congress general secretary (Communications) Jaiaram Ramesh said the Swiss air quality technology company IQAIR has just released its 2024 World Air Quality Report which finds that India is the world's fifth most polluted country.

The Rajya Sabha MP said in his statement that according to the report, India's population-weighted average concentration of fine particulate matter is 50.6 µg/m3 which is 10 times the WHO's annual guideline level of 5 µg/m3.

He claimed that according to the report, 74 of the world's 100 most polluted cities are in India, and national capital New



Delhi is the second-most polluted city in the world after Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh.

"Among the lesser-known tragedies of the non-biological PM's reign is the rapidly deteriorating air quality nationally and the inattentiveness and policy chaos that has characterised the government's response to it," he said in his statement. Ramesh cited several studies in the past about air pollution-linked fatalities in the country.

In early July 2024, he said, a study pub-

lished in the prestigious Lancet journal showed that 7.2 percent of all deaths in India are associated with air pollution which comes about 34,000 deaths each year in just 10 cities. The former environment minister said that around the same time, a study by the Centre for Science and Environment revealed that the government's interventions in pollution control are poorly designed, with the National Clean Air Program (NCAP) largely focused on mitigating road dust rather than industrial, vehicular, and biomass emissions -- the source of PM 2.5 -- that are the leading causes of mortality.

To make matters worse, in the last five years, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has left more than 75 percent of the Environment Protection Charge (EPC) and Environmental Compensation (EC) funds unspent, he claimed, adding that in total ₹ 665.75 crores have been left unutilised. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'India will co-chair the EWG on counter-terrorism for the first time' India to host regional counter-terror conclave this week

NEW DELHI, March 16: India will host a two-day conclave of 10-nation ASEAN grouping and some of its dialogue partners beginning Wednesday that will focus on firming up a comprehensive strategy to combat the threat of terrorism and extremism.

The conclave of the experts working group (EWG) on counter-terrorism under the framework of ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) mechanism is also expected to deliberate on the evolving regional security scenario, officials said.

The ADMM-Plus is a platform comprising 10-nation ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and its eight dialogue

partners -- India, China, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the US.

The EWG conclave to be held in Delhi will be co-chaired by India and Malaysia.

The defence ministry said delegations from 10 ASEAN members and the bloc's eight dialogue partners along with Timor Leste and ASEAN Secretariat will be participating in the meeting. "India will co-chair the EWG on counter-terrorism for the first time," it said. Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh will deliver the keynote address at the opening ceremony of the conclave on Wednesday.

It will be the first meeting for activities planned for EWG on

counter-terrorism for the ongoing cycle from 2024-2027.

"Discussions will focus on evolving a robust and comprehensive strategy designed to tackle the evolving threat of terrorism and extremism," the ministry said. "The meeting aims to share the on-ground experience of the defence forces of ASEAN and its dialogue partners. It will lay the foundation for the activities/exercises/seminars/workshop planned for the cycle 2024-2027," it added in a statement. The ADMM-Plus has been focusing on seven areas of practical cooperation such as counter-terrorism, maritime security, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian mine action and cyber secu-



city. EWGs have been established to facilitate cooperation in these areas. The EWGs are each co-chaired by one ASEAN member state and one dialogue partner fol-

lowing a three-year cycle. The task of the co-chairs is to lay down the objectives, policy guidelines and directions for the EWG for the three-year cycle. (PTI)

Forces' 3,900-km-long motorcycle rally travels through Assam

GUWAHATI, March 16: The 3,900-km-long motorcycle rally, undertaken by the armed forces, left for West Bengal from Guwahati in Assam on Sunday.

The motorcycle rally 'Shaurya Yatra', flagged off on March 10 from the strategically located Vijaynagar in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh, will conclude at the Rann of Kutch in Gujarat.

A programme was held in Guwahati after the rally arrived here. As part of it, the rally participants interacted with the ex-servicemen who shared their heartfelt stories, an Assam Rifles spokesperson said.

The ex-servicemen were felicitated by the bike rally participants,

he added. "The rally has now set course for Siliguri in West Bengal, continuing its journey," the spokesperson said.

The 15-day 'Shaurya Yatra' motorcycle rally was given a grand flag-off from Vijaynagar, Arunachal Pradesh. It was ceremonially flagged off by General Officer Commanding, 3 Corps, Lt Gen Abhijit S Pendharkar at Rangapahar military station in Dimapur, Nagaland, on Saturday.

The rally will culminate at Rann of Kutch in Gujarat on March 23. Altogether 12 motorbike-riding enthusiasts from the Indian Army, Assam Rifles and locals from Arunachal Pradesh are participating in the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

India, New Zealand announce resumption of FTA talks after gap of 10 yrs

NEW DELHI, March 16: After a gap of about ten years, India and New Zealand on Sunday announced resumption of negotiations for a proposed free trade agreement (FTA) to boost economic ties.

India and New Zealand began negotiating the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) in April 2010 to boost trade in goods, services, and investment. However, after ten rounds of discussions, the talks stalled in February 2015.

"The two nations are pleased to announce the launch of negotiations for a comprehensive and mutually beneficial India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations," the commerce ministry said.

The announcement was made after the meeting of Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal and Todd McClay, New Zealand's Minister for Trade and Investment.

Prime Minister of New Zealand Christopher Luxon is here on a four-day visit from March 16.

"The India-New Zealand FTA negotiations aim to achieve balanced outcomes that enhance supply chain integration and improve market access," it said.

"With bilateral trade continuing to grow steadily, surpassing USD 1 billion during April-January 2025, the FTA negotiations aim to unlock new avenues for businesses and consumers, fostering mutual growth and prosperity of our nations," Goyal said in a post on X.

According to think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI), a major challenge in the renewed talks will be the disparity in tariff structures.



New Zealand's average import tariff is only 2.3 per cent, with over half of its tariff lines already duty-free, meaning Indian goods already have substantial access to its market.

In contrast, India's average tariff stands at 17.8 per cent, meaning it would have to make significant reductions, making a traditional FTA less attractive for India. "As talks resume, both countries will need to find common ground on these issues to move forward successfully," GTRI Founder Ajay Srivastava said. He said earlier New Zealand was demanding greater access to India's dairy market, which India resisted to protect its domestic dairy industry that supports millions of farmers.

Currently, India's dairy imports from New Zealand are minimal (around USD 0.57 million), and while India may consider limited imports of value-added dairy products, it remains firm against allowing raw dairy imports, he said.

India was also reluctant to lower tariffs on New Zealand's dairy, meat, and wine exports, while New

Zealand pushed for more favourable trade terms.

"Pressure from the US to open India's dairy and agriculture sectors may also influence negotiations," Srivastava said, adding that another key issue was India's demand for easier movement of its skilled professionals and better access for its IT and services sector.

India wanted New Zealand to grant work opportunities similar to those given to Australia and China, but New Zealand did not agree, according to GTRI. It said earlier the FTA talks got complicated as both countries were part of the negotiations around the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which India eventually withdrew from in 2019 due to certain concerns about market access and protecting local industries.

The bilateral trade between the two countries stood at USD 873.4 million (exports USD 538.33 million and imports USD 335 million) in 2023-24 as against USD 1.02 billion in 2022-23.

India's key goods exports to New Zealand include clothing,

fabrics, and home textiles; medicines and medical supplies; refined petrol; agricultural equipment and machinery such as tractors and irrigation tools; auto; iron and steel; paper products; electronics; shrimps; diamonds; and basmati rice. The main imports are agricultural goods, minerals, apples, kiwifruit, meat products such as lamb, mutton, milk albumin, lactose syrup, coking coal, logs and sawn timber, wool, and scrap metals.

In FY24, India's services exports to New Zealand stood at USD 214.1 million, while New Zealand's services exports to India totalled USD 456.5 million. India's key services exports include IT and software services, provided by companies such as Infosys and HCL, along with telecommunications services to support New Zealand's digital infrastructure.

India also exports healthcare services, including medical tourism, pharmaceutical research, and telemedicine. Financial services are another important area, with Indian banks and fintech companies offering digital payment solutions. New Zealand's services exports to India are led by education services, with thousands of Indian students pursuing higher education in New Zealand.

Tourism services are also significant, as Indian tourists are drawn to New Zealand's natural landscapes and adventure activities.

New Zealand provides fintech services, offering digital solutions to India's financial sector, and specialised aviation training programmes for pilots and cabin crew.

Additionally, New Zealand firms offer niche IT services such as data analytics and automation solutions. (PTI)

Lenders transfer ₹ 1,104cr McLeod Russel debt at discount with 5-yr repayment tenure

KOLKATA, March 16: A consortium of lenders to bulk tea producer McLeod Russel India Limited (MRIL) has transferred its debt exposure to the National Asset Reconstruction Company Limited (NARCL) for ₹ 700 crore, representing a 36 per cent haircut, sources said on Sunday.

The debt of ₹ 1,104.69 crore has been sold under a 15:85 cash-to-security receipts (SR) structure, with 15 per cent of the consideration to be paid upfront and the remaining 85 per cent through SRs over the next five years, they said.

The Swiss challenge auction for the debt transfer of the base value of ₹ 700 crore received no counterbids against NARCL's offer due to extremely poor sentiments about the tea sector, a merchant banker official involved in the transaction said.

The ₹ 700 crore debt deal is seen as significantly lower than a previously attempted one-time settlement (OTS) of ₹ 1,030 crore backed by Carbon Resources, which lapsed due to a lack of consensus among lenders. McLeod officials stated that the development is a positive step that will allow the company to negotiate with only three debtors NARCL, JC Flowers ARC, and IndusInd Bank rather than a dozen banks.

"We are not out of the woods, but this will help the company get time to turn around and avoid a distress sale of assets," a company official said, declining to be quoted due to the sensitivity of the matter.

As of June 30, 2024, McLeod Russel had total outstanding dues of ₹ 1,461.06 crore, including debt assigned to another private asset reconstruction company and IndusInd Bank which are not part of this transaction.

NARCL is expected to work closely with the existing management to restructure the company. However, no immediate comments were available.

Based on financial due diligence, the lenders anticipated an additional net recovery of approximately ₹ 270 crore upon full redemption of the SRs.

McLeod had informed the bidders that NARCL had taken over the loans of ICICI Bank-led consortium which had State Bank of India, HDFC Bank Limited, Axis Bank Limited, Punjab National Bank, UCO Bank, Indian Bank, and RBL Bank.

ICICI Bank officials declined to speak on the details. The company's loans were classified as non-performing assets (NPAs) in October 2019 due to financial stress arising from a prolonged downturn in tea prices, rising costs, and unrecovered loans extended to group entities, notably McNally Bharat Engineering Co Ltd, which is undergoing insolvency proceedings. McLeod Russel, promoted by the Khaitan family, operates 31 tea estates in Assam and two in West Bengal, with a saleable production of 39.19 million kg in FY24 and a workforce exceeding 50,000 employees. (PTI)

India should seek reciprocity from EU on medical devices under FTA: GTRI

NEW DELHI, March 16: India should seek reciprocal concessions from the European Union (EU) under the proposed free trade agreement (FTA) in the medical devices sector to promote its exports, economic think tank GTRI said on Sunday.

India charges zero to 10 per cent tariffs on most medical devices and a duty cut by India on medical devices without addressing EU's regulatory challenges will result in low exports but large scale imports from EU. "To achieve a fair trade deal, India must demand reciprocity. India should cut tariff on medical devices only if the EU reduces its non-tariff barriers," the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said. The ongoing India-EU FTA negotiations on medical devices are asymmetrical.

While the EU demands zero tariffs on medical devices from India, it maintains high regulatory barriers that hinder Indian exports difficult in the EU markets, it added.

GTRI Founder Ajay Srivastava said the EU customs duty rates are zero, but market entry costs are substantial because of the stringent regulatory framework.

"Exporting to EU has become more difficult as it replaced the Medical Device Directives (EU-MDD) with the more stringent Medical Device Rules (EU-MDR)," he said.

Citing an example, he said the new certification and regulatory expenses amount to 60,000-300,000 euro annually for market access of 100,000-3.75 million euro. "Certification approval time increased from the earlier 4-8

months to 2-3 years now. Shortage of notified bodies and auditors in the EU is leading to high certification costs," Srivastava said.

On account of this, Indian exporters are withdrawing from the EU market or limiting product offerings as high entry and certification costs make market participation financially unsustainable, he noted.

Moreover, he said the lack of Indian participation in the Medical Device Single Audit Program (MDSAP) limits the acceptance of Indian devices in key regulated markets. MDSAP allows medical device manufacturers to be audited only once for compliance with regulatory requirements in multiple markets, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Japan, and the United States. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Bodo Accord brought peace

nine militant organisations have signed peace accords and more than 10,000 youth have been brought to the mainstream by the Modi government at the Centre, he said. The central and the state governments have allotted Rs 1,500 crore for the development of BTR which has a population of 35 lakh under the directive of the prime minister, Shah said. The prime minister is committed to peace and development of all the northeastern states and to end insurgency, violence and conflict in the region.

He said that BTR has already hosted the Durand Cup and exhorted Bodo youths to start preparing for the 2036 Olympics.

Shah said a road in New Delhi, named after ABSU founding president 'Bodofa' Upendranath Brahma, and his bust will be inaugurated in the first week of April. He said that the BJP governments at the Centre and the state are committed to translating the dreams of 'Bodofa', who was born in Dotma, into reality. It was the late prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee who included the Bodo language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, Shah said.

Sixty villages of Sonitpur and Biswanath districts have also been included in BTR to ensure their development and progress, he added. ABSU is taking forward the education and empowerment of youth and it is due to their efforts that students till class 12 are appearing in examinations in the Bodo medium. Products from Kokrajhar and other districts of BTR under the 'One District, One Product' initiative are now being displayed at hotels in New Delhi and this has been possible due to peace in the region, he said.

More than 12 products from BTR have already got GI tag and this has led to the growth of an industrial environment, Shah said. Shah said he was honoured to address the ABSU convention and thanked all ABSU members for inviting him to it.

"I also pay my obeisance to the 5,000 martyrs who had laid their lives for the cause of the Bodoland, paving the way for peace in BTR," he said. "Investments of over Rs 5 lakh crore are lined up for Assam following the recent business summit in the state. I urge the youth to move ahead by educating themselves and establishing permanent peace... the future is ready for you," he said.

The government is going to ensure infrastructure development in BTR which will help the youth compete with those in the rest of the country, Shah added. The Union home minister recalled that a few years ago, he was invited to the Bathou Puja of the Bodos and was gifted some books on the religion.

"On reading the books, I realised the high spiritual values of the Bathou religion which embodies the five elements of nature. I make efforts to spread these messages to the students across the country," Shah added. (PTI)

Two arrested with drugs

drugs will be around ₹ 24 crore as per Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) standards. Yaba, which is Thai for 'crazy medicine', is a mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine. (PTI)

Cong hits out at govt over air

On 29th July 2024, he said, upon being asked a question about the Lancet study, the Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change made the "shocking" claim in Rajya Sabha that there was "no conclusive data" to directly correlate air pollution and deaths. He further claimed that in August 2024, a study by the Mumbai-based International Institute of Population Sciences used government data from the National Family and Health Survey (NFHS V) to unravel the worst kept secret in India: that air pollution is costing thousands of Indians their lives and health.

"In districts where air pollution exceeds National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS), there is a 13 per cent increase in premature mortality for adults and around 100 per cent increase in mortality for children," he also claimed.

"This Government's Modus Operandi is to deny that there is a real air pollution-linked mortality problem, underfund programmes targeted at mitigating pollution, fail to utilise the resources that it allocates, and misuse the funds that do get spent," Ramesh said. The Congress leader spelt out some steps the government must take moving forward.

"The first step must be to acknowledge the public health crisis linked to air pollution across wide swathes of India. Consequently, given this crisis, we must revisit and totally revamp both the Air Pollution (Control and Prevention) Act of 1981 and the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) put into effect in November 2009. As per the NAAQS, the permissible concentration of fine particulate matter is 60 µg/m3 for a 24-hour period, and 40 µg/m3 annually - versus the guidelines of less than 15 µg/m3 for a 24-hour period and 5 µg/m3 annually set by the WHO," he said.

Ramesh suggested the government must drastically increase the funds made available under the NCAP. The current budget, inclusive of NCAP funding and the 15th Finance Commission's grants, is about ₹ 10,500 crores, spread across 131 cities, he said. "Our cities need at least 10-20 times more funding - NCAP must be a ₹ 25,000 crore programme. "The NCAP must adopt measurement of PM 2.5 levels as the yardstick for performance. NCAP must reorient its focus to key sources of emissions - burning of solid fuels, vehicular emissions, and industrial emissions," he said.

The former environment minister also suggested that the NCAP must adopt a regional/airshed approach for air quality control, municipal and state authorities must have the governance architecture and resources required to collaborate across jurisdictions.

The NCAP must be given legal backing, an enforcement mechanism, and serious data monitoring capacity for every Indian city, beyond the current focus only on "non-attainment" cities, he said.

Ramesh also said that Air pollution norms for coal power plants must be enforced immediately and all power plants must install a Fluoride Gas Desulfurizer (FGD) by the end of 2025. "The National Green Tribunal's independence must be restored, and the anti-people environmental law amendments of the last 10 years must be rolled back," he said. (PTI)

Forces' 3,900-km-long motorcycle

rally. The bikers will also interact with school children and motivate them to join the Indian Armed Forces. Held under the theme 'Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat', the rally aims to promote national integration and honour the sacrifices of the armed forces while also carrying the message of unity, courage and national pride. (PTI)

DVC's ₹ 1,500 cr push to modernise power supply

KOLKATA, March 16: Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) has launched a ₹ 1,500 crore project to modernise power supply in its command area to ensure round-the-clock quality power and to reduce aggregate technical and commercial (AT&C) losses, an official said on Sunday. DVC's entire distribution network primarily serves industries, with negligible supply to retail consumers.

The project focuses on shifting from conventional power distribution to a state-of-the-art, technology-driven system to establish a robust primary and secondary distribution network across DVC's command area spanning 24,235 square kilometres in West Bengal and Jharkhand. "The project capex is nearly ₹ 1,500 crore and will be completed in 18 months. The system integrates advanced features such as a distribution management system, outage management system, customer relation management, metering data management system, GIS mapping for real-time communication, ring main units (RMU), and fiber optic-based metering communication systems," DVC member (Finance) Arup Sarkar told PTI. The new distribution system incorporates cutting-edge technologies, including unmanned container-based substations (E-houses) equipped with GIS-based 33 KV panels, modular battery chargers, and substation automation systems (SAS), he said.

In the first phase, DVC will deploy 12 E-houses, 8 conventional indoor-based 33/11 KV substations, and 4 GIS-based prefabricated substations. The first E-house was commissioned on January 3, 2025, in Dhanbad, with additional E-houses in BIADA, Deoli, Giridih, Hazaribagh, and Sindri slated for commissioning by March 2025, Sarkar said. The entire distribution network, including consumer feeders, will be managed through two advanced control centres located in Kalyaneshwari, West Bengal, and Koderama, Jharkhand, DVC said. These centres will ensure hot redundancy and feature a 24x7 customer cell. The new system will enable automatic consumer connection and disconnection based on billing and collection, allowing customers to manage their services seamlessly through a mobile app, eliminating the need for physical interaction, the official said. (PTI)

NAME CHANGE

I have Changed my name from Mohammed Samsul Islam to Samsul Islam swearing a notarial affidavit at srimanta Sankardevnagar Hojai(Assam).

LOST

I, Ashok Kumar Sah, C/o Rambhajan Sah of Bakalia 1 No. Balijan has lost my Admit Card bearing Roll no:- 30195, Roll Code:- 2310, Migration Certificate and College Learning Certificate.

SAIL to scale up Rourkela Steel Plant capacity to 9 MT by 2030 at ₹ 30,000 cr investment

NEW DELHI, March 16: State-owned SAIL has plans to more than double the capacity of its Rourkela Steel Plant (RSP) to around 9 million tonne per annum at an investment of ₹ 30,000 crore, a move which will boost supplies to sectors like defence, oil & gas, automobiles among others.

Post expansion, which will come up over an area of 1,200 acre, RSP will alone contribute around 25 per cent to SAIL's overall 35 million tonne per annum (MTPA) production capacity target by 2030, Alok Verma, Director In-Charge, RSP told PTI in an interview. Located at Rourkela in Odisha, around 320 km from state capital Bhubaneswar, RSP holds the distinction of being the first public sector steel plant in India. It was set up in 1950s with German collaboration with an initial capacity of 1 MT.

The plant became operational on February 3, 1959, when the then President of India Rajendra Prasad lit up the first blast furnace Parvati.

At present, the total steelmaking capacity of Steel Authority of India Ltd (SAIL) stands at 20.30 MTPA of which RSP's contribution is 4.4 MTPA.

Speaking further, the official said RSP's capacity will be enhanced by 5 MTPA to 9.4 MTPA by 2030. "With the expansion, we aim to garner a sizeable share of the sectors which we cater to," Verma said adding RSP produces plates, hot rolled (HR) coils, spiral welded and electric resistance welded pipes, cold rolled non-oriented (CRNO) which find applications in areas like ship building, rail wagons, LPG cylinder, automobiles, oil and gas, motors, generators, and transformers.

The plant also has a dedicated mill to manufacture naval grade, armour grade and quenched and tempered plates for various naval and defense applications.

Sharing the details, Verma said approximately 1,200 acre on the south eastern side of the plant will be required for taking up this mega

green field expansion project to be implemented with an investment of around ₹ 30,000 crore.

As part of expansion the major facilities are planned. It includes raw material handling plant, coke oven stamp charge battery, sinter plant, thin slab caster-direct rolling, cold rolling mill, silicon mill and logistics, he said.

Besides, a new blast furnace and steel melting shop will be set up.

As a prerequisite for this expansion, a railway line connecting Dumertra station to RSP is under construction for smooth movement of raw materials and finished goods to strengthen logistics. It will avoid load on Bondamunda Yard.

The second rail connection work is being executed by South Eastern Railways on cost deposit scheme for which the requisite amount has been deposited to Indian Railways by RSP.

SAIL, under Ministry of Steel, is among the top three steel manufacturers in India. (PTI)

Indian corporate houses remain positive for hiring persons with disabilities

KOLKATA, March 16: Indian companies are ramping up hiring of persons with disabilities (PwDs), seeing it as both a "social imperative" and a "strategic business advantage" amid growing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) commitments, stakeholders said.

Onboarding such people in Indian corporate houses has seen a steady rise, with a 30-40 per cent increase in job postings for inclusive roles over the past three years, they said.

Indian companies, ranging from the steel and mining sectors to the insurance segment are focusing on workplace accessibility to onboard PwDs in their job roles.

Future Generali India Insurance Company MD and CEO Anup Rau said the insurer has achieved the milestone of one per cent of its workforce comprising of PwDs.

"The commitment to ensuring at least one per cent PwDs of our workforce is rooted in our belief that inclusion is not just a box to tick or a policy to implement - it's a responsibility to create a meaningful change," Rau told PTI.

In the last one year, the insurer's PwD workforce has increased from 16 to 41 employees across 16 regional branches, and nearly 22 per cent of the PwD hires are women, he said. "In FY'23 it was stated that only seven of the Nifty 50 companies had over one per cent PwD employees, with four out of them being in the public sector space. This stark reality underscores the urgent need for corporate leadership in championing inclusion," Rau said.

Vedanta Chief Human Resource Officer Madhu Srivastava said the

businesses by fostering diverse perspectives and boosting creativity and innovation.

With environmental, social and governance-focused hiring and government incentives like tax benefits for PwD employment, the share of such employees in the formal workforce is expected to double by 2030, human resources investment platform First Meridian Global Services and Innovsource CEO Manmeet Singh said.

Large corporations and startups alike are "prioritising diversity, especially in sectors like IT, retail, and BFSI, where remote and hybrid work models enable greater participation," Singh told PTI.

"Despite reports that India has over 7 crore persons with disabilities (PwDs), and their employability rate remains at just 0.4 per cent, hiring of PwDs in India has seen a steady rise, with a 30-40 per cent increase in job postings for inclusive roles over the past three years," he said. Stronger regulatory mandates along with diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments by corporate houses, are driving PwD hiring, he said. Atlanta-based Global technology & digital talent solutions provider NLB Services CEO Sachin Alug said integrating persons with disability, although a focus area, is gaining momentum slowly in India Inc.

"Today, culture plays a major role in determining the brand identity of a company and how it is perceived by partners, customers, employees and the entire business ecosystem. In order to build a diversity-oriented culture, businesses are striving to employ a diverse workforce," Alug told PTI. (PTI)

In an emailed response, the spokesperson said, "Over the past 2-3 years, the number of PwD employees at Tata Steel has steadily increased. We have made significant strides in our hiring practices and have actively sought to create a more inclusive environment."

The steelmaker's official also said including people with disabilities in the workforce strengthens

Education minister unveils statue of Veer Sambhudhan Phonglo at Assam University

Marks 175th birth anniversary with grandeur

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 16: The 175th birth anniversary of Veer Sambhudhan Phonglo, the valiant freedom fighter of the erstwhile North Cachar Hills, now Dima Hasao district, was commemorated with great reverence and enthusiasm on Sunday.

The highlight of the celebration was the grand unveiling of his statue at Assam University, Silchar, a significant initiative undertaken by the Barman Dimas Kachari Development Council, Assam. Gracing the occasion as the chief guest, minister for education & tribal affairs (Plain), Ranoo Pegu, had the distinguished honor of unveiling the statue, marking a proud moment for the region.

The event witnessed an august gathering of dignitaries, including cabinet ministers Nandita Gorlosa and Kaushik Rai, along with Assam University vice-chancellor Rajive Mohan Pant. Several eminent personalities, including MLA Nihar Ranjan Das, Cachar BJP district president Rupam Saha, and community leaders Nikhil Barman, Dilip Nunisa, Rupesh Barman, Reena Singh, and Rupam Nandi Purkayastha, were present, reinforcing the historical and cultural significance of the occasion. Their collective presence underscored the unwavering respect and admiration for the legacy of Veer Sambhudhan Phonglo, whose indomitable spirit and sacrifice against British colonial rule continue to inspire generations.

A vibrant cultural performance by students followed the unveiling, encapsulating the rich heritage of the region and adding to the grandeur of the event. The celebration then transitioned to the Bipin Chandra Pal Auditorium, where a solemn yet spirited assembly was convened in honor of the

fearless revolutionary. The distinguished guests were welcomed with the traditional Uttariya, symbolizing deep respect and gratitude.

Addressing the gathering, Minister Pegu eloquently highlighted the immense contributions of Veer Sambhudhan Phonglo to India's freedom struggle.

He emphasised that Phonglo's unwavering defiance against colonial oppression serves as an enduring inspiration. Lauding Assam University for taking the initiative to install the statue, he remarked that with the presence of the portraits of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and other national icons, the addition of Phonglo's statue further enriches the institution's historical essence. Pegu reiterated the Assam government's steadfast commitment to holistic development and drew a parallel between this vision and the transformative leadership of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, which is now being carried forward under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He reaffirmed the government's dedication to preserving the contributions of tribal leaders and ensuring their legacies remain a guiding force for the future.

In a significant announcement, Pegu revealed that the Assam government has decided to establish a hostel for students in Dholai, fulfilling a long-pending request made by MLA Nihar Ranjan Das. Additionally, in a landmark initiative to honor and safeguard tribal heritage, a Tribal Museum will also be dedicated to Assam University, serving as a repository of the rich and diverse cultural traditions of indigenous communities.

Speaking at the event, minister for food, public distribu-

tion and consumer affairs, mines and minerals, and Barak Valley Development, Kaushik Rai, underscored the importance of recognizing and celebrating the unsung heroes of history. He stressed that preserving their sacrifices and contributions is vital in fostering a sense of pride and belonging among future generations. He commended the Assam government's unwavering commitment to the welfare of indigenous communities and its concerted efforts to ensure their rightful place in the state's developmental roadmap.

Minister for sports, youth welfare, and minority development, Nandita Gorlosa, echoed similar sentiments, emphasising the role of cultural preservation and education in empowering tribal communities. She reassured that the government remains steadfast in its mission to foster inclusivity and uplift marginalized communities. She further reiterated that cultural heritage must be preserved as a symbol of identity, unity, and progress.

The collective voices of the dignitaries reinforced the paramount importance of unity, mutual respect, and the need to uphold the valor and sacrifices of Veer Sambhudhan Phonglo.

It is pertinent to mention here that the grand commemoration not only paid tribute to one of India's bravest freedom fighters but also reaffirmed the Assam government's and Assam University's commitment to preserving history, fostering development, and nurturing the aspirations of future generations.

The event stood as a testament to the enduring spirit of resilience, cultural pride, and the relentless pursuit of progress, inspired by the legacy of Veer Sambhudhan Phonglo.

82% of promises of the Bodo Accord fulfilled: Amit Shah

CM appreciates the contribution of ABSU in shaping a progressive society

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 16: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday said that 82 per cent of the promises of the Bodo Accord have been achieved and the remaining will be fulfilled in the next two years.

Shah said this while addressing the 57th annual conference of the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) in Assam's Kokrajhar.

The Union home minister said also that the signing of the Bodo Accord was a step towards peace and development, and the government remains committed to upholding the promises made.

"82% of the agreements have already been fulfilled by the Assam and Central governments and the remaining will be fulfilled in the next two years under the able leadership of PM Modi. Economic development, preservation of cultural identity, and greater autonomy are key areas we are working on," he added.

Shah reiterated the government's dedication in ensuring stability and prosperity in the region and expressed his desire to see sportspersons from Bodoland representing India in the upcoming Olympics.

"This is my first visit to Dima, and I pay my respects to the 5,000 individuals who sacrificed their lives for Bodoland to become what it is today. We aspire to see sportspersons from Bodoland representing India in the upcoming Olympics," he added.

He said that they are committed to bring the youth of Bodoland into the mainstream, adding, "We will fulfill



this promise. With Bodo language now nationally recognised, we will work towards ensuring its wider acceptance."

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma also spoke on the occasion and emphasised the state's commitment to the progress of Bodoland.

"The Bodo community has always been an integral part of Assam's diverse cultural fabric. We are committed to realising Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma's vision by strengthening education and development in Bodoland. The government is focussed on implementing policies that bring long-term benefits, including employment initiatives and infrastructural upgrades," he added.

Sarma appreciated the contribution of ABSU in shaping a progressive society and highlighted several infra-

structural projects which are being established in the region.

"Several new educational institutions, including universities, are being established, and within the next three years, a medical college will be set up in Kokrajhar. We have announced the establishment of 35 higher secondary schools in Bodoland," he stated.

Later, Dipen Boro, president of ABSU, addressing the gathering, highlighted the significance of the discussions held over the past four days.

"Over the past four days, we have engaged in meaningful dialogue, identifying key challenges and opportunities for progress. The deliberations have been insightful, and the resolutions taken will shape the course of our efforts in the coming years," he added.

Boro said that their attention will be

on translating these discussions into actionable initiatives and assure that the learnings from this gathering are implemented effectively.

"ABSU remains steadfast in advocating for the rights, education, and development of our community, and we will continue working to strengthen our institutions and policies to empower the next generation," he stated.

Chief Executive Member of BTR, Pramod Boro, spoke of self-reliance and economic empowerment and promised to continue to work towards creating opportunities for our youth.

"A forward-thinking Bodoland requires investment in education, entrepreneurship, and infrastructure. Strengthening the economic foundation of the region is important for its long-term prosperity. This conference has reaffirmed our collective ambition of fostering a self-sustaining, thriving Bodoland. We will continue to work towards creating opportunities for our youth and bolstering the region's growth trajectory," he stated.

The 57th Annual Conference of the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) concluded on Sunday at Bodofa Fwthar, Dotma, Kokrajhar, after four days of discussions, cultural showcases, and deliberations on key issues affecting the Bodo community.

The event, which began on March 13, saw participation from prominent leaders, policymakers, and community representatives who engaged in dialogue about education, cultural preservation, and socio-economic development.

Governor attends seminar on national security and border management

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 16: Assam Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya attended the valedictory function of a seminar titled Codifying Border Laws: Legal Frameworks for National Security and Border Management at Assam Royal Global University in the city on Sunday.

The seminar, jointly organised by Sreemanta Chetna Manch Purvottar and Adhivakta Parishad Assam Prant, focused on the critical issues pertaining to border security and the legal frameworks necessary for effective border management.

In his address, Acharya remarked that the values of truth and justice resonate with the importance of securing the country's borders and ensuring the prosperity of the nation.

"The discussions took place in the seminar to contribute to the empowerment of India and will undoubtedly generate new and innovative ideas that will shape our approach to security," said Acharya.

He further highlighted the significance of the seminar, noting that India's vision of a 'Developed Bharat' and the commemoration of 75 years of the Constitution provide an ideal backdrop for discussions on border security.

The Governor reiterated that India's borders are vital to the nation's security and sovereignty. He emphasised the need for a comprehensive legal framework to codify border laws, underscoring that the effort to strengthen border management is crucial for safeguarding national interests.

Citing the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Governor Acharya pointed out that India's border security is not only about physical

defense but also addressing the concerns of local communities. He stressed on the importance of the newly introduced laws—Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (Indian Penal Code), Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (Criminal Procedure Code), and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam (Indian Evidence Act)—which aim to dismantle colonial legacies and set the stage for a self-reliant India.

Acharya also hailed Prime Minister Modi's focus on the Northeast, recognizing the region's cultural heritage and elevating its global standing. He cited several transformative initiatives, including the recognition of Charaideo Maidams as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the recognition of Assamese as a Classical Language, and the development of Srimanta Sankardeva's birthplace into a global tourism hub. These efforts are contributing to a renewed sense of pride and identity for Assam and the Northeast.

The Governor called for greater focus on the Northeast's border regions, given their strategic importance, as they share borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, and Myanmar. He reaffirmed the State government's commitment to working closely with the Central Government to strengthen border security and enhance regional stability.

The event was attended by Chairman of the Seventh State Finance Commission and Retired Lieutenant General Rana Pratap Kalita, Retired IPS Officer Pradeep Kumar, president of Seemant Chetna Manch, Northeast, Assam Pradesh, Binita Bhagwati, and vice president of Advocates' Council, Assam Province, Bankim Sharma. A host of other dignitaries also participated in the seminar.

Trio in police net in Jorhat

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, March 16: Three more persons have been arrested in connection with the attack on a youth on Saturday at the JPR locality during the Holi festivities. The four were produced before a judicial magistrate here on Sunday and sent to judicial custody. The three were identified as Akanta Kashyap (25) of Dohabara chook, Abhishek Bhuyan of Dohabara chook (24) and Bishanta Chetry (24) of Rajabari Mission Compound. On Saturday day Shasanka Bhushan Choudhary (24) of Dohabara chook was arrested. Dip Bora, who was attacked with a bottle, is admitted to JMCH.

Annual day celebrated

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 16: The Apte International Preschool, Guwahati, recently held its 7th Annual Day Function, marking the successful completion of another academic year at Madhab Deb Auditorium on the premises of Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra. The event was inaugurated by Vasavi Acharya, a veteran in child education, and featured energetic performances by students, including songs, dances, and skits. Anupama Sikaria, franchise owner, welcomed parents and reflected on the school's seven-year journey, emphasising its commitment to nurturing young minds with love, care, and excellence. Parents appreciated the efforts of both students and teachers, evident in the well-coordinated performances. Established seven years ago on VIP Road near Borbari Chowk, the school has successfully sent off five batches of students, many of whom have secured admission in top city schools. Managed by a dedicated all-women staff, Apte International Preschool is committed to providing quality education while ensuring safety, well-being, and holistic development.

NFR records 0.956 MT of freight loading during February



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 16: NFR recorded 0.956 million tonnes (MT) of freight loading across various commodities in February 2025, a PR stated.

In February 2025, several commodities recorded significant growth in freight loading compared to the same period last year. Container

loading recorded a hike with 44.4%, Cement loading saw a 37.5% increase, while dolomite loading rose by 26.7% and Fertilizer loading grew by 5.0%. Additionally, in other segments, ballast loading increased by 27.3%, stone chips registered a 50.5% and bamboo loading recorded a notable rise of 800% as compared to the previous fiscal year.

The consistent growth in freight loading reflects the rising economic activity in the region. As of February 2025, NFR's cumulative freight loading reached 9.627 million tonnes, marking a 4.9% increase compared to the same period last year. This upward trend has not only strengthened the region's economic landscape but also contributed significantly to NFR's revenue. Moving forward, NFR remains committed to technical advancements aimed at enhancing service reliability and efficiency, ensuring sustained growth in freight transportation.

Nemcare Hospital ICU consultant receives Dr Vijay Lakshmi Kamat Award

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 16: Dr Suchismita Paul, ICU Consultant at Nemcare Hospital, has been conferred with the prestigious Dr Vijay Lakshmi Kamat Award for securing the All India 1st Rank in the Indian Diploma in Critical Care Medicine (IDCCM) 2024.

Dr Suchismita, a resident of Digboi, is the daughter of Late Pramal Kanti Paul and Sipra Paul, and the wife of Dr Partha Pratim Das, Associate Professor at Guwahati Medical College. She completed her MBBS and post-graduation in Anesthesiology from Assam Medical College, Dibrugarh.

The award ceremony was held on March 7, 2025, at the 31st National Conference of the Indian Society of Critical Care Medicine (ISCCM) in Kochi, Kerala. Dr Sumit Ray, vice-chancellor of the Indian College of Critical Care Medicine, Professor Pradip Kumar Bhattacharya, chairman, Dr Ajith Kumar, secretary of the ISCCM, Indian Society, Dr Srinivas Samavedam, president, Elect, ISCCM, Indian Society and Dr Bharat Jagiasi, general secretary, ISCCM, India Society presented the award to Dr Suchismita.

Dr Suchismita is the first specialist doctor from the North-East region to secure the top position in the All-India Diploma Examination for the IDCCM. She received a warm welcome at the Guwahati airport, where she was felicitated by various individuals and organizations.

Peace committee in Diphu to maintain tranquility

HT Bureau

DIPHU, March 16: The Karbi Anglong District Administration has formed a peace committee in Diphu on Sunday to maintain peace and tranquility in the district.

The peace committee would be headed by the District Commissioner (DC) of Karbi Anglong, Nirola Phangchopi. A joint meeting was attended by social organisations, students, NGOs including the Karbi Anglong Women Justice Forum (KAJWF), Karbi Students Association (KSA), Bengali Samaj, Muslim Masjid Committee, and the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) and from the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) Taxation Department officials. Phangchopi convened the meeting, accompanied by Superintendent of Police Suprotive Lal Baruah. The meeting lasted for about three hours.

Addressing the media after the meeting, the DC said, "The peace committee was formed in response to an incident on March 14, 2025, where one Sukursing Enghee was attacked by a fishmonger named Nazrul Islam at the Diphu fish market. In this connection, a case has been registered against the accused person at Diphu

Police Station, and the accused has been sent to jail. For better treatment, the victim has been referred to Guwahati Medical College and Hospital, and his condition is improving, but it will take time, and I pray for his speedy recovery."

Phangchopi also appealed the stakeholders to re-open the Diphu market as usual and refrain from holding any protest demonstrations, as the peace committee body would take note any untoward incident.

When asked about the cancellation of the trading license, Phangchopi stated that the Karbi Students Association (KSA) of all factions has demanded the cancellation of trading licenses. She said that the Principal Secretary in charge of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, Dilip Terang, who was present in the meeting, has assured that the issue would be placed before the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council.

"The taxation department of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council will re-verify the fish market in Diphu and administer the market for the time being," she said.

The Diphu market has been shut down from the day of the incident while vehicle movement on the road was taking place as usual.

Dhubri shopkeepers decry alleged double standards by labour officials

HT Correspondent

DHUBRI, March 16: Local shopkeepers in Dhubri staged a protest against labour department officials on Sunday, accusing them of imposing fines unfairly. The officials had arrived to enforce the closure of small shops, citing Sunday as a declared local holiday.

However, shop owners alleged that while malls were allowed to remain open, smaller businesses were being forced to shut down. The protesting shopkeepers claimed that authorities were biased, allowing five to six major malls to operate freely while penalizing smaller establishments.

"Why this double standard? The officials turn a blind eye to big malls because they receive hefty bribes, but they target us small shopkeepers," alleged a trader. With the ongoing festive season, local business owners emphasised the importance of staying open to sustain their earnings. "If we don't open now, when will we do business?" questioned another shopkeeper.

The incident has sparked outrage among the local business community, who are demanding fair treatment from authorities. No official statement has been issued yet regarding the allegations.

Filmmaker Jahnu Baruah conferred with 15th Moghai Ojah Award

AJYCP state president Palash Changmai presided over the function



HT Correspondent

JORHAT, March 16: Globally acclaimed filmmaker of Assam and a Padma Bhushan awardee Jahnu Baruah was conferred the 15th Moghai Ojah Award at a solemn ceremony organised on the occasion of 'Ganasilpi Moghai Ojah Divas' by the central committee of the Asom Jatiyatibadi Yuba Chitra Parishad (AJYCP) with support from the Jorhat district unit of the students' body at the CKB Commerce College, Jorhat, on Sunday.

The award was instituted in 2011 by the Jorhat district unit of the AJYCP in the name of legendary dhol musician - Moghai Ojah of Jorhat - who made

dhol famous outside Assam by his enthralling performances.

The award carrying a cash prize, a seleng chadar, gamosa, japi, xori, a citation, and a memento, is annually presented on the death anniversary of Ojah on March 15. In view of Holi festivity observed on Saturday the award presentation function was organised on Sunday.

Jahnu Baruah was presented the award at the function, presided over by the State AJYCP state president Palash Changmai and inaugurated by chief advisor of the students' body Rana Pratap Baruah. The welcome address was delivered by the AJYCP General

Secretary Ratul Borgohain. Family members of the great musician (Moghai Ojah) attended the function as special guests.

Barua, after receiving the award in his address, thanked AJYCP for honouring him with the award in the name of the great musician of the State. Praising the students' body for instituting the award in the name of Moghai Ojah, he said that the society as a whole should initiate efforts to keep alive the legacy of the people who had contributed immensely to art and culture of the Assamese community.

Stating that Assamese society was a strong one having repository a rich culture heritage, the eminent filmmaker mentioned the contributions of Chaolong Siu-Ka-Pha and Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva towards the society. He urged the upcoming generation to draw inspiration from the great leaders and persons of Assam who had contributed in the field of cultural, literary and education.

Jorhat MLA Hitendra Nath Goswami and Dr Jyotirkeha Hazarika, a former Head of the Department, Assamese, Jagannath Barooah College (Autonomous), Jorhat, and also a known poetess and a writer, were amongst the guests present at the event.

Tributes were also offered at the samadhisthal of Moghai Ojah on the eastern outskirts here by the students' body.

World Glaucoma Week – 9 to 15 March 2025

Fighting the silent threat of Glaucoma together before it's too late

By: Dr. Mahipal Singh Sachdev

Glaucoma, often referred to as the 'silent thief of sight', is the second leading cause of blindness worldwide. Despite its devastating impact, it remains largely undetected until significant vision loss occurs. As we observe World Glaucoma Week 2025 under the theme "Uniting for a Glaucoma-Free World," it is crucial to raise awareness about the increasing burden of glaucoma among youth, the role of lifestyle factors, and the advancements in technology aiding in early detection and management.

Traditionally considered a disease of aging, glaucoma is now emerging as a serious concern among younger populations due to lifestyle changes, prolonged screen exposure, and poor dietary habits. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that India has one of the highest numbers of vision-related disorders, with a rising prevalence in individuals aged 10-35 years. Factors such as excessive screen time, unhealthy diet, smoking, and sleep deprivation contribute to increased intraocular pressure (IOP) – a primary risk factor for glaucoma.

Glaucoma is a group of eye diseases that damage the optic nerve, often due to elevated IOP. Unlike other vision problems that present immediate symptoms, glaucoma progresses silently, leading to irreversible blindness if left untreated. Early symptoms include:

- Frequent headaches and eye strain
- Blurred or narrowed vision (tunnel vision)
- Difficulty adjusting to darkness
- Increased light sensitivity

• Seeing halos around lights
Due to its asymptomatic nature in the early stages, regular eye screenings are essential for timely diagnosis and treatment.

Lifestyle Factors Increasing Glaucoma Risk

The modern lifestyle of today's youth is significantly contributing to the growing incidence of glaucoma. Some key risk factors include:

1. Prolonged Screen Time: Excessive use of digital devices strains the eyes, leading to increased eye pressure and reduced blink rates, which can contribute to optic nerve damage.

2. Smoking and Alcohol Consumption: Tobacco and excessive alcohol consumption deplete essential nutrients, including Vitamin A, which is vital for eye health. Smoking is also linked to oxidative stress, further exacerbating the risk of glaucoma.

3. Nutritional Deficiencies: A poor diet lacking in antioxidants, Omega-3 fatty acids, and vitamins (A, C, and E) weakens the eye's defense mechanism against pressure-related damage.

4. Poor Sleep Patterns: Irregular sleep schedules, especially among those in shift-based jobs, impact eye health by increasing IOP fluctuations.

5. Sedentary Lifestyle: Lack of physical activity contributes to poor blood circulation, affecting the optic nerve and overall eye health.

Advancements in Glaucoma Detection and Management

With the advent of cutting-edge medical technologies, early detection and treatment of



glaucoma have become more accessible. Some of the latest innovations include:

• AI-Powered Screening: Artificial intelligence-based algorithms can analyze retinal images to detect early signs of glaucoma with high accuracy.

• OCT (Optical Coherence Tomography): This advanced imaging technology provides detailed cross-sectional images of the optic nerve, enabling early detection.

• Smart Contact Lenses: Designed to monitor intraocular pressure fluctuations throughout

the day, these lenses help in early diagnosis and personalized treatment plans.

• Minimally Invasive Glaucoma Surgery (MIGS): New surgical approaches offer safer and more effective ways to reduce eye pressure with minimal recovery time.

• Laser Treatments: Selective laser trabeculoplasty (SLT) has emerged as a preferred non-invasive option to improve fluid drainage and lower eye pressure.

Preventive Measures for a Glaucoma-Free Future

While technological advancements aid in glaucoma management, prevention remains the key to reducing its global burden. Indian youth must adopt healthy habits to safeguard their vision:

• Regular Eye Check-ups: Early detection through routine screenings can prevent irreversible vision loss.

• Balanced Diet: Incorporate Vitamin A-rich foods like carrots, leafy greens, sweet potatoes, and fish to support eye health.

• Screen Time Management: Follow the 20-20-20 rule – every 20 minutes, take a 20-second break and look at something 20 feet away.

• Quit Smoking and Limit Alcohol: Smoking cessation reduces oxidative stress, while moderate alcohol intake prevents nutrient depletion.

• Exercise Regularly: Physical activity enhances blood circulation to the optic nerve, lowering the risk of high IOP.

• Adequate Sleep: Ensure at least 7-8 hours of sleep daily to maintain overall eye health.

Glaucoma is no longer just an age-related disease; it is rapidly becoming a public health concern among the youth. With the combined efforts of healthcare professionals, policymakers, and individuals, we can unite to create a glaucoma-free world. Early detection, lifestyle modifications, and embracing technological advancements are the cornerstones of preventing this silent killer from becoming an epidemic. Let's take proactive steps today to preserve the vision of future generations. *(The author is the Chairman, and Managing Director of Centre For Sight Group of Eye Hospitals)*

Is toothpaste killing all the good bacteria in our mouth?

By: Niamh Coffey, Rick Sullivan & Isabel Olegário

The goal of brushing one's teeth is to have fresh breath and prevent cavities. But the effect of toothpaste on the complex ecosystem of bacteria in our mouths – the oral microbiome – is often overlooked.

Recent research has highlighted just how crucial the oral microbiome is for our overall health. A well-balanced microbiome helps regulate harmful bacteria, aids digestion and protects the gums. But does toothpaste support this balance, or could it be disrupting it? And could the toothpaste of the future be designed to work with the oral microbiome rather than against it?

The mouth is one of the most densely populated microbial habitats in the body, home to more than 700 species of bacteria. These bacteria inhabit not only the surfaces of the teeth and gums in biofilm – a sticky, structured community that can be both beneficial and harmful – but also thrive in our saliva, contributing to the dynamic oral microbiome.

A healthy microbiome includes bacteria that help regulate pH levels (a measure of how acidic or alkaline a substance is), break down food and even produce natural antimicrobial compounds. But when the balance is disrupted – often due to diet, poor oral hygiene or certain medical conditions – harmful bacteria can take over. This imbalance, known as dysbiosis, is linked to tooth decay and gum disease.

What does toothpaste actually do?
The main function of toothpaste isn't to kill bacteria outright but to disrupt the biofilm that allows harmful bacteria to thrive. Brushing mechanically removes this biofilm from teeth and gums, while abrasives in toothpaste help break it up further.

Many toothpastes also contain fluoride, which strengthens tooth enamel and helps prevent cavities. Interestingly, fluoride itself doesn't kill bacteria, but it makes it harder for acid-producing bacteria like *Streptococcus mutans*, a key player in tooth decay, to cause damage.

Some toothpastes include antibacterial agents, such as triclosan (now banned in some countries due to safety concerns) or newer alternatives like stannous fluoride and zinc compounds. These ingredients target harmful bacteria, but there's still debate about whether they also disrupt beneficial microbes in the process.

Despite toothpaste being a daily staple, research into its effects on the oral microbiome is still evolving.

Some studies suggest that certain antibacterial agents reduce both harmful and beneficial bacteria, potentially changing the microbiome in ways we don't yet fully understand. Others indicate that the microbiome recovers quite quickly after brushing, making any disruption temporary.

Scientists are now exploring whether future toothpaste formulations could take a more targeted approach, reducing harmful bacteria while preserving beneficial species. Some emerging research looks at probiotics and prebiotics – ingredients that could actively support a healthier oral microbiome rather than simply disrupting it.

Keeping the oral microbiome in balance isn't just about avoiding cavities. There's growing evidence linking gum disease to heart disease, diabetes and harms during pregnancy. Inflammation triggered by harmful oral bacteria can spread beyond the mouth, potentially contributing to long-term health problems.

Brushing with fluoride toothpaste twice a day and cleaning between the teeth helps reduce the bacterial load in the mouth, lowering the risk of both oral and systemic diseases.

Microbiome-friendly toothpaste
As our understanding of the oral microbiome grows, toothpaste may evolve to become more selective in its action. Instead of broad-spectrum antibacterial agents, future formulations may include ingredients that support beneficial bacteria while keeping harmful species in check.

Some promising candidates include arginine, a naturally occurring amino acid that promotes the growth of beneficial bacteria, and plant-derived antimicrobials that disrupt harmful biofilms without killing good bacteria. However, research in this area is still in its early stages, and more evidence is needed to determine the long-term effects of these ingredients.

Toothpaste plays a key role in oral health by breaking up bacterial biofilm, reducing the risk of tooth decay and gum disease. While some ingredients may affect the oral microbiome, research suggests that brushing and flossing remain the most effective ways to maintain a healthy mouth.

Future toothpaste innovations may shift towards microbiome-friendly formulations but, for now, the best advice remains the same: brush twice a day with fluoride toothpaste, spit out the excess and clean between your teeth daily. *(Courtesy: Scroll.in)*

The menace of binge drinking: A gateway to stroke for Indians

By: Dr. Vipul Gupta

With the rising incidences of mortality and morbidity due to stroke, it is crucial to address this silent but pervasive health threat that looms over our population. Recent studies, including the groundbreaking Interstroke study, have shed light on the alarming vulnerability of Indians to stroke, with a significant correlation identified between high alcohol consumption and stroke risk.

The Interstroke study, a global initiative investigating the risk factors for stroke, has provided valuable insights into the specific challenges faced by the Indian population. Among the various risk factors examined, high alcohol consumption has emerged as a major contributor to the heightened susceptibility of Indians to strokes.

Factors Influencing Stroke Risk in Indians

1. Ethnicity: Research indicates that ethnic background plays a crucial role in determining an individual's vulnerability to stroke. Indians, with their unique genetic makeup and predispositions, are found to be more susceptible to the adverse effects of excessive alcohol consumption.

2. Gender Disparities: The study also underscores gender disparities, revealing that Indian men are more prone to strokes than their female counterparts.

3. Alcohol and Body Mechanism: The relationship between alcohol and stroke risk is multifaceted. High alcohol intake can lead to elevated blood pressure, irregular heart rhythms, and increased levels

of triglycerides, all of which contribute to a higher likelihood of strokes. The unique physiological response of Indian bodies to alcohol exacerbates these risks.

Binge Drinking and Stroke Risk: A Deadly Connection

Binge drinking, characterized by the consumption of large quantities of alcohol in a short span, has become a growing concern in India.

1. Blood Pressure Surge: Binge drinking often leads to a sudden spike in blood pressure, putting immense strain on the cardiovascular system. Prolonged episodes of elevated blood pressure significantly increase the risk of a stroke, especially among those genetically predisposed to hypertension, a prevalent condition in the Indian population.

2. Atrial Fibrillation (AFib): Binge drinking is a recognized trigger for irregular heart rhythms, such as atrial fibrillation (AFib). This condition, prevalent among binge drinkers, disrupts blood flow, forming clots that can travel to the brain and cause a stroke.

3. Cholesterol Imbalance: Excessive alcohol intake can disturb the delicate balance of cholesterol levels in the body, leading to the buildup of arterial plaque. This plaque can rupture, forming clots that may travel to the brain, causing ischemic strokes.

Binge drinking, with its insidious link to stroke risk, poses a formidable threat to the Indian population. Acknowledging the specific dangers posed by this harmful drinking pattern is vital for implementing targeted preventive measures.

Preventive Measures

As we enter the festive season, where alcohol consumption tends to spike, it becomes imperative to adopt preventive measures. Here are some suggestions:

1. Moderation is Key: Encourage responsible drinking. Limit alcohol intake and avoid binge drinking, especially during celebrations. Set personal limits and stick to them.

2. Stay Hydrated: Consuming water between alcoholic beverages can help in maintaining hydration levels and mitigate the dehydrating effects of alcohol.

3. Know Your Limits: Be aware of individual tolerance levels. Factors like age, weight, and overall health influence how alcohol affects the body. Listen to your body and know when to stop.

4. Opt for Healthy Alternatives: Consider substituting traditional alcoholic beverages with healthier alternatives. Non-alcoholic mocktails and fresh fruit juices can be enjoyable alternatives during festivities.

5. Regular Health Check-ups: Schedule regular health check-ups to monitor blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and overall cardiovascular health. Early detection and management of risk factors can significantly reduce the chances of stroke. Acknowledging the link between high alcohol consumption and stroke risk is the first step towards a healthier future. By embracing preventive measures and making informed choices, we can collectively work towards reducing the impact of strokes on the Indian population, ensuring a happier and healthier tomorrow. *(The author is Group Director and Head of the Department of Neurointervention at Paras Hospital, Gurugram)*

Many gluten-free foods are high in calories and sugar, low on fiber and protein, and they cost more — new research

By: Sachin Rustgi

United States consumers often pay more for gluten-free products, yet these items typically provide less protein and more sugar and calories compared with gluten-containing alternatives. That is the key finding of my new study, published in the journal *Plant Foods for Human Nutrition*.

This study compared gluten-free products with their gluten-containing counterparts and the findings suggested that many perceived benefits of gluten-free products – such as weight control and diabetes management – are exaggerated.

Currently, many gluten-free products lack dietary fiber, protein and essential nutrients. Manufacturers often add supplements to compensate, but the incorporation of dietary fibers during processing can hinder protein digestion.

In addition, gluten-free products generally contain higher sugar levels compared with other products containing gluten. Long-term adherence to a gluten-free diet has been associated with increased body mass index, or BMI and nutritional deficiencies. Gluten-free products – defined in the U.S. as those that contain less than or equal to 20 parts per million of gluten – largely lack wheat, rye, barley and sometimes oats, all rich sources of arabinoxylan, a crucial nonstarch polysaccharide. Arabinoxylan provides several health benefits, including promoting beneficial gut bacteria, enhancing digestion, regulating blood sugar levels and supporting a balanced gut microbiota.

Our study also pointed out that it is difficult to find a gluten-free product that excels in all nutritional areas, such as high protein and fiber content with low carbohydrates and sugar.

On the other hand, gluten-free seeded bread contains significantly more fiber – 38.24 grams per 100 grams – than its gluten-containing counterparts. This is likely due to efforts by manufacturers to address fiber deficiencies by using ingredients such as pseudo-cereals, such as amaranth and quinoa hydrocolloids – meaning water-soluble macromolecules used in gluten-free baked goods made with quinoa flour.

These improvements, however, vary by manufacturer and region. For example, gluten-free products in Spain tend to have lower fiber content than their gluten-containing counterparts.

Why it matters

The term "gluten-free diet" has become a buzzword, much like "organic," and is now a part of everyday life for many people, often without a full understanding of its actual benefits. While a gluten-free diet is a medical necessity for people who are sensitive to gluten, a condition called celiac disease, or for those with wheat allergies, others adopt a gluten-free diet due to perceived health benefits or because it's a trend.

In 2024, the global gluten-free product market was valued at US\$7.28 billion and projected to reach \$13.81 billion by 2032. The U.S. market share is estimated to be \$5.9 billion – a little less than half of the global figure.

Approximately 25 per cent of the U.S. population consumes gluten-free products. This figure is far higher than the roughly 6 per cent of people with non-celiac wheat sensitivity, 1 per cent of people with celiac disease and even lower percentages of people with wheat allergies.

This suggests that many people adopt gluten-free diets for reasons other than medical necessity, which may not offer health or financial benefits.

Symptoms of celiac disease and gluten intolerance include stomach pain and bloating.

What's next

Investment in research and development is essential to create more nutritionally balanced gluten-free products using locally available ingredients. This will require human feeding trials with different formulations of gluten-free products to ensure that these products meet nutritional needs without adverse effects.

Collaborations between governments could help secure subsidies, which would reduce production costs and make these products more affordable. Although the initial costs of research and maintaining a gluten-free production line are high, using local ingredients and financial incentives can make these products more cost-competitive compared with their gluten-containing counterparts.

Public education is also important to keep people informed about the pros and cons associated with a gluten-free diet. *(Courtesy: Down to Earth)*

Conceiving amid Smog: Impact of pollution on IVF success

By: Dr. Neelam Banerjee

As pollution levels surge across North India, the detrimental effects of poor air quality extend far beyond respiratory illnesses. Increasing evidence reveals a concerning link between pollution and reproductive health, particularly in the success rates of in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatments. For couples struggling with infertility, pollution represents an often-overlooked factor that could significantly impact their journey toward parenthood.

Connection Between Pollution and Fertility

Air pollution, laden with fine particulate matter, heavy metals, and other toxins, is known to affect overall health. Its influence on reproductive health is now a focus of scientific research.

Pollutants like nitrogen dioxide, and sulphur dioxide can disrupt hormonal balance, oxidative stress levels, and inflammation in the body, factors that play a crucial role in fertility.

For men, exposure to polluted air has been associated with lower sperm count, reduced motility, and an increase in abnormal sperm morphology. For women, pollution can impair ovarian reserve, disrupt menstrual cycles, and adversely

versely affect egg quality. These challenges compound the difficulty for couples undergoing IVF, where both egg and sperm quality are critical for successful outcomes.

Impact on IVF Success Rates

Studies have highlighted that individuals exposed to higher levels of air pollution are at a greater risk of poor IVF outcomes. Pollutants can negatively influence embryo quality, implantation success, and pregnancy rates.

One study reported that women exposed to elevated levels of fine particulate matter during ovarian stimulation had fewer mature eggs retrieved during the IVF process.

Additionally, pollution-induced oxidative stress can lead to increased DNA damage in reproductive cells. This not only reduces the likelihood of conception but may also elevate the risk of miscarriage and complications during pregnancy.

Pollution Crisis and Reproductive Health

North India is facing alarming pollution levels, with the region frequently enveloped in hazardous smog during the winter months. Cities like Delhi, Gurugram, and Lucknow report air quality indices (AQI) that often exceed safe limits by several folds.

This environmental crisis am-

plifies health risks, including those related to fertility.

For couples seeking IVF treatment, the toxic air quality may pose an added hurdle. Prolonged exposure to polluted air could affect both partners, diminishing the effectiveness of fertility treatments and adding to the emotional and financial strain of the process.

Protective Measures for Reproductive Health

While systemic solutions are essential to combat pollution, individuals can reduce its impact by using air purifiers, limiting outdoor exposure on high-pollution days, maintaining an antioxidant-rich diet to counter oxidative stress, and consulting fertility specialists to address potential risks during IVF.

As the air quality crisis continues to escalate, its implications for reproductive health and IVF outcomes cannot be ignored. Addressing this issue requires both immediate individual precautions and long-term policy interventions. For hopeful parents navigating the challenges of infertility, understanding and mitigating the impact of pollution could be a vital step in achieving their dream of parenthood. *(The author is a Senior Consultant & Head of Department - IVF, Yatharth Hospital, Greater Noida)*

'The people and the government will do everything in their power to at least slightly alleviate their pain'

51 dead, more than 100 injured in nightclub fire in North Macedonia

SKOPIE (NORTH MACEDONIA), March 16: A massive nightclub fire killed 51 people early Sunday in North Macedonia's eastern town of Kocani, and injured more than 100, interior minister Panche Toshkovski told a press conference.

The blaze broke out around 2:35 a.m. during a concert by a local pop group at the Pulse nightclub, according to Toshkovski. He said pyrotechnics caused the roof to catch fire. Videos showed chaos inside the club, with young people running through the smoke as the musicians urged people to escape as quickly as possible.

Officials said the injured have been taken to hospitals around the country, including the capital, Skopje, many with severe burns. The effort was being assisted by multiple volunteer organisations.

Health Minister Arben Taravari said 118 people have been hospitalised, adding that he had received offers of assistance from neighbouring countries.

"All our capabilities have been



put to use, in a maximum effort to save as many lives as possible of the young people involved in this tragedy," Taravari told reporters, at times looking visibly shaken.

This is the worst tragedy in recent memory to befall the landlocked nation, whose population is less than 2 million.

"This is a difficult and very sad

day for Macedonia. The loss of so many young lives is irreparable, and the pain of the families, loved ones and friends is immeasurable," Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski wrote on X, formerly Twitter.

"The people and the government will do everything in their power to at least slightly alleviate their pain and help them in these most

difficult moments." Family members gathered in front of hospitals and Kocani's city offices begging authorities for more information.

The club was in an old building that was previously a carpet warehouse and has been running for several years, according to local media MKD.

Toshkovski said that authorities would investigate the venue's licensing and safety provisions, adding that the government had a "moral responsibility" to help prosecute anyone responsible. Police have arrested one man already, but he didn't provide details on the person's involvement.

Condolences poured in from politicians across the region, including Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama, the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

"I wish those who were injured a speedy recovery. Ukraine mourns alongside our (North) Macedonian friends on this sad day," Zelenskyy wrote on X. (AP)

Iran denies aiding Yemen's Houthi rebels after US strikes, threat from Trump

CAIRO, March 16: Iran on Sunday once again denied aiding Yemen's Houthi rebels after the United States launched a wave of airstrikes against them and President Donald Trump warned that Tehran would be held "fully accountable" for their actions.

The Houthi-run Health Ministry said the strikes killed at least 31 people, including women and children, and wounded over 100.

The rebels said one strike hit two homes in northern Saada province, killing four children and a woman. The rebel-run Al-Masirah TV showed images of what it said were the bodies. The Houthis have repeatedly targeted international shipping in the Red Sea and launched missiles and drones at Israel in what the rebels said were acts of solidarity with the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, where Israel has been at war with Hamas, another Iranian ally.

The attacks stopped when a fragile Israel-Hamas ceasefire took hold in Gaza in January, but the Houthis had threatened to renew them after Israel cut off the flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza this month.

The US and others have long accused Iran of providing military aid to the Houthis and the US Navy has seized Iranian-made missile parts and other weaponry it said were bound for the militant group, which controls Yemen's capital, Sanaa, and the country's north.

Gen. Hossein Salami, head of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, denied his country was involved in the Houthis' attacks, saying it "plays no role in setting the national or operational policies" of the militant groups it is allied with across the region, according to state-run TV.



Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, in a post on X, urged the US to halt the strikes and said Washington cannot dictate Iran's foreign policy.

Trump on Saturday had vowed to use "overwhelming lethal force" until the Houthis cease their attacks on shipping along the vital maritime corridor.

The airstrikes come a few days after the Houthis said they would resume attacks on Israeli vessels sailing off Yemen in response to Israel's latest blockade on Gaza. There have been no Houthi attacks reported since then. The Houthis had targeted over 100 merchant vessels with missiles and drones, sinking two and killing four sailors, during their campaign targeting military and civilian ships between the start of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023 and January of this year, when the ceasefire in Gaza took effect.

The United States, Israel and Britain have previously hit Houthi-held areas in Yemen, but Saturday's operation was conducted solely by the US.

It was the first strike on the Houthis under the second Trump administration. (AP)

Five security personnel killed in terror attack in Balochistan

KARACHI, March 16: At least five security personnel were killed and more than a dozen injured in a terrorist attack in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province on Sunday.

A suicide attacker rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into a convoy of paramilitary Frontier Corp (FC) on the national highway in the Noshki area of the province.

No group has claimed any responsibility for the attack yet.

Confirming the attack, the police chief of the local Noshki police station Zafarullah Sumalani said that the initial investigations suggested that it was a suicide attack.

"The death toll may rise," he said.

Sumalani also said that evidence from the site of the attack suggested that a suicide attacker rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into the FC convoy.

Meanwhile, security forces have cordoned off the blast site, and investigations are underway to determine the cause and those responsible for the attack.

Balochistan Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti condemned the attack and expressed sorrow over the loss of life. "Those who play with the peace of Balochistan would be brought to a tragic end," Bugti said in an official release. Balochistan government spokesperson Shahid Rind also condemned the attack "targeting innocents."

Earlier last week, in the same province, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) militants ambushed the Jaffar Express, carrying 440 passengers, near the mountainous terrain of Gudalar and Piru Kunri on March 11. The militants killed 21 passengers and four paramilitary soldiers before the Army eliminated all 33 terrorists on March 12. (PTI)

US prepares to deport about 300 alleged gang members to El Salvador

WASHINGTON, March 16: President Donald Trump's administration will pay El Salvador USD 6 million to imprison for one year about 300 alleged members of the Venezuelan Tren de Aragua gang, in one of the first instances of the Central American country taking migrants from the United States.

The agreement follows discussions between El Salvador's President, Nayib Bukele, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio about housing migrants in El Salvador's notorious prison. Bukele's government has arrested more than 84,000 people, sometimes without due process, since 2022 as part of his crackdown on gang violence in the small country. It came as the American Civil Liberties Union and Democracy Forward preemptively sued Trump late Friday in federal court in Washington, DC, saying five Venezuelan men being held at an immigration detention centre in Raymondville, Texas, were at "imminent risk of removal" under the Alien Enemies Act.

The agreement may have been put on hold, however. US District Judge James E. Boasberg on Saturday blocked anyone from being deported under Trump's proclamation for two weeks and scheduled a Friday hearing to consider arguments. ACLU attorney Lee Gelernt said two flights Saturday may have carried people deported under Trump's proclamation, one to El Salvador and one possibly to Honduras. (AP)

Rebels in Yemen say death toll from US strikes has climbed to 31, including women, children

WEST PALM BEACH (US), March 16: The Houthi rebel-run Health Ministry says the death toll from US strikes on Yemen has climbed to 31, including women and children.

Anees al-Asbahi, a spokesperson for the ministry, said Sunday that another 101 people were wounded in the overnight strikes.

President Donald Trump said he ordered a series of airstrikes on the Houthi-held areas in Yemen on Saturday, promising to use "overwhelming lethal force" until Iranian-backed Houthi rebels cease their attacks on shipping along a vital maritime corridor. The Houthis said at least 18 civilians were killed. "Our brave Warfighters are right now carrying out aerial attacks on the terrorists' bases, leaders, and missile defences to protect American shipping, air, and naval assets, and to restore Navigational Freedom," Trump said in a social media post. "No terrorist force will stop American commercial and naval vessels from freely sailing the Waterways of the World."

He also warned Iran to stop supporting the rebel group, promising to hold the country "fully accountable" for the actions of its proxy. It comes two weeks after the US leader sent a letter to Iranian leaders offering a path to restarting bilateral talks between the countries on Iran's advancing nuclear programme.

Trump has said he will not allow it to become operational.

The Houthis reported explosions in their territory Saturday evening, in the capital of Sanaa and the northern province of Saada, the rebels' stronghold on the border with Saudi Arabia, with more airstrikes reported in those areas early Sunday.

Images online showed plumes of black smoke over the area of the Sanaa airport complex, which includes a sprawling military facility. The Houthis also reported airstrikes early Sunday on the provinces of Hodeida, Bayda, and Marib.

At least 18 people were killed, including 13 in Sanaa and five in Saada, according to the Houthi-run health ministry. At



least 24 others were wounded, including nine in Sanaa and 15 in Saada, it said.

A US official said this was the beginning of air strikes on Houthi targets that are expected to continue. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to talk to the press.

Nasruddin Amer, deputy head of the Houthi media office, said the airstrikes won't deter them and they would retaliate against the US. "Sanaa will remain Gaza's shield and support and will not abandon it no matter the challenges," he added on social media.

Another spokesman, Mohamed Abdulsalam, on X, called Trump's claims that the Houthis threaten international shipping routes "false and misleading".

The airstrikes come a few days after the Houthis said they would resume attacks on Israeli vessels sailing off Yemen in response to Israel's latest blockade on Gaza. They described the warning as affecting the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Arabian Sea. There have been no Houthi attacks reported since then.

Earlier this month, Israel halted all aid coming into Gaza and warned of "additional consequences" for Hamas if their fragile ceasefire in the war isn't extended

as negotiations continue over starting a second phase.

The Houthis had targeted over 100 merchant vessels with missiles and drones, sinking two vessels and killing four sailors, during their campaign targeting military and civilian ships between the start of the war between Israel and Hamas in late 2023 and January of this year, when this ceasefire in Gaza took effect. The attacks raised the Houthis' profile as they faced economic and other problems at home amid Yemen's decade-long stalemate war that's torn apart the Arab world's poorest nation.

The Houthi media office said the US strikes hit a residential neighbourhood in Sanaa's northern district of Shoubab. Residents said at least four airstrikes rocked the Eastern Geraf neighbourhood there, terrifying women and children.

The Eastern Geraf is home to Houthi-held military facilities and a headquarters for the rebels' political bureau, located in a densely populated area. The Houthis reported fresh strikes on the southwestern Dhamar province late Saturday. They said the strikes hit the outskirts of the provincial capital, also named Dhamar, and the district of Abs. The United States, Israel and Britain have previously hit Houthi-held areas in Yemen. (AP)

Hamas says it will only release American-Israeli hostage if ceasefire deal implemented

CAIRO, March 16: Hamas said on Saturday it will only release an American-Israeli and the bodies of four other hostages if Israel implements their ceasefire agreement, calling it an "exceptional deal" aimed at getting the truce back on track.

Israeli airstrikes meanwhile killed nine people in the Gaza Strip who the military identified as militants, allegations denied by a UK-based aid group that said eight of its workers were killed.

A senior Hamas official said long-delayed talks over the ceasefire's second phase would need to begin the day of the release and last no longer than 50 days.

Israel also would need to stop barring the entry of humanitarian aid and withdraw from a strategic corridor along Gaza's border with Egypt. Israel has said it won't pull out from the corridor, citing the need to combat weapons smuggling.

Hamas would also demand the release of more Palestinian prisoners in exchange for hostages, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the closed-door talks.

Edan Alexander, 21, who grew up in New Jersey, was abducted from his military base during Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack that ignited the war. He is the last living US citizen held in Gaza. Hamas still has 59 hostages, 35 believed to be dead.

Speaking at a protest camp set up last week outside Israeli military headquarters in Tel Aviv, relatives of hostages said Netanyahu was "violating the agreement he signed and abandoning the hostages in Gaza". "You want to sacrifice our children for the pleasures of power," said Itzik Horn, father of hostage Eitan and freed hostage Iair. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu late Saturday told negotiators to prepare for the continuation of talks regarding the release of hostages, his office said.

Airstrikes kill nine
Two Israeli airstrikes in the northern town of Beit Lahiyah near the border killed at least nine people, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.

The Palestinian Journalists' Protection Center, a local watchdog, said the dead included three Palestinian journalists who were documenting aid distribution. Local

health official Fares Awad identified one as Mahmoud Islim, who was operating a drone. The Israeli military said it struck two people operating a drone that it said posed a threat to soldiers in the area. It said it launched another strike at a group of people who came to collect the drone equipment, identifying all those targeted as militants.

The army later released the names of six people it said were militants killed in the strikes, including one accused of taking part in the October 7 attack and another who it said had been released as part of the ceasefire. The military said two others, including Islim, were militants posing as journalists.

The UK-based Al Khair Foundation said that eight of its workers were killed in the strikes. It denied the Israeli military's allegations that those killed were militants or had connections to Hamas.

Hamas in a statement called the attack a "serious escalation" showing Israel's attempts to "sabotage any opportunity" to implement the ceasefire agreement.

Also Saturday, Israel's military said it removed a platoon of soldiers from Gaza who were seen in a video on social media opening fire during a celebration of the Jewish holiday of Purim. The video shows soldiers shooting, apparently randomly, while another performs the customary reading of the Book of Esther. The military said the soldiers "will face disciplinary measures".

Israel has cast doubt on Hamas' offer

The United States said it presented on Wednesday a proposal to extend the ceasefire a few weeks as the sides negotiate a permanent truce. It said Hamas was claiming flexibility in public while privately making "entirely impractical" demands.

Talks continued in Egypt, which along with Qatar has served as mediators with Hamas in the indirect talks with Israel.

Israel and Hamas were to begin negotiations on the ceasefire's second phase in early February, but only preparatory talks have been held. In Phase Two, Hamas would release all remaining hostages in exchange for a lasting truce.

The first phase saw the release of 25 Israeli hostages and the bodies of eight others in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners. (AP)

Russia, Ukraine trade overnight aerial attacks after Putin sets out conditions for ceasefire

KYIV, March 16: Russia and Ukraine traded heavy aerial blows overnight, with both sides on Saturday reporting more than 100 enemy drones over their respective territories.

The attacks comes less than 24 hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin met with US envoy Steve Witkoff to discuss details of the American proposal for a 30-day ceasefire in the war with Ukraine.

Putin told a press conference on Thursday that he supported a truce in principle but set out a host of details that need to be clarified before it is agreed. Kyiv has already endorsed the truce proposal, although Ukrainian officials have publicly raised doubts as to whether Moscow will commit to such a deal.

Speaking to reporters in Kyiv on Saturday, after virtual talks between Western allies hosted by UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Zelenskyy voiced Ukraine's support for the 30-day full ceasefire proposal to discuss a longer-term peace plan, but said Russia would attempt to derail talks with conditions and "buts".

Starmer has told allies to "keep the pressure" on Putin to back a ceasefire in Ukraine, hailing Ukraine as the "party of peace". Starmer said Putin will "sooner or later" have to "come to the table".

In a statement earlier on Saturday, Zelenskyy had accused Moscow of building up forces

along the border.

"The build up of Russian forces indicates that Moscow intends to keep ignoring diplomacy. It is clear that Russia is prolonging the war," he said.

However, Zelenskyy stressed that if Russia did not agree with the US proposal there would be "specific, harsh and straightforward" response from the administration of US President Donald Trump.

He also said that Kyiv's troops were maintaining their presence in Russia's Kursk region after Trump said Friday that "thousands" of Ukrainian troops had been surrounded by the Russian military.

"The operation of our forces in the designated areas of the Kursk region continues," Zelenskyy said. "Our troops continue to hold back Russian and North Korean groupings in the Kursk region. There is no encirclement of our troops."

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio spoke Saturday with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. In the call, they discussed next steps to follow up on recent meetings in Saudi Arabia and agreed to continue working towards restoring communication between the United States and Russia, State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce said in a statement.

Ukraine's air force said Saturday that Russia had launched a barrage of 178 drones and two ballistic missiles over the country overnight. (AP)

Indonesia's cocoa farmers work with businesses to fight bitter impact of climate change

TANJUNG REJO (INDONESIA), March 16: The loud whirr of a chainsaw sounds through the forest as a small group of farmers gathers around a tree filled with red seed pods. With one slow stroke, a severed knobby branch hits the ground.

"Now it will help the tree grow new fruit," farmer Tari Santoso says with a smile.

Thousands of cocoa farmers across Indonesia like Santoso are working with businesses and other organisations to protect their crops from the bitter impacts of climate change and under-investment that have pushed cocoa prices to record levels.

Cocoa trees are high maintenance: Grown only near the equator, they require a precise combination of steady temperatures, humidity and sunlight. It takes five years for a tree to start producing the seeds that are processed into cocoa used to make chocolate and other delectable foods. Climate change raises the risks for farmers: Hotter weather hurts yields and longer rainy seasons trigger the spread of fungus and deadly pests. Increasingly unpredictable weather patterns have made it harder for farmers to deal with those challenges.

So farmers are switching to other crops, further reducing cocoa supplies and pushing prices higher: In 2024, prices nearly tripled, reaching about USD 12,000 per



ton, driving up chocolate costs and leading some chocolate makers to try growing cocoa in laboratories.

Indonesia is the third-largest producer of cocoa in the world, behind Cote D'Ivoire and Ghana, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, farmers are joining with businesses and nongovernmental organisations to develop better growing practices and improve their livelihoods.

Sitting in the shade of his forest farm in south Sumatra, 3 miles (5 kilometers) from a national park where Sumatran tigers and rhinos roam, farmer Santoso is working with Indonesian chocolate maker Krakakoa.

After he began working with the company in 2016, Santoso starting using practices that helped his

cocoa trees flourish, regularly pruning and grafting new branches onto older trees to promote growth and prevent the spread of disease.

He is using organic fertiliser and has adopted agro-forestry techniques, integrating other crops and trees such as bananas, dragon fruit, coffee and pepper, into his farm to foster a healthier ecosystem and invest in other income sources.

"It wasn't very successful before we met Krakakoa," Santoso said. "But then, we received training ... things are much better."

Krakakoa has trained more than 1,000 cocoa farmers in Indonesia according to its founder and CEO, Sabrina Mustopo. The company also provides financial support.

Santoso and other farmers in Sumatra said the partnership helped them to form a cooperative

provides low-interest loans to farmers, with interest paid back into the cooperative rather than to banks outside of the community.

Cocoa farmers who need bigger loans from government-owned banks also benefit from partnering with businesses, as the guaranteed buyer agreements can provide collateral needed to get loans approved, said Armin Hari, a communications manager at the Cocoa Sustainability Partnership, a forum for public-private collaboration for cocoa development in Indonesia.

Dozens of other businesses, the government and nongovernmental organisations and cooperatives are also working with cocoa farmers to better cope with climate change, benefiting thousands, Hari said. He pointed to a collaboration between Indonesia's National Research and Innovation Agency and the local division of international chocolate maker Mars, which have released a new variant of cocoa that produces more pods per tree.

Challenges still remain, said Rajendra Aryal, the FAO's country director for Indonesia. Fewer people see cocoa farming as a lucrative business and instead are planting other crops such as palm oil. And many small-scale farmers still cannot get loans, he said.

But Aryal said he hopes that continued collaboration between farmers and others will help. (AP)

Mizoram body urges Shah to reconsider decision to fence India-Myanmar border, lift FMR

AIZAWL, March 16: The central committee of the Young Mizo Association or Central YMA (CYMA) has urged Union Home Minister Amit Shah to reconsider the Centre's decision to fence the India-Myanmar border and lift the Free Movement Regime (FMR) with the neighbouring country, a leader of the body said on Sunday.

YMA is the largest civil society organisation in Mizoram with more than 4 lakh members out of the state's nearly 11 lakh population, according to the 2011 Census.

CYMA general secretary Malsawmliana told PTI that leaders of the association met Shah during his visit to the state on Saturday and submitted a memorandum urging him to stop fencing the India-Myanmar border and reconsider the decision to lift FMR.

The memorandum said that the proposed scrapping of the FMR and fencing the international border would have a detrimental effect on the vital ethnic and cultural ties between ethnic Mizos of India and Myanmar as well as their livelihoods.

It said that FMR has been a vital mechanism in maintaining ethnic and cultural connections and fostering brotherhood between the Mizo communities of the two countries.



"The proposed abolition of the FMR and the implementation of border fencing would have a detrimental effect on the vital ethnic and cultural connections, disrupting the harmonious co-existence and cultural exchanges that have been integral to the lives of Mizos.

"We firmly believed that the scrapping of the FMR and the erection of border fence would not only disrupt these cultural connections but also

the lives and livelihoods of the Mizo people on both sides," the memorandum said.

Mizoram has been providing shelter to around 40,000 refugees from Myanmar's Chin state, who share ethnic ties with the Mizos, since the military takeover of the neighbouring country in 2021.

Besides, the state also hosts 2,000 refugees from Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and 12,000

internally displaced people (IDPs) from Manipur.

The memorandum urged the Centre to extend humanitarian assistance and provide additional funds to support the YMA and other organisations' efforts in providing relief to refugees and IDPs.

The CYMA also placed several demands, including the upgradation of Lengpui airport, allocation of more funds for combating drugs, inclusion of the Mizo language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution and creation of a Mizo battalion under the Border Security Force (BSF).

Malsawmliana said that Shah assured them of the upgradation of Lengpui airport, which will be executed by the Airports Authority of India (AAI) and the work will be completed within six months.

Shah told the leaders that the Centre would provide financial assistance to the state government to provide relief to the refugees and IDPs, he said.

As regards lifting the FMR and erection of the border fence, the Union home minister informed the CYMA leaders that it requires careful deliberations and suggested to them that they should send representatives to Delhi, according to Malsawmliana. (PTI)

Drugs worth ₹ 88 crore seized

Amit Shah says no mercy for drug cartels

NEW DELHI, March 16: A massive consignment of methamphetamine tablets worth ₹ 88 crore was seized and four members of an international drug cartel were arrested in Imphal and Guwahati zones, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on Sunday.

Shah also said the drug haul is a testament to the stellar performance of the bottom-to-top and top-to-bottom approach towards investigation and asserted that the Narendra Modi government's crackdown on drugs will continue.

"No mercy for drug cartels. Accelerating the Modi gov't's march to build a drug-free Bharat, a massive consignment of methamphetamine tablets worth ₹ 88 crore is seized, and 4 members of the international drug cartel are arrested in Imphal and Guwahati zones," he wrote on X.

The home minister expressed his "heartfelt" congratulations to the Narcotics Control Bureau for the success.

Acting on a tip-off, the officers of NCB Imphal zone carried out an operation on March 13. The NCB team intercepted a truck near the Lilong area and recovered 102.39 kg of Methamphetamine tablets from a toolbox in the rear section of the truck, according to an official statement.

Two occupants of the truck were arrested, it added.

Without delay, the team immediately conducted a follow-up operation and apprehended the suspected receiver of the contraband from the Lilong area, the statement said.

A four-wheeler, used for drug trafficking, was also seized and the man was subsequently arrested, it said.

The suspected source of the contraband is Moreh town in Manipur. Further investigation is underway to nab others involved in the case, the statement said.

In another operation on the same day, officers

of the NCB-Guwahati zone intercepted an SUV on the Assam-Mizoram border near Silchar and seized 7.48 kg of Methamphetamine Tablets concealed inside the spare tyre of the vehicle, it said.

The occupant of the vehicle was arrested, according to the statement.

The source of the contraband was Moreh and the suspected destination was Karimganj in Assam, the statement said.

Further investigation to nab others involved in the case is going on, it said.

Meanwhile, the NCB would be taking over the probe from the Mizoram State Excise Department into the seizure of about 46 kg of crystal meth from Brigade Bawngkawn in Aizawl on March 6.

In this case, four people involved in the drug syndicate have already been arrested.

The investigation is being taken over by NCB to probe the international and inter-state linkages of the drug trafficking network, the statement said.

The Northeastern region has emerged as one of the most vulnerable areas of India from the point of view of drug trafficking owing to its geographic location, it said.

Identifying this vulnerability, the Ministry of Home Affairs augmented the strength of the NCB in 2023 to further strengthen the "war against drugs" in the region.

The NCB, through its five zonal units and a regional headquarters in the Northeast, has been continuously working against drug traffickers operating in the region, particularly those involved in the trafficking of synthetic drugs such as Methamphetamine tablets, popularly known as YABA, it said.

These tablets pose a threat to not only the young population of the region, but also to the security of the nation as a whole, the statement said. (PTI)

Locals urge highway department to restore damaged bridge and NH-415



HT Correspondent

ITANAGAR, March 16: The local residents of the capital complex and commuters of NH-415 from Hollongi to Itanagar have urged upon the Highway authority to immediately take up the repriming and maintenance and restoration of the damaged portion.

The locals allege that due to flash flood, landslide and earth cutting, several parts of road have been damaged, but it has been observed that the restoration is being done at a snail speed.

"There are several parts on the stretch be-

tween Itanagar to Hollongi where road construction has not been done properly and every year there are damages caused due to rain and other various reasons," the local said.

There are several bridges in between Itanagar and Hollongi which have been either washed away or damaged and even the one located near the Airport tri-junction has been totally submerged and the small river is flowing over the bridge.

However, no one has come up for even restoration work, as a result of which the traffic

between Airport and Hollongi check gate made on one way and four lane, is not properly functioning.

Just near the said bridge a portion of the road has been completely damaged and needs immediate restoration but no restoration work has been initiated so far and time is passing day to week and to months.

The local allege that the officers from PWD, and Highway had inspected the bridge on several occasions during the last four years but no proper action has been initiated and in the present day the stretch of around 200 mtrs are not being used for traffic movement and remain closed. As per information, the inspection team from Uttarakhand and NHIDCL has also carried out inspection twice but the problem remains the same, the locals observed.

The local and commuters further alleged that the actual monsoon is yet to arrive but presently in the month of March several potholes has begun to show up at many locations of the national Highway-415.

"If the highway authority did not wake from the deep slumber then this year also we have to face the ire of the bad road of NH-415 like every year in Itanagar. It is high time that the Highway authority especially the NHIDCL need to carry out proper inspection and take initiatives for proper restoration of the damage caused due to rain, flash floods and landslide or else we may find bad to worse road which have been experienced by the people of the Naharlagun township due to under construction of the NH-415 Package-B and everyone are asking for it and even the Chief Minister has been saying in media time and again," they said.

Tripura BJP to contest TTAADC village committee polls in alliance with TMP, IPFT

AGARTALA, March 16: Tripura BJP president Rajib Bhattacharjee on Sunday said that the ruling party will contest the elections to the village committees of TTAADC along with its allies, the Tipra Motha Party (TMP) and the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT).

The BJP and TMP had fought the state assembly elections in 2023 separately but a year later, the Tipra Motha Party joined the BJP-led coalition government.

"We believe in coalition politics... we will fight the elections to the village committees under the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) collectively after consultation with our two allies, TMP and IPFT," Bhattacharjee told reporters here.

The TTAADC, constituted under the Sixth Schedule, has 587 village committees (akin to panchayats) for which elections

were supposed to take place in February 2021. The schedule of the polls is yet to be announced.

Bhattacharjee said the BJP, in association with Janajati Morcha, the tribal wing of the ruling party, has initiated highlighting the good work of the BJP-led coalition government for the welfare of the indigenous people.

"Today, we organised a state-level programme - 'Empowering Janajati, Empowering Tripura' -- here to highlight the good work done by the BJP-led government in the last seven years. Such programmes will be held in district and block levels as well," he said.

Bhattacharjee said the BJP-led government has been spending more development funds in the tribal-dominated blocks than in non-tribal blocks to speed up development activities such as road construction, drinking water supply, housing

and livelihood.

"The 23-year-old Bru issue has been solved permanently by rehabilitating the internally displaced families in the state during the BJP rule. Besides, as many as 18 Eklavya Model Residential Schools have been sanctioned for providing proper education to tribal students," he added.

In response to a petition filed by the Tipra Motha Party for holding village committee elections at the earliest, the Tripura High Court had last year directed the State Election Commission (SEC) to conduct the polls by December 2024.

Although the five-year tenure of the village committees expired in February 2021, the elections could not be held due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The State Election Commission later initiated delimitation of the village committees, further delaying the polls. (PTI)

APTUF organises mass meeting to discuss Eight Point Charter



HT Correspondent

ITANAGAR, March 16: The Arunachal Pradesh Trade Union Federation (APTUF) on Saturday March 15 organised a mass meeting to discuss various issues including the Eight Point charter of demands and other issues confronting the casual and contingency labourers and workers community of the state.

Representatives from various labour and workers unions and associations took part in the day-long meeting which was held at the Tennis court area of IG Park in the city.

Hundreds of workers were present, most of them from various government departments and works departments of which their leaders shared their views, suggestions and advice on the occasion.

The meeting also discussed the issues and challenges with the labourers, workers and ALCs of state.

The Arunachal Pradesh Trade Union Federation (APTUF) chief patron, Jalley Sonam thanked the state government for enhancement of the monthly salary of the labour and workers community of the state. "More than thirty five thousand individuals will be benefited. It is a historic one that the state government has enhanced

around ₹ 6000 in one go for which we appreciate the state government led by chief minister Pema Khandu and dy chief minister Chowna Mein," said Sonam.

"It is also a matter to appreciate that the Pema Khandu led government has also announced a sum of rupees three lakh for those who retired from the service who attained to the age of 60 years. The state government has decided that they will not let anyone go empty handed is a good gesture," added Jalley Sonam.

APTUF President Changma Tajo informed the media, "What the state government has done is a matter of appreciation and we appreciate the state government for enhancement of the salary of ₹ 6000 whereas we have demanded ₹ 1000, we thank the CM and Dy CM from the core of our heart," he said.

"As we are from the working community so there are other issues pertaining to the labour and workers. We have submitted eight points of charter of demand earlier out of which the salary hike was also one of the important points," said APTUF President.

"Other issues which include relieving age of 60 years, though we are not against the age bar but we are worried about the com-

pensation of ₹ 3 lakh which we will apprise the state government to rethink, enhancement of scale of pay and grade pay of all work charge of all departments of state. Creation of WC Post in all engineering departments of state, regularisation of ALCs, implementation of golden handshake @ ₹ 10,00,000 (ten lakh) and declaration of gazette holiday on May 1 on account of international holiday," he said.

"We are not against the government as the government is our guardian and so we have to appraise our genuine demand from time to time. Accordingly we will meet our leaders and will appraise about our meeting today and let the state government have sufficient time to rethink about an issue which has not been considered so far. We are very much hopeful that the state government will listen to our genuine grievances and later on May 1 we shall have a mass celebration of International Labour Day and we shall review our issue on that day," added Changma Tajo.

Secretary general Kenkar Yoncha and other government department workers, union leaders shared their views and advices and urged the state government the consideration of their demands.

10 IIT students injured as vehicle falls into gorge in Sikkim

GANGTOK, March 16: Ten students of IIT (ISM) Dhanbad were injured after their vehicle plunged into a 100-foot-deep gorge in Sikkim's Mangan district, police said on Sunday.

The accident happened near Pakshep in Forest Dara around 9:30 pm on Saturday when the students were travelling from Lachung to Gangtok, they said.

The driver, who was also injured, lost control of the vehicle, resulting in the accident, they added. Among the students were four females.

Three of the injured were sent to a hospital in Gangtok as their conditions were serious, while the others received treatment in Mangan. (PTI)

Amit Shah praises Mizoram child singing sensation Esther Hnamte, gifts guitar to her

AIZAWL, March 16: Union Home Minister Amit Shah praised Mizoram's child singing sensation Esther Lalduhawmi Hnamte, popularly known as Esther Hnamte, and gifted a guitar to the seven-year-old prodigy who enthralled the audience with the rendition of 'Vande Mataram'.

Shah attended a function marking the relocation of the Assam Rifles' base from Aizawl to a designated camp at Zokhawasang on the eastern outskirts of the state capital, in which Hnamte sang "Vande Mataram" composed by AR Rahman on Saturday.

"Love for Bharat unites us all. Deeply moved to listen to Mizoram's wonder kid Esther Lalduhawmi Hnamte, singing Vande Mataram in Aizawl. The seven-year-old's love for Bharat Mata poured out into her song, making listening to her a mesmerizing experience. Gifted her a guitar and blessed her for a brilliant future ahead," Shah wrote in a post on X.

Shah invited Hnamte at Raj Bhavan and gifted her the musical instrument. Hnamte's parents expressed happiness and thanked the Union Home Minister for the gift.

"We were about to move to Tlabung in the state's southern part after the function on Saturday. The Home Minister invited us to the Raj Bhavan. We are very happy and delighted for the gift, which is her most needed instrument," Hnamte's mother R Lalawmpui told PTI.

Born on June 9, 2016, Hnamte, who hails from south Mizoram's Lunglei town, began singing at the age of 3 years in churches and elsewhere.

She gained widespread recognition when her video of singing AR Rahman's "Vande Mataram" shared by former chief minister Zoramthanga and later by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in October 2020 went viral.

In August 2021, Hnamte released a music video of the national anthem on YouTube featuring personnel of the Assam Rifles, which sponsored the video.

The video received 3 million views within a week, which has now risen to 47 million.



In December last year, Hnamte sang "Vande Mataram" at the inaugural function of Ashtalakshmi Mahotsav in the presence of Modi, who previously praised the child prodigy for her mesmerising performance.

Hnamte gifted the PM a Northeast mascot doll, "Poorvi", on the occasion. The youngest of three siblings, Hnamte has won awards, including special appreciation from former state governor P Sreedharan Pillai, and the "Young Achievers Award," presented by Dalmia Cement Bharat Limited.

She has also been honoured by the country's largest dairy firm in an advertisement as the Amul Girl in 2021.

A documentary of her life "A Star is Born" won the Best Documentary Award (Silver) at the Northeast Film Festival in 2023. (PTI)

'It is a fact that the party's independent strength and influence have not grown'

Jyoti Basu rejecting PM post not factor: Karat

NEW DELHI, March 16: The decline of the CPI(M) was caused by the erosion of support in West Bengal and Tripura, veteran leader Prakash Karat has said and added a roadmap to rebuild the party's strength would be discussed during its upcoming all-India congress.

Karat -- who served as the CPI(M) general secretary between 2005 and 2015 -- further said he did not consider veteran leader Jyoti Basu declining the prime minister's post in 1996 as a reason behind the party's decline.

"It is a fact that the party's independent strength and influence have not grown... And that's primarily been due to the erosion in our base of support in West Bengal and Tripura, two of the strong states that we have," Karat said in an interview with PTI.

"So, the focus of our forthcoming party congress is how we strengthen the party," the CPI(M) interim coordinator added.

The CPI(M) had 43 MPs in the 14th Lok Sabha from 2004 to 2009. Its tally declined to 16 in 2009, nine in 2014 and three in 2019. The party won four seats in the Lok Sabha in the 2024 elections. In state assemblies, the CPI(M)-led Left Front was defeated by the TMC in West Bengal in 2011 after being in power for 34 years. It was defeated by the BJP in Tripura -- which the CPI(M)-led coalition had governed since 1993 -- in 2018.

Speaking about preparations for the party congress, Karat said political and organisational reviews during the past three years had been done. Shortcomings and weaknesses in political, ideological and organisational work would



be identified during the meet.

"Keeping in mind that... Our political task or goal still remains how to isolate and defeat the BJP or the Modi government, for that you need wider unity. We recognise that. How to maintain this wider unity, a broader platform, that we will have to strive for," he said.

"At the same time, we don't see this as separate. Strengthening of the CPI(M) will also help strengthen the overall opposition unity or strengthening of the Left. And we feel that the Left's alternative politics or policies need to be projected as a rallying point for the fight against the various policies of the Modi government," he added.

He also disagreed with the suggestion that the party's decision not to accept the prime minister's post offered to then-West Bengal chief minister Basu in 1996 as a reason for its gradual decline.

"We should not forget that our main strength in Parliament at that

time came from West Bengal... And our party does not think being in government or in any position will help to increase the strength of the party," Karat told PTI.

"What we had as (our) strength in West Bengal was decades of work, struggles of the different sections of people for their rights. And that led to the formation of the Left Front government there (in 1977)," he added.

The party's strength does not grow by having some ministerial positions, the veteran leader said.

"That is why, at that time, we felt it wouldn't be helpful. Politically, we were committed to having a United Front government," he said.

Noting that the CPI(M) had 32 Lok Sabha MPs in 1996, Karat said that, as a minority government, it would not have had the freedom to implement policies.

Thirteen smaller parties, including Left Front constituents, formed the United Front government after

the 1996 elections, with outside support from the Congress.

After both Basu and former prime minister VP Singh declined, HD Deve Gowda took over as prime minister in the United Front government. He was succeeded by IK Gujral, whose government collapsed in 1998.

Karat, who took over the party's running last year, said the passing of general secretary Sitaram Yechury came as a setback just as preparations for the all-India congress had started picking up pace.

However, the party's organisational structure made it possible to carry the preparations forward, he added. "Our Politburo and Central Committee work on a collective basis, we were able to overcome this loss immediately" Karat told PTI.

The 24th All-India Party Congress of the CPI(M) will be held in Tamil Nadu's Madurai on April 2-6. Karat said a new leadership would emerge as the Central Committee had instituted an age limit of 75.

"Those who pass 75 years of age will not be eligible to be elected to the Central Committee. And the Central Committee elects the Politburo (members) and the general secretary," he added.

According to the party's draft political resolution, to be discussed at the Madurai meet, the CPI(M) would continue to cooperate with the INDIA bloc and other regional parties against the BJP and also work on strengthening Left unity while focusing on increasing its mass base and influence.

The document also stressed on the urgent need to expand the independent strength of the CPI(M). (PTI)

Those who called Maha Kumbh 'Mrityu Kumbh' unable to control disturbance during Holi: Adityanath

GORAKHPUR (UP), March 16: Hitting out at his West Bengal counterpart Mamata Banerjee over her remarks criticising Maha Kumbh arrangements, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said Sunday those who had said the "Maha Kumbh of Prayagraj was a 'Mrityu Kumbh' were unable to control disturbance during Holi".

Addressing the oath-taking ceremony of newly-elected office bearers of the Gorakhpur Journalists Press Club in Gorakhpur, he said that "for the first time, people came to the Maha Kumbh from Tamil Nadu".

"People (devotees) also came from Kerala. The population of Uttar Pradesh is 25 crores, and the Holi concluded peacefully. But, in West Bengal, a number of disturbances took place during Holi," he said.

On the day of Holi, a 20-year-old youth was killed in a scuffle during celebrations in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas district.

Akash Choudhury, alias Amar, was accosted by three to four youths while celebrating Holi with his friends near his residence in Titagarh. As an argument broke out, he was repeatedly stabbed in his neck and other parts of his body by the assailants, the officer added. Adityanath took a dig at Banerjee over such incidents in her state.

"People who were unable to control the disturbance ('upadrav') during Holi, had said that the Maha Kumbh of Prayagraj was a 'Mrityu Kumbh'. But, we said that this is not 'Mrityu' (death), it is 'Mrityunjay' (victory over death) It is a Maha Kumbh."

He said that everyday of the Maha Kumbh witnessed 50,000 to 1 lakh people from West Bengal taking part in the 45-day event.

Days after the January 29 stampede at the Sangam Nose, where the official toll was 30, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had said the Maha Kumbh has turned into a 'Mrityu Kumbh' due to such incidents of stampede, claiming the actual toll was suppressed by authorities.

"They have hidden hundreds of bodies to bring down the toll. The Maha Kumbh has turned into a 'Mrityu Kumbh' under the BJP rule," Banerjee said during an address in the West Bengali assembly on February 18. Back in Gorakhpur, Adityanath also said his government sent ministers to some states to invite governors and chief ministers to the Maha Kumbh,



and if possible also hold a press (conference).

He also thanked the media for helping the Maha Kumbh transform into the biggest event of the world through their positive writings.

He said the Kumbh became a base to connect society with the idea of Ek Bharat, Shreshth Bharat. "For the first time, it was seen that culture can fuel prosperity, faith can become a medium of livelihood."

He told the journalists, "Whatever support you require to take positive role of the media forward, the government will stand with you."

Adityanath said several freedom fighters played an important role as journalists and gave momentum to the freedom movement through their work in media. These include Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi, Lokmanya Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi and others who gave a new direction to society with the their writings, he said.

Adityanath also said that "when the country's democracy was being strangled, news groups put all their strength to save the democracy through their writings."

He underlined the ever-evolving role of the media in the changing world. "Today, technology is changing rapidly... today the young generation is using social media platforms because they have less time. In such a situation, the responsibility of media institutions has increased even more to convey positive things because some people are spreading negativity by misusing social media platforms."

"In such a situation, the media world will have to move forward with the same role for which it is known. This will be a big task not only for democracy but also for the security and sovereignty of the country," he said. (PTI)

Removal of Aurangzeb's grave won't serve any purpose: Athawale

MUMBAI, March 16: Union minister Ramdas Athawale has voiced his opposition to the demand for demolition of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's grave in Maharashtra's Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar district, saying its removal will not serve any purpose.

Talking to reporters here on Saturday night, the Republican Party of India (A) leader also said the matter should not be politicised.

Some right wing outfits have called for the removal of Aurangzeb's grave located at Khuldabad in Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar.

Organisations like Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) plan to submit a memorandum to the state government on Monday, urging legal action to remove the grave and have warned of 'kar seva' and statewide protests if the demand is not met.

BJP's Satara MP Udayanraje Bhosale, a descendant of Maratha king Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, had sought the removal of Aurangzeb's tomb in Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar.

Aurangzeb is remembered in Maharashtra for his battles with the Marathas, who resisted his expansionist ambitions. Shivaji Maharaj's son, Sambhaji, was captured, tortured, and executed on his orders.

Athawale said it is true that Aurangzeb was cruel and killed (Shivaji Maharaj's son) Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj. But, he failed to conquer the (Maratha) kingdom and ultimately died in Maharashtra.

"His tomb has existed for many years, and there is no need to reopen this issue. The tomb stands as a reminder of his misdeeds, and its removal will serve no purpose," said the leader, whose party is an ally of the ruling BJP.

Asked about some BJP leaders raising the issue, Athawale said he does not believe that this matter should be politicised.

"Neither the BJP nor any other party is involved in this controversy. It is inappropriate to describe Aurangzeb as an astute administrator or compare the BJP regime to his rule," the Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment said.

Athawale said that since Aurangzeb was buried there (in Khuldabad), his tomb should remain undisturbed.

Notably, Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Sanjay Raut on Friday called the BJP rule in Maharashtra worse than that of Aurangzeb and claimed farmers were dying in the state because of the saffron party.

Earlier this month, Samajwadi Party MLA Abu Asmi Azmi was suspended from the state assembly till the end of its budget session on March 26 following his remarks eulogising Aurangzeb.

The Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar administration in an order on Saturday barred Hindutva leader Milind Ekbote from entering the district from March 16 to April 5 amid calls from some outfits to remove Aurangzeb's grave.

The order said Ekbote's organisation Dharmaveer Sambhaji Maharaj Pratishthan pays homage to the warrior-king annually in Pune and intelligence inputs were received about him and his supporters possibly coming to Khuldabad to remove Aurangzeb's tomb. (PTI)

BJP to protest against 4% reservation for Muslims in public contracts inside & outside legislature

BELAGAVI (KARNATAKA), March 16: Karnataka BJP President B Y Vijayendra on Sunday said his party will strongly oppose and protest both inside and outside the state legislature, against the Congress government's decision to introduce a 4 per cent reservation for Muslims in public contracts, calling it "unconstitutional" and "Sarkari Zihad".

This government has become a "paper tiger" with no development and is only focused on minority appeasement, he alleged.

"The Chief Minister in his 16th budget presented recently (March 7), has announced a 4 per cent reservation to Muslim contractors in government tenders, a decision has also been made in this regard at the cabinet meeting on Friday. This decision is unconstitutional," Vijayendra said.

Speaking to reporters here, he said that there is no mention of reservation based on religion in the constitution.

"This decision of the government is a conspiracy to create a rift or divide or gap between the religions. It is unfortunate that the Chief Minister is involved in this.

The BJP strongly condemns this appeasement politics, the party will fight and protest against this undemocratic stand of the government both inside and outside the state legislature," he added.

On Friday, the Cabinet approved an amendment to the Karnataka Transparency in Public Procurements (KTTP) Act, reserving 4 per cent of contracts in (civil) works valued up to ₹ 2 crore and goods/services contracts up to Rs 1 crore for Muslims.

At present, Karnataka has reservation in civil works contracts for SC/STs (24 per cent) and OBC contractors belonging to Category-1 (4 per cent) and Category-2A (15 per cent). There were demands to add Muslims under Category-2B of the OBCs with a reservation of 4 per cent.

Later in a post on 'X' Vijayendra said, "4 per cent Today, 100 per cent Tomorrow! This is the New 'Sarkari Zihad' that the Siddaramaiah government is imposing on Hindus and ensuring systematic discrimination against the SCs, STs & OBCs!"

"This is besides the Land Zihad through Waqf Board, Anti

CHANDIGARH, March 16: AAP supreme Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday asserted that Bhagwant Mann would complete his five-year term as the chief minister of Punjab, trashing opposition parties' claims that he would be removed from the post.

However, Kejriwal also said drugs and corruption were the biggest problems in Punjab where the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) under Mann has been in power for the last three years.

Kejriwal and Mann offered prayers at the Golden Temple on the completion of three years of the party's government in the state on Sunday.

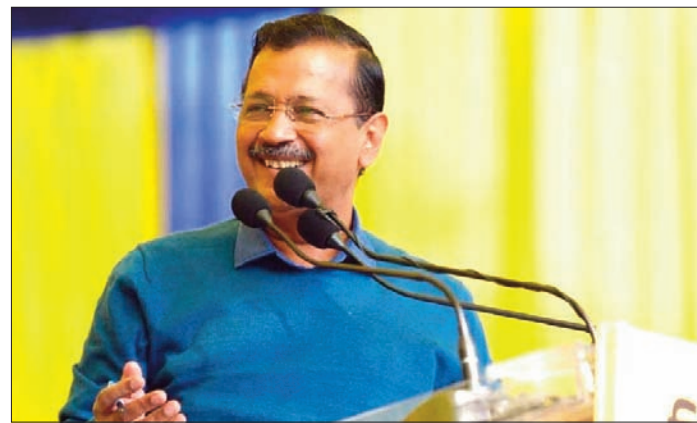
Kejriwal, the former Delhi chief minister, arrived in Amritsar on Saturday after completing a 10-day Vipassana meditation session in Punjab's Hoshiarpur.

During the Golden Temple visit, Kejriwal was accompanied by his wife Sunita Kejriwal, and AAP leaders, including minister Kuldeep Singh Dhalliwal.

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) formed the government in Punjab in 2022 after winning 92 of the total 117 assembly seats.

Speaking to reporters in Amritsar, Kejriwal said, "On March 16, 2022, Mann saab took over as the Punjab chief minister. Today we came here to seek the blessings of Guru Maharaj (Almighty). In three years, they (gurus) guided us and gave us the strength to continue serving people."

"Today, the biggest problems in Punjab are drugs and corruption. Three crore people of Punjab have come together to wage war against



drugs and corruption... this is a battle for nay (justice)," he said.

Kejriwal said they prayed to God to give them strength so that they could continue to serve the people of Punjab.

"We are here to serve the people and not for power," he said.

Asked about AAP's political rivals claiming that the Punjab chief minister would be changed soon, the party chief asserted, "Mann saab will complete five years, you do not need to worry... he will complete the next five years as well."

Last month, Punjab Congress leader Partap Singh Bajwa had claimed that 32 AAP MLAs were in touch with him, ready to switch sides. He had also alleged that Mann was in touch with the BJP.

"When Kejriwal decides to remove him (Mann), he will pack his bags and join them (BJP)," Bajwa had alleged.

Meanwhile, Mann told reporters on Sunday that the AAP had pledged to make Punjab a 'rangla

Congress launches 'palayan roko, naukri do pada-yatra' in Bihar

PATNA, March 16: The Congress in Bihar on Sunday launched a state-wide 'pada-yatra' themed 'palayan roko naukri do', highlighting the endemic unemployment in the province which is blamed for migration of young population on a large scale.

Leaders like AICC in charge for Bihar Krishna Allavaru, state Congress president Akhilesh Prasad Singh and former JNU students' union president Kanhaiya Kumar visited the remote West Champaran district where the pada-yatra, which would be undertaken by volunteers of the party's youth and students' wings, began.

Talking to reporters on the occasion, Kanhaiya Kumar, who is also national in charge of NSUI, the students wing, launched a veiled attack on the ruling BJP-led NDA in Bihar. "This government is unable to give jobs. Every competitive exam is marred by question paper leaks or ends in litigation in court because of other irregularities. Those who got employed recently, like government teachers, are being deprived of pension benefits that their seniors enjoy," said the Begusarai-born leader.

Indirectly referring to BJP's alleged politics of communal polarisation, he said, "When the government fails to provide the people with good education, health care and employment, it seeks to create a division in the society, pit one section against another."

He added, "We have gathered at the Bhitiharwa ashram set up by Mahatma Gandhi. We draw inspiration from his famous Dandi yatra, and his resolve to fight for one's cause without giving up the



ideals of satya truth and ahimsa non-violence." The pada-yatra is being seen, in political circles, as an attempt by the Congress to assert itself ahead of the assembly polls due later this year which the party is likely to contest in alliance with RJD and the Left. Kumar, who began his political career with the CPI, before switching over to Congress four years ago, side-stepped queries about the elections.

He declined to answer a pointed question as to whether he could contest the assembly polls himself, and when asked how many seats he wanted for his party, he replied, "I am only concerned about every job aspirant being assured of a seat that suits his or her qualifications."

Kumar also gave a pep talk to young party workers on the occasion, asking them to work for bringing about a change in the state "from where people need to move out for almost everything, a good education, a job or even a honeymoon." "On the other hand, we never see people from other states coming to Bihar in search of livelihood. This is why we face humiliation elsewhere. The government has no solution to this problem so it tries to divert attention with a politics of hate," alleged Kumar. (PTI)

New Zealand PM, several foreign ministers to attend PM Modi to inaugurate Raisina Dialogue today

NEW DELHI, March 16: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will on Monday throw open the three-day Raisina Dialogue, India's flagship conference on geopolitics and geoeconomics that will be joined by delegates from 125 countries.

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiba are among those attending the 10th edition of the conclave.

In a first, a delegation, including a senior security official, from Taiwan is also attending the deliberations reflecting growing cooperation between the two sides in the last few years, people familiar with the matter said.

The Raisina Dialogue is being hosted by the leading think-tank Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in partnership with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).

It will witness the participation of representatives from about 125 countries including ministers, former heads of state and heads of government, military commanders, captains of industry, technology leaders, academics, journalists,



scholars on strategic affairs and experts from leading think tanks, the MEA said on Sunday. Officials said foreign ministers from 20 countries are attending the deliberations. The visit to India of the Ukrainian foreign minister comes as the US is stepping up efforts towards a temporary ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia to end their conflict.

New Zealand PM Luxon will deliver the keynote address at the inaugural session on Monday.

Foreign ministers of Slovenia, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein,

ers of the world will engage each other across conversations in various formats, over six thematic pillars.

The pillars are: Politics Interrupted: Shifting Sands and Rising Tides; Resolving the Green Trilemma: Who, Where, and How; Digital Planet: Agents, Agencies and Absences; Militant Mercantilism: Trade, Supply Chains and the Exchange Rate Addition; The Tiger's Tale: Rewriting Development with a New Plan; and Investing in Peace: Drivers, Institutions, and Leadership.

In various sessions, the participants will discuss the state of the world and explore opportunities for cooperation on a wide range of contemporary matters.

Over 3,500 participants from about 125 countries will be joining the dialogue in person, according to the MEA.

In the past nine years, the Raisina Dialogue, whose name has been derived from Raisina Hill, an area in New Delhi housing the most important government buildings and used as a metonym for the seat of the Government of India, has grown in stature and profile. (PTI)

Wanted for deadly terror attacks in J&K, top LeT commander killed by gunmen in Pakistan

NEW DELHI, March 16: A top Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) commander, wanted by Indian security agencies for several deadly terror attacks in Jammu and Kashmir, was eliminated by gunmen in an attack in Pakistan, officials said on Sunday.

Zia-ur-Rehman alias Nadeem alias Abu Qatal alias Qatal Sindh was gunned down in the Jhelum area of Punjab on Saturday evening. His security guard was also killed, the officials said, quoting information received from the neighbouring country.

Considered the most trusted handler of LeT founder and 26/11 Mumbai terror attack mastermind Hafiz Saeed, he said 43-year-old Rehman was the main handler of the terror outfit involved in the planning of various attacks in the Poonch-Rajouri region of Jammu and Kashmir.

The officials said Rehman had infiltrated the Jammu region in early 2000 and exfiltrated in 2005. He had a wide network of Over Ground Workers in Poonch and



Rajouri through his old contacts, they said.

In the various investigations conducted by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) into the gruesome terror incidents in Poonch-Rajouri region, his involvement was found, officials said.

He was charge-sheeted by the NIA under the Unlawful Activities

(Prevention) Act and other sections for an attack on Hindu minorities in Dhangri Village of Rajouri District in 2023, they added.

Terrorists struck Dhangri village on January 1, 2023, and targeted villagers before fleeing the scene, leaving behind an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). While five people were killed in the firing by

terrorists, two others died in the IED explosion the next morning. As many as 14 villagers were injured in the twin attacks.

The officials said Rehman is also the mastermind of the Reasi Bus Attack which was orchestrated on the day of the oath-taking ceremony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government on June 9, 2024.

In this attack, terrorists killed nine pilgrims and injured 41 by firing on a bus carrying pilgrims to Shiv Khori temple.

He was also involved in the Bhatta-Durian terror incident on April 20, 2023, in which five Army personnel were killed. He is also accused in the Kandi attack on officers and personnel of the 9 Para Special Forces on May 5, 2023. The attack claimed the lives of five personnel, officials said.

They said Rehman, along with Saifullah Sajid Jutt, another Pakistan-based terrorist, was the main handler of terrorists of the outfit operating in the Poonch-Rajouri belt of Jammu and Kashmir.

Born on February 4, 1982, in the Sanghar district of Sindh province of Pakistan, Rehman was in charge of LeT's Khairatta dets (small group of terrorists ready to infiltrate) located in Kotli district of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). He was the main link between the LeT cadres and its operators in PoK and Sindh Province of Pakistan, the officials said, adding he was the most trusted handler of Saeed.

On several occasions, the LeT founder tasked Rehman with ensuring control over the dets in PoK, the officials said. Rehman's associates -- Riyaz Ahmed alias Abu Qasim and Hanzla Adnan -- were killed in separate incidents in Pakistan in September and December 2023.

Over a dozen terrorist commanders of different outfits, including the LeT, Jaish-e-Mohammad and Hizbul Mujahideen, have been eliminated by unidentified gunmen in Pakistan and PoK over the last three years. (PTI)

Immigration Bill: Seven-year jail term for using forged passport

NEW DELHI, March 16: Anyone found using a forged passport or visa for entering, staying or exiting India will be punished with a jail term of up to seven years and a fine to the extent of ₹ 10 lakh if the new immigration bill is approved by Parliament. The legislation, piloted by the Union Home Ministry, also provides for mandatory reporting of information about foreigners by hotels, universities, other educational institutions, hospitals and nursing homes to enable tracking of overstaying foreigners.

All international airlines and ships will also be required to submit at a port or place in India the passenger and crew manifest, the advance information of passengers and crew on board of such aircraft, vessel or other mode of transport.

"Whoever knowingly uses or supplies a forged or fraudulently obtained passport or other travel document or visa for entering into India or staying in or exiting from India, shall be punishable with an imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than two years, but may extend to seven years and shall also be liable to fine which shall not be less than one lakh rupees, but may extend to ten lakh rupees," according to the bill introduced in Lok Sabha on March 11. It also says that any foreigner who enters into any area in India without a valid passport or other travel document, including visa required for such entry in contravention of provisions of the law or of any rule or order given in pursuance thereof, shall be punishable with an imprisonment for a term which may extend to five years with a fine which may extend to five lakh rupees or with both.

The legislation empowers the Centre to exert control over places that are "frequented by any foreigner" and require the owner to close the premises, permit its use under specified conditions, or refuse admission to all or a "specified class" of foreigners.

The Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025 is a comprehensive legislation to regulate all matters relating to foreigners and immigration.

Matters relating to foreigners and immigration are presently administered through four Acts—the Passport

(Entry into India) Act, 1920, the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939, the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act, 2000. All these laws are now proposed to be repealed.

While the Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025 consists of several amendments in the four Acts proposed to be repealed after simplification and harmonisation, it also has certain new provisions to meet the present-day requirements.

This legislation is in line with the government's policy of simplification of laws, ease of doing business and minimising compliance burden.

It seeks to balance the requirements of national security and related issues of immigration of foreigners with the need to promote economic growth and tourism in the country. However, it is not connected with any matters related with grant of citizenship.

"The Bill will help in tackling the problem of illegal migration into India and facilitate tracking of movement of overstaying foreigners within India. It will also help in reducing the compliance burden," an officer said. While Indian visas of all categories to foreigners can be granted in physical or sticker form by Indian missions or posts located abroad, the Bureau of Immigration (BoI) grants electronic visas under seven categories to people from 167 countries. Besides, visa-on-arrival is granted by immigration authorities at six designated airports to nationals of three countries -- Japan, South Korea and the UAE (only for such UAE nationals who had earlier obtained e-visa or regular or paper visa for India). The stay and movement of foreigners in India and their exit are regulated by the BoI and state governments and Union Territory administrations.

According to existing laws, all foreigners on long-term (more than 180 days) student, medical, research, employment, missionary and project visas are required to register with the Foreigners Regional Registration Officer (FRRO) or the Foreigners Registration Officer (FRO) concerned, having jurisdiction over the place where the foreigner intends to stay, within 14 days of arrival. (PTI)

Whitewashing of Sambhal mosque underway

SAMBHAL (UP), March 16: The whitewashing of the outer wall of the Shahi Jama Masjid in Uttar Pradesh's Sambhal began on Sunday morning, an advocate of the mosque side said. The Allahabad High Court on March 12 directed the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to undertake and complete the whitewashing at the mosque within one week.

Following the high court order, an ASI team carried out measurements and assessments on March 13. "The whitewashing of the outer wall of the Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal began on Sunday," Sha-keel Warsi, an advocate representing the mosque side in the Sambhal district court told PTI.

Shahi Jama Masjid's president Zafar Ali said, "The whitewashing work started at around 9 am. The whitewashing of the outer wall is going on. At present, 9-10 labourers are engaged in the whitewashing work". (PTI)

Grenade-like object hurled at YouTuber's house in Jalandhar, Pak don claims responsibility

CHANDIGARH, March 16: A Pakistani gangster has claimed responsibility after a "grenade-like object" was hurled at the residence of Jalandhar-based YouTuber Rozer Sandhu on Sunday.

Two videos have emerged since the incident, one in which a Pakistani gangster, Shahzad Bhatti, claiming that he carried out the attack against the YouTuber for allegedly using derogatory language against the Muslim community.

Police on Sunday said unidentified persons hurled a "grenade-like object" at Sandhu's residence at Maqasud in Punjab's Jalandhar district.

However, it did not explode, and the house was not damaged.

On receiving the information, senior police officers rushed to the spot. A bomb disposal squad took the object to custody.

Jalandhar Rural Superintendent of Police Jas-roop Kaur Bhatti said, "We found a round metallic object, but couldn't immediately verify if it was a grenade. It has the appearance of a grenade. Further investigation is on."

Speaking to reporters outside the influencer's

residence, Senior Superintendent of Police (Rural) Gurmeet Singh said, "We spoke to Sandhu and also found a suspicious metallic object. A bomb disposal team is examining it," he said, adding that they will examine the CCTV footage.

Singh said agencies abroad are trying to derail the ongoing campaign against drugs in Punjab and nobody will be allowed to get away with their nefarious designs.

Asked whether the influencer has made any objectionable comment, Singh said nothing of that sort has come to light.

Meanwhile, a purported 18-second video has emerged, showing a man sitting in a car, giving directions to throw a grenade-like object at the second floor of a building. He is seen asking another man in the car to take out the pin.

In yet another video, Pakistani gangster Shahzad Bhatti has claimed that the "grenade" was hurled in Jalandhar as the YouTuber was abusing Islam.

"If he survives, we will do it again. He is not alone, there are five people who did it. They thought we forgot. I thank my brothers Zeeshan

Akhtar and Happy Passia (a US-based terrorist) who helped me," Bhatti said in the video.

"If you want no bloodshed to take place or peace to be disturbed, you arrest them. I give you pictures and names, you arrest them. If you don't arrest them, I will wreak such havoc that their seven generations will remember."

I am showing the video (of hurling the grenade) at the end. I do not need fame. I have made the video so that if anyone abuses again, I shall do worse. If he (Sandhu) survives, I shall do (something) bigger than this," Bhatti said.

"You arrest them if you don't want bloodshed. He, his brother and there are three-four more people. I have their names and pictures," the gangster added.

The development comes a day after a motorcycle-borne person hurled an explosive device at a temple in Amritsar. In the blast that followed, a portion of the temple's wall was damaged and window panes shattered.

There have been many incidents of explosions targeting police posts in Amritsar and Gurdaspur in the last four months. (PTI)

'Progressive policies can drive less harmful solutions to tobacco use in India'

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 16: Speaking at the Times Group ET NOW Global Business Summit 2025, Frederic De Wilde, President of SSEA, CIS & MEA Region at Philip Morris International (PMI), stressed the importance of regulatory modernisation and scientific innovation in reducing the harm caused by tobacco use.

With India home to 300 million tobacco users, including 100 million smokers, De Wilde highlighted the need for policies that reflect scientific advancements and encourage safer alternatives for those who do not quit smoking.

De Wilde pointed out that regulation remains the biggest challenge for any evolving industry, including the tobacco sector.

He noted that scientific and technological advancements are redefining the industry, but long-term impact can only be achieved through progressive policies that support modernisation, industry transformation, and investment-driven growth. He argued that such an approach would also elevate India's role in the global tobacco ecosystem.

He underscored how science-led decision-making has transformed various industries worldwide, from renewable energy to digital finance, enabling economic expansion and stronger global positioning. Drawing parallels to these industries, he urged India to adopt a similar approach for tobacco control by embracing scientifically validated alternatives.

Reflecting on PMI's own transformation, De Wilde explained that the company began rethinking its role in the tobacco industry two decades ago, recognising that combustion is the primary cause of harm in smoking.

To address this, PMI invested \$14 billion in scientific research and product innovation, hiring over 500 top scientists to develop less harmful alternatives.

Ten years ago, PMI launched these alternatives in collaboration with governments, leading to significant reductions in cigarette consumption in multiple countries. Citing international examples, De Wilde pointed to Japan, where the introduction of alternatives has halved the combustible cigarette market.

In Rome, one in three smokers has transitioned to alternatives, while Sweden has achieved the lowest smoking rate in Europe—just 5%—with young adult smoking rates nearing zero.

He highlighted that Sweden also reports the lowest lung cancer incidence among men in the EU, demonstrating the public health benefits of regulatory modernisation.

Turning to India, De Wilde commended the country's success in regulatory clarity across industries such as technology, finance, and infrastructure.

He suggested that India's progressive policy frameworks, which have accelerated economic transformation, could be extended to scientifically backed tobacco control measures.

By adopting a structured regulatory approach, he argued, India could set a global benchmark for policy development and trade.

PMI, he said, is eager to work with Indian policymakers to align scientific innovations with regulatory priorities. While many countries have implemented structured policies for new tobacco product categories, India has an opportunity to lead the way in responsible industry evolution.

De Wilde emphasised the potential for government-industry collaboration to drive positive change, benefiting both public health and economic growth.

Proposing a redefined tobacco control strategy for India, De Wilde advocated for a blend of science-driven policies and sustainable regulations that ensure access to harm-reduction alternatives.

With millions of lives at stake, he emphasized that such an approach could significantly strengthen public health efforts.

Beyond policy modernisation, De Wilde reiterated PMI's commitment to sustainability, particularly in agriculture and farmer empowerment.

India, as one of the world's largest tobacco producers, relies on tobacco farming for thousands of livelihoods. He emphasised the need for sustainable practices and introduced PMI's Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) initiative, which aims to equip farmers with advanced technology, training, and resources to enhance productivity while minimising environmental impact.

Mangaluru police bust biggest-ever drug cartel in Karnataka, arrest two South African nationals

MANGALURU (KARNATAKA), March 16: Mangaluru Police seized over 37 kg of MDMA valued at ₹ 75 crore, the biggest-ever drug haul in the state, a police official said on Sunday.

Two South African nationals were arrested in Bengaluru in connection with this case, the official said.

Addressing a press conference, Mangaluru Police Commissioner Anupam Agarwal stated that the operation stemmed from an earlier arrest six months ago. In September, police apprehended one Haider Ali in Pumpwell, Mangaluru, and confiscated 15 grams of MDMA from him.

Subsequent investigations led authorities to a Nigerian national named Peter, who was arrested in Bengaluru with MDMA worth ₹ 6 crore. Further probes pointed to an international drug network with links to traffickers using air routes between Delhi and Bengaluru, he

said. Acting on intelligence, the Mangaluru Central Crime Branch (CCB) police arrested two South African nationals -- Bamba Fant (31) and Abigail Adonis (30) -- upon their arrival in Bengaluru on March 14. The suspects were taken into custody in Neeladri Nagar, Electronic City in Bengaluru, the senior police officer said.

Authorities discovered MDMA concealed in their trolley bags, alongside four mobile phones, passports, and ₹ 18,000 in cash. Police sources indicate that the arrested individuals were allegedly supplying drugs to Nigerian peddlers operating in Bengaluru and other regions.

Additionally, they are suspected of using forged passports and visas for travel. The investigation is ongoing to trace the larger network behind the illicit drug trade, officials said.

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said the operation of the

Mangalore City Police in which the largest quantity of drugs was detected in the history of the state in which two accused have been arrested, was commendable.

"By seizing 37 kg of MDMA worth over 75 crores, our police have averted a major danger that was about to face the lives of thousands of young people," he said in a post on 'X' in Kannada.

"Since the first day we came to power, we have been committed to building a drug-free society and have waged a war against drug sales and consumption," he said.

Recalling his visit to Mangaluru a few months ago, he said, "I had promised the people of the district that we would curb the drug menace and create a healthy environment in the district. As part of our efforts, a huge drug network has now been unearthed. Our government's goal is to eradicate the drug network that has spread across the state." (PTI)

Seven policemen injured in spate of mob attacks in Bihar

BHAGALPUR/MADHUBANI/NAWADA, March 16: Seven policemen were injured in three incidents of mob attacks in Bihar, officials said on Sunday. These attacks happened in Bhagalpur, Madhubani and Nawada districts on Saturday, and were similar in nature -- police visiting an area on receiving information about a fight, and getting assaulted by a mob, they said.

Two more such incidents happened in the state in the last five days. While an assistant sub-inspector (ASI) died on Saturday after he was assaulted in Munger district, another policeman of the same rank died in Araria district on Wednesday. In Bhagalpur's Kahalgao sub-division, five policemen were injured after being attacked by a mob in the Antichak police station area, officials said. Among those injured were a sub-inspector, three constables and a chowkidar, they said.

"The incident took place when a police team went to investigate a brawl between two boys, which had escalated. One of the boys hurled stones at the team. Following that, locals also started hurling stones. A police vehicle was damaged," Station House Officer of Antichak Ashutosh Kumar said. "Additional forces were immediately sent to the area and the situation was brought under control," he said.

The injured policemen were taken to the nearest government hospital for treatment, he said. "The prime accused, however, managed to flee. Local magistrate Sanjeev Choudhary was also present there when the incident happened. Based on the statement given by Choudhary, a case was registered against 24 people," Kumar said. Five people have been arrested so far, he added.

In Madhubani district, a police team was attacked when it went to the Parsahi area on receiving information about a fight between two groups of people, officials said. "Initially, a group of people indulged in a scuffle with the policemen. Amid the melee, a policeman was hit by a blunt object on his head. He was immediately rushed to the nearest hospital. He is out of danger at present. Some more policemen sustained minor injuries," a police officer said. A case was registered against 30 people, they said. Another policeman was injured in a similar attack when he along with some of his colleagues went to Shekoda in Nawada's Kawakol police station area on getting information about an incident of stone pelting between two groups of people.

"A case has been registered and a search is underway for the accused," the district police said in a statement. Hours before these three incidents, ASI Santosh Kumar Singh succumbed to the injuries that he received after being attacked by a mob in Nandlalpur village in the Mufassil police station area of Munger district. (PTI)

James Dyson Award 2025 opens for entries, offering ₹ 30 lakh prize for innovation

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 16: The James Dyson Award 2025, an international competition aimed at fostering innovation in design and engineering, is now open for submissions.

Students and recent graduates from 28 countries and regions are invited to present problem-solving ideas that could improve lives.

Since its inception in 2005, the award has provided over ₹ 1 million (approximately ₹ 112 crore) in prize money to support more than 400 student inventions.

The global winner, chosen by James Dyson himself, will receive ₹ 30,00,000 (approximately ₹ 30 lakh), along with international media exposure that could help turn their invention into a commercial success.

Sir James Dyson, founder of Dyson, highlighted the competition's impact over the past two decades, emphasizing the role of young designers in tackling global challenges.

"The brilliant ideas we've seen prove that young people are passionate about solving the world's most pressing problems using design, engineering, and technology," he said.

Previous winners have demonstrated the award's potential to transform innovative ideas into practical solutions.

In 2024, India's national winner was Novacarry, a portable cooling

carrier designed by Odisha-based Komal Panda to keep insulin and other liquid medications at the ideal temperature. The recognition from the James Dyson Award has helped Panda refine the product for broader accessibility.

Other past winners include mOm incubators, a low-cost, inflatable neonatal incubator designed by UK-based James Roberts.

The invention has already supported over 10,000 patients and continues to expand globally, including in conflict zones such as Ukraine.

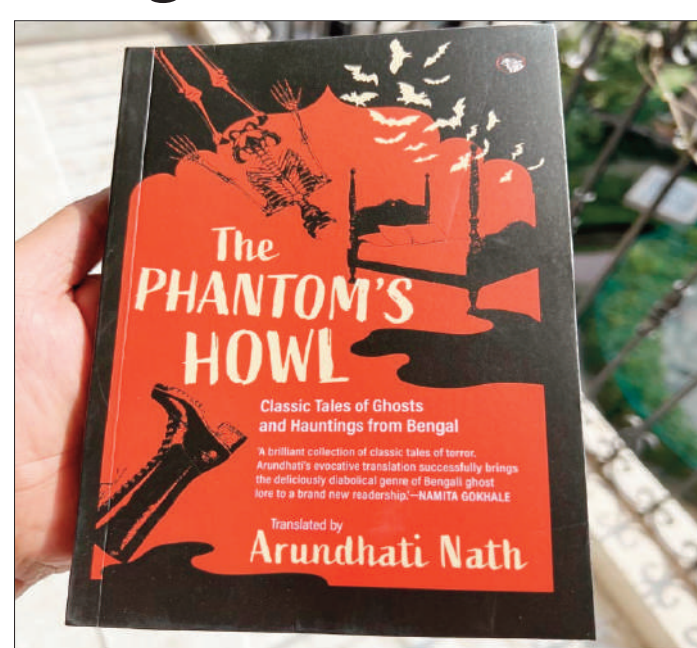
Another notable innovation is SoapPen, a colorful soap pen designed by Parsons School of Design graduates Shubham Issar and Amanat Anand.

Initially a runner-up in the U.S., SoapPen has since launched in the U.S. market, making hand hygiene fun and accessible for children.

Entries for the 2025 edition must be submitted by midnight on July 16. National judging panels will assess submissions based on functionality, design process, uniqueness, and commercial potential.

The National Winners, each receiving ₹ 5,00,000 (approximately ₹ 5 lakh), will be announced on September 10. The Global Top 20 Shortlist, selected by Dyson engineers, will be revealed on October 15, with the Global Winners announced by James Dyson on November 5.

New anthology brings together ghost tales from Bengal



NEW DELHI, March 16: A spooky collection of ghost stories from Bengal, titled "The Phantom's Howl", brings together some of the scariest and humorous tales of hauntings by masters of Bengali literature to a new generation of readers.

Written for adults and children, the collection, touted to be a quintessential representation of Bengal and its fascination with its

many 'bhoots' and their tales, is a series of spine-chilling and often bizarre encounters with the otherworldly.

Translated by debutante Arundhati Nath, the anthology comprises stories from legendary authors such as Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay and Hemendra Kumar Roy, to lesser-known writers like Jogesha Chandra Bandyopadhyay,

Niradchandra Majumdar and Amarendra Nath Munshi.

"Translating these stories for a modern readership was both an act of nostalgia and rediscovery - I reread works by many known authors and stumbled upon several lesser-known ones; each one of them spoke to me in their unique way blending suspense with intrigue, and subtle foreboding with mystery. I hope modern readers find these treasures enigmatic and engrossing," Nath told PTI.

So, be it a half-burnt shadow dancing on the walls, a vain-glorious skeleton reminiscing about her past beauty, the lonely spirit of a young girl forever rows its boat in the marshes, or a proud English ghost creates trouble on a train from Kolkata to Kashi, intrigue and horror are abound in the pages of this one-of-its-kind collection.

"There is the cursed bed of a Chinese man; the possessed pair of boots of a hunter; a Mughal-era house that wants to suck the soul of its inhabitants; and an innocuous black cloth that spells danger for all who wave it," reads the description of the book.

"The Phantom's Howl", priced at ₹ 399, is currently available for purchase across online and offline stores. It is published by Speaking Tiger. (PTI)

Feel responsible about doing comedy, don't want to offend anybody: Jamie Lever



MUMBAI, March 16: Stand-up comic Jamie Lever says she feels a certain responsibility towards taking her father, veteran star and comedian Johnny Lever's legacy of "clean comedy" forward.

Jamie, also an actor, is currently seen in the short film "2050 Care with Love" which is available on YouTube. It also features veteran actor Sulabha Arya.

When she came into the film industry, Jamie said she not only inherited her father's goodwill but also his fans.

"My father is known for doing clean comedy for the past 40 years and today's generation also says that this person made us laugh without saying any vulgar things or cuss words."

"So, I have a different responsibility. When I came into the industry, his fans were also passed on to me."

"Then, I had my own fan following too, so I had the responsibility of maintaining that style of comedy. There was no pressure, it was a choice that I made to continue doing that style of comedy, which is clean, because I wanted entire families to watch it (my comedy) together," the comic-actor told PTI in an interview.

Jamie, also a social media sensation known for her excellent impersonations of celebrities like Asha Bhosle, Farah Khan, Kareena Kapoor Khan, and Javed Akhtar, said she doesn't want to upset anybody with her comedy.

"... I don't want to offend anybody, because comedy is such a positive thing. You are bringing laughs, spreading joy. It is also a very spiritual thing for me, so I don't want to pollute that with anything else, so that is my personal reason for doing clean comedy," she added.

The 37-year-old said society has warmed up to female comics over the years.

"We are in a much better place now than 10 years ago, when I started. I never thought of myself as a female comic, I just thought of myself as a comic and I wanted to compete with other comics and I wanted to make my own place in the industry," she said. (PTI)

AR RAHMAN DISCHARGED AFTER HOSPITALISATION DUE TO DEHYDRATION

CHENNAI, March 16: Music composer AR Rahman was admitted to a corporate hospital here on Sunday following dehydration and was discharged some hours later after doctors gave him a clean bill of health.

The 58-year-old musician was hospitalised on early Sunday morning and was now back home, according to his manager Senthil Velan.

AR Reihana, the music director's sister, earlier refuted reports that Rahman was hospitalised after he complained of chest pain.

"Nothing happened. He had dehydration and gastric problems," Reihana told PTI. Videos. The two-time Oscar and Grammy winner, known for films such as "Roja", "Dil Se..", "Enthiran", and "Slumdog Millionaire", initially also complained of neck pain, his manager said.

"He (Rahman) has just come back home. He is perfectly fine. He was hospitalised early this morning... The doctors conducted some tests and everything was normal," Velan told PTI.

Rahman's close aide Vijay Iyer said the composer, who is fasting on account of the holy month of Ramzan, had returned from a trip to the UK and was jet-lagged.

"All that added up and caused him some level of dis-

comfort for which he was advised an immediate, thorough check-up and rest. He is back home and doing fine now. Thanks for your wishes," Iyer said in a statement.

Rahman's wife Saira Rahman, who announced separation with the musician after 29 years of marriage in November, also sent her best wishes.

"AR is in my prayers, and I wish him the best of health. In this tough time, I stand by him, as I also recover from my surgery, and wish him a speedy recovery," Saira Rahman said in a statement.

In an audio statement, she asked the media not to refer to her as Rahman's ex-wife as they were separate but "not divorced". "We are still husband and wife. It's just that we are separated because I wasn't keeping well for the last two years and I didn't want to stress him. I request the media to not call me his 'ex-wife'. I ask everyone, including his family, to not give any stress to him and take care of him," Saira Rahman further said.

Earlier, Rahman's son AR Ameen shared a picture of the medical bulletin issued by Apollo Hospitals, Grems Road on his Instagram Stories.

In the bulletin, the hospital authorities said Rahman visited the facility "today morning with dehydration symptoms and got discharged after routine

check-up".

Concerned fans also shared get well soon messages on social media.

"Get well soon... Thalaivaraeyy..." wrote an admirer on X. "Oh no! Wishing @arrahman speedy recovery. He'll be fine and live beyond 100 years," said another.

"Get well soon dear @arrahman bro. Our prayers are with you always," read a post.

In a previous Instagram Story, Ameen shared an update about his father's health soon after the news of the illustrious composer being hospitalised broke. "To all our dear fans, family, and well-wishers, I sincerely thank you for your love, prayers, and support. My father felt a bit weak due to dehydration hence we went ahead and did some routine tests, but I'm happy to share that he is doing well now."

"Your kind words and blessings mean a lot to us. We truly appreciate your concern and continued support. Much love and gratitude to you all!" Ameen wrote.

Rahman's daughters Khatija Rahman and Raheema Rahman also shared the same statement and medical bulletin on their Instagram Stories.

On Sunday morning, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin said he spoke to the hospital doctors and enquired about Rahman's health. (PTI)

CRICKETER DAVID WARNER TO FEATURE IN TELUGU MOVIE 'ROBINHOOD'



NEW DELHI, March 16: Australian cricketer David Warner is set to make a cameo appearance in an upcoming Telugu film "Robinhood".

Produced by Mythri Movie Makers, the film is directed by Venky Kudumula, known for "Chalo" and "Bheeshma". The film stars Nithiin and is slated to be released worldwide on March 28.

Mythri Movie Makers announced the news on X on Saturday.

"After shining and leaving a mark on the ground, it is time for him to shine

on the silver screen. Introducing the widely loved @davidwarner31 to Indian Cinema with #Robinhood in an exciting cameo GRAND RE-LEASE WORLDWIDE ON MARCH 28th," the caption read.

Warner also posted on X about the same, saying he enjoyed shooting for the movie.

"Indian Cinema, here I come. Excited to be a part of #Robinhood. Thoroughly enjoyed shooting for this one," he wrote.

The film also stars Sreeleela. (PTI)

'Sunny Sanskari Ki Tulsi Kumari' to now release in September

NEW DELHI, March 16: The release of "Sunny Sanskari Ki Tulsi Kumari", starring Varun Dhawan and Janhvi Kapoor in the lead, has been postponed to September 12, the makers said on Sunday.

Written and directed by Shashank Khaitan of "Humpty Sharma Ki Dulhania" and "Badrinath Ki Dulhania" fame, the film was previously scheduled to be released on April 18.

"Sunny Sanskari Ki Tulsi Kumari" is backed by Karan Johar's Dharma Productions and Khaitan's Mentor Disciple Entertainment.

In a press note, the makers said "Sunny Sanskari Ki Tulsi Kumari" locks in 12th September 2025 as their release date."

The film also stars Sanya Malhotra, Akshay Oberoi, Rohit Saraf, and Manish Paul. Johar, Adar Poonawalla, Apoorva Mehta and Khaitan are credited as producers. "Sunny Sanskari Ki Tulsi Kumari" will reunite Dhawan and Kapoor, who most recently worked together on Nitesh Tiwari's relationship drama "Bawaal" (2023). (PTI)



Almost no difference in acting between films and OTT series: Sheeba Chadha



GUWAHATI, March 16: Actor Sheeba Chadha, known for her roles in movies such as "Badhaai Do" and "Dum Laga Ke Haisha" as well as series like "Mirzapur" and "Bandish Bandits", says there is hardly any difference between working in a feature film and web shows.

According to the actor, the only difference could be that a performer is allowed more time to get into the depth of their character.

"I really don't find much difference. The crews are so osmotic that people working in one medium are also working for the other. One is long format and the other has finiteness in features. Actors like us get more compounded, fleshed-out characters in OTT with more space and time to explore, which is not possible in a film."

"That difference is there. In the sheer experience of working, I don't find it much different. In the performance, I don't find any difference... But sometimes a really well-nuanced and well-written character in a film too will give you that (satisfaction). You can have a long drawn out, fleshed-out series in a character but it might not give you the same satisfaction," Chadha told PTI in an interview.

The acclaimed actor started her career with 1998's "Dil Se.." and played pivotal roles in "Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam", "Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani", "Murder", "Parzania", "Delhi-6", "Raees", "Gully Boy", and "Doctor G", among others. Chadha, 52, said she didn't have any 'ideal or dream character' on her list.

Asked how she chooses her characters, she said: "There is no science to it. I don't go about it in a very detailed way. Of course, the character has to be interesting enough with a definitive space in the story. After that, it's just the maths of dates, money and other things. It's quite simple."

Chadha, also a well-known theatre actor, said she is not getting enough time to do plays due to her busy work schedule.

"Yes, I am doing less theatre. I don't think I should be calling myself a theatre practitioner right now, because I am not practising theatre right now," she added.

The actor said she earlier used to think that being away from the stage would be impossible for her.

"But I have found out that it has not been so. Organically, cinema and OTT have been at the centre of my life now, but it's (theatre) not going to go anywhere. Right now it's just not allowing me the time and investment needed for theatre. "You can't just start a rehearsal (for a play) and say one of my film projects has come and I am not going to do it. You cannot do that. I am not finding that kind of space right now to truly invest, but in times to come it will happen, I know it. I will be doing it for sure." Chadha also said she hasn't been able to watch many movies in the recent years due to her work engagements.

"Especially Malayalam cinema that I really want to start watching. I have been hearing

wonderful stuff about it," she said, adding that every kind of cinema has its place in society.

Bollywood has its place because its reach is of another kind and everybody consumes Hindi cinema all over the country, added the actor. "Now, we have access to regional cinema. When we started, we used to watch a lot of world cinema, but not so much regional. Of course, (Satyajit) Ray and (Ritwik) Ghatak used to be classics. Now, we have a lot of Telugu, Tamil, and Malayalam (films). So, any kind of cinema is good. The more we can make, the better."

Chadha, who has portrayed some of the most layered characters in cinema, said it is immaterial if a film telling a story of a woman is directed by a man or a woman.

"It depends on how deeply you are immersed in the story that you want to tell. Then I think beyond a point gender may not matter so much," she added.

Asked if Indian cinema, especially Bollywood, has been true in projecting women, the actor said she wasn't sure if it was easy to answer this question.

"At all points of time, people will be represented and shown as in the society, maybe not on centre stage. One will have films where one sees a lot of representation in a more nuanced and explorative way, and we are seeing that over time. Has it been done to its best? Probably not. That scope is limitless for any kind of exploration because it (cinema) is evolving." (PTI)

McLaren's Lando Norris wins wet and wild Australian Grand Prix



MELBOURNE, March 16: McLaren's Lando Norris has won a chaotic rain-affected Australian Grand Prix, his first at Albert Park, with the Brit just managing to stay ahead of Red Bull's Max Verstappen following a third safety car late in Sunday's race.

Lewis Hamilton had a miserable Ferrari debut. The seven-time champion finished 10th and was annoyed by constant radio messages from his pit team.

Norris started the season-

opening race, Melbourne's first wet race since 2010, from pole position. But, while he initially came under increasing pressure from Piastri, who set a series of fastest laps until his papaya team told him to hold position, the Australian spun at the penultimate corner on lap 44 as the rain intensified and dropped down the order. A late race fightback helped Piastri recover to take ninth place — including passing Hamilton on the final lap — and two championship points.

Verstappen finished 0.895 of a second behind Norris after starting from third on the grid, and took advantage of Piastri's misfortune and the final safety car and tire stops. Mercedes' George Russell closed out the top-three.

"I knew I had a good pace, but I made one mistake in turn six and he got me in the DRS and the DRS around here is probably like a second or something so that allowed it to keep staying within that second," said Norris, who scored McLaren's 12th win

in Australia to steal the outright record from Ferrari.

"I know what I'm capable of, I know what I can do, but obviously it's just round one, so we need to go and do it again next weekend and then continue from there. A long season ahead, we've just got to keep our head down and keep pushing."

Williams endured a mix bag, with Alex Albon securing his best result since Abu Dhabi 2020, and new recruit Carlos Sainz — who won here last year

driving for Ferrari — out at the final turn on the opening lap.

Mercedes was thrilled to get two cars in the top five, with Russell onto the podium, his first since winning in Las Vegas last year. Rookie Andrea Kimi Antonelli, who replaced Hamilton at the silver squad, showed his class with a superb fightback drive from 16th on the grid, following his Q1 exit, to finish fifth.

Aston Martin's Lance Stroll also made the best of the chaotic conditions to move up from 13th to sixth, ahead of Sauber's Nico Hulkenberg, bringing home eight points in what has been a difficult weekend for the green team with its car uncompetitive in dry running. Ferrari is the most successful constructor at the Australian Grand Prix, with 11 wins since its first in 1987, but it will leave Melbourne disappointed with just five points to show after Charles Leclerc finished eighth and Hamilton 10th.

The Scuderia was seen as a potential championship challenger ahead of the season start and has plenty of work to do ahead of the Chinese Grand Prix next week. The Melbourne race had a thrilling start with Racing Bull's Isack Hadjar out on the formation lap, and Alpine's Jack Doohan joined Sainz in crashing out on the opening lap.

There were just 14 finishers, after Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso hit the turn eight barriers on lap 34, while Red Bull's Liam Lawson and Sauber's Gabriel Bortolotto went into the barriers and out of the race 10 laps from home in the treacherously wet conditions. (AP)

Olympic presidential candidate Prince Feisal sees real-world politics playing a bigger role

GENEVA, March 16: The IOC presidential election on Thursday takes place in a political climate that seems a world away from the last contested Olympic leadership vote in 2013.

"There is a very different flavor between the two elections," said Prince Feisal of Jordan, among three of the seven candidates on this ballot who was an IOC member and voted 11 ½ years ago.

"It was more personality driven," Prince Feisal told The Associated Press in an online interview from Amman, "rather than necessarily global economics and politics driven that might have an impact this time. We don't want sports to be politicized but the reality is we are part of this global environment."

Real-world politics was present last time in Buenos Aires, when current candidates Juan Antonio Samaranch and Kirsty Coventry, a new member then, also were voters. So was Prince Feisal's sister Princess Haya, then president of equestrian's governing body.

On that day, IOC president Thomas Bach famously had a call within minutes of winning a six-candidate contest after a phone was thrust in his hand to speak to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Then, in September 2013, Russia was the next Olympic host with the Sochi Winter Games opening less than four months later. Russia was then a more trusted IOC partner, before it tainted those games with a state-backed doping scheme and broke the United Nations-backed

Olympic Truce for Sochi with the conflict in Ukraine.

A big issue for Bach's successor is protecting the next Summer Games, opening in July 2028 in Los Angeles, when the United States is shaping up as an unpredictable partner for its long-term allies in the multilateral world order the IOC sees itself belonging to. Diplomatic challenges are normal in Jordan, led by Prince Feisal's elder brother King Abdullah II, who met with President Donald Trump at the White House last month.

"In Jordan, this is what we have been living in since even before I was born," said the 61-year-old prince of a kingdom that shares borders with Syria, Iraq, Israel, the Palestinian territories and Saudi Arabia.

The Palestinian Olympic body, which sent eight athletes to the Paris Summer Games last year, is one of 206 recognized national teams, plus the official refugees team. Asked if the Palestinian team will compete in L.A., Prince Feisal said: "I would hope and I would pray that they would be there as part of a long-term solution." "Can I guarantee it? No. Does it worry me? Yes. We have got to stand for peace. Sports can play that healing role and can bring people together. We have seen that at the Olympic Games."

The last gathering of the IOC election candidates before the election meeting, near the site of Ancient Olympia in Greece, was at a meeting of European officials in Frankfurt — just as Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy was at the White House. (AP)

Aizawl FC earn crucial victory in relegation battle against Delhi FC

MAHILPUR (PUNJAB), March 16: Winger Lalbiakdika scored a brace as Aizawl FC beat relegation rivals Delhi FC 2-0 in their I-League match here on Sunday.

Lalbiakdika struck in the 40th and 77th minutes to give his side the crucial three points.

The victory took Aizawl above the bottom two for the first time in the season with 19 points from as many matches, albeit having played a game more than SC Bengaluru.

Delhi, with 13 points from 19 games, remain rock bottom.

Aizawl could have been 2-0 up within the first 25 minutes if it wasn't for some bad luck and inefficient finishing.

Lalthanhuma was the first to come close, his header drifting just wide of the far post.

A few minutes later, a horrible goalkeeping error by Deb-nath Mondal saw the ball fall at the feet of Lalanzova in the six yard box, albeit at an acute angle.

The Aizawl winger decided to cut it back with an empty goal

at his mercy and Delhi cleared.

The goal was always coming though, and Delhi's inability to really break out of defence and create problems for Aizawl were clear to see.

In the 40th minute, Aizawl finally opened the scoring when Lalbiakdika picked up an errant clearance that had drifted from the right all the way across the box.

With his first touch, he beat his marker, cut on to his favoured foot and fired it home at the near post. It was a lead Aizawl deserved.

Aizawl continued to control and dominate the game in the second half too, and Lalbiakdika had opportunities to double their lead.

The winger scored his second in the 77th minute, to double Aizawl's lead.

As he ran on to a through ball, substitute goalkeeper Lalmuansanga came off his line in an attempt to clear it away.

Lalbiakdika neatly rounded the goalkeeper before finishing into an empty net. (PTI)

Mbappe scores twice to reach 31 goals for Madrid

BARCELONA, March 16: After a slow start to his Real Madrid career, Kylian Mbappe has already surpassed one of the club greats. Mbappe scored twice in Madrid's 2-1 comeback win over Villarreal on Saturday to take his tally to 31 goals in all competitions this season — one more than Brazil striker Ronaldo managed in his first campaign at the club. It also helped Madrid open up a three-point lead atop the Spanish league over Barcelona, which has played two games less.

Long gone are the scoring troubles Mbappe endured in his first months at Madrid.

Having surpassed Ronaldo's tally from 2002-03, the former Paris Saint-Germain player is now closing in on the 33 goals that Cristiano Ronaldo scored in his first season with Madrid in 2009-10. "They are legends who marked eras with the club," Mbappe said about the two Ronaldos. "If I score more goals than Ronaldo and Cristiano it doesn't mean that I am better, just that my first season is better. Scoring goals is important, but it is even more so if we win La Liga, the Champions League and the Copa del Rey."



His double at fifth-placed Villarreal took Mbappe's La Liga tally to 20 goals, only one fewer than Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski in the domestic competition.

Leading the comeback Villarreal made it a pulsating game as it attacked in waves with Alex Baena and Nicolas Pepe helping create a series of chances. Thibaut Courtois made three good stops for Madrid to deny Pepe, Ayoze Pérez, and Pape Gueye in the first half. But Villarreal paid at the

other end where Mbappe ruthlessly exploited the holes in the Yellow Submarine's defense.

"Mbappe didn't participate much, but he was lethal," Villarreal coach Marcelino Toral said.

A one-handed save by Courtois to deny Ayoze led to a corner kick that resulted in Villarreal's eight-minute opener. Juan Foyth swept home a ball that fell to him inside the six-yard box after it had ricocheted off players in a packed area. Mbappe leveled in the 17th after he teed up teammate Brahim

Díaz for a shot that was saved by goalkeeper Diego Conde, and the ball fell to the France striker to rifle home.

Mbappe was on the scoreboard again in the 23rd when Villarreal's defense lost track of him at the top of the area. He received a pass from Lucas Vázquez and had all the time he needed to place a shot into the right corner.

Halftime substitute Thierno Barry and Foyth both squandered scoring opportunities early in the second half before Madrid tightened its defense to see out the game. Carlo Ancelotti left Vinícius Júnior and Antonio Rudiger on the bench until the final half hour — with Luka Modric going on shortly after — as the Madrid coach rotated his lineup three days after its grueling Champions League victory over Atletico Madrid that went to a penalty shootout. "This was an important and difficult game against one of the best teams in the league," Mbappe said. "After the game against Atletico and its added time it was very tough today but we knew we had to win. We showed character and that we wanted this win." (AP)

Spaun grabs lead, Bhatia is fifth with McIlroy

PONTE VEDRA BEACH (USA), March 16: J.J. Spaun shot 2-under 70 as his 25-foot putt went 360 degrees around the cup and dropped for par to give him a one-shot lead going into the final round of the Players Championship.

The par gave Spaun a 2-under 70, the lowest score among the final 10 groups that teed off in a strong, steady wind with gusts up to 25 mph on a course that can be intimidating even in calm conditions.

Cauley teed off two hours earlier and still faced a bulk of the wind. He finished with three birdies on his last four holes for a 66 to be in the final group.

Lucas Glover had a 71 and finished with a double bogey on the 15th, an eagle by chipping in on the par-5 16th, and a double bogey with a tee shot that didn't reach the island on the notorious par-3 17th.

Spaun was at 12-under 204, a stroke ahead of Cauley and three ahead of Glover and Alex Smalley. Akshay Bhatia (75) put up a good fight after a miserable start, going from a birdie on the opening hole to a bogey-bogey-double bogey stretch that sent him spiraling down the leaderboard.

He still wound up with a chance and was tied-fifth at 8-under and four behind leader Spaun.

Rory McIlroy made birdie on the final hole to salvage a 73 and perhaps his chances, leaving him only four shots behind at 8-under.

Lahiri finishes 25th, Niemann wins second title of the year

SINGAPORE, March 16: Indian golfer Anirban Lahiri carded a two-under 69 in the third and final round to secure a modest Tied-25th finish at LIV Golf Singapore on Sunday. Lahiri, who shot rounds of 70 and 72 on the first two days, registered four birdies against two bogeys in the final round. At the top, Joaquín Niemann (65) cruised to a massive five-shot win over Brooks Koepka (66) for his second victory in the first four events of the season.

Niemann, who also won LIV Golf Adelaide in February, fired a six-under 65 in the final round to top the field at Sentosa Golf Club, outlasting Smash GC's Koepka, who finished second, and Range-Goats GC's Ben Campbell, who rounded out the podium in third.

Niemann has now won four LIV Golf events in total, trailing only Koepka, who has five titles to his name. (PTI)

Forest getting close to the Champions League after another win but struggling City held by Brighton

LONDON, March 16: Champions League qualification is getting tantalizingly close for Nottingham Forest.

For Manchester City, there's still plenty of work to do.

Forest, a team many might have thought would be battling relegation this season in the Premier League, moved just a point behind second-place Arsenal by beating Ipswich 4-2 on Saturday.

More importantly perhaps for Forest, the gap to City grew to six points after the soon-to-be-deposed champions drew 2-2 at home to Brighton.

City is hanging onto fifth place, which is likely to be the final Champions League qualification position from the Premier League for next season. Certainly any ambitions for a record-extending fifth straight league title are long gone for City, which is 22 points behind first-place Liverpool with nine games left.

Owngoal.com says Man City twice took the lead in the

first half, through Erling Haaland's penalty and Omar Marmoush's fierce outside-of-the-area shot, but was pegged back each time by an opponent also in contention to get into the Champions League.

An own-goal by Abdurkadir Khusanov in the 48th ultimately clinched a point for Brighton, which is only a point behind City and could easily have come away from at Etihad Stadium with all three points. Carlos Baleba blasted over the bar from close range with a great late chance for the visitors.

"I came from the locker room and it's a disappointing feeling," Brighton manager Fabian Hürzeler said.

City has won just two of its last six league games and already has conceded 40 league goals, its most in a single campaign in Pep Guardiola's nine seasons at the club.

"That's because of something missing," said Guardiola, who acknowledged that

he could sense a nervousness in the crowd.

"Yes definitely," he said. "Everybody feels the pressure."

Elanga double for Forest

Anthony Elanga scored twice for Forest, whose other goals came from Nikola Milenkovic and Jota Silva in the latest win on its march back to Europe's top competition. Forest famously won the European Cup in 1979 and '80 under Brian Clough and is close to returning to the competition under Nuno Espírito Santo, who had to steer the team away from relegation danger after being hired midway through last season.

Nuno wasn't getting carried away, though.

"You know what I think about the table," he said. "What we have (to do) is to focus on ourselves, focus on ourselves. Work as much as we can because there is a lot of football to be played yet."

Relegation race close to being settled already

Ipswich, in third-to-last place, dropped nine points adrift of safety after Wolverhampton — the team directly above the relegation zone — won 2-1 at last-place Southampton.

Jørgen Strand Larsen scored both of Wolves' goals.

Leicester, which is tied for points with Ipswich in 19th place, hosts Manchester United on Sunday and Southampton is destined for the drop a further eight points back. Bournemouth had been another unheralded team in contention for Champions League qualification but is starting to fade, dropping to ninth with a 2-1 home loss to Brentford.

Bournemouth hasn't won any of its last four league games, or five in all competitions, though is still only four points behind Man City — its opponent in the FA Cup quarterfinals at the end of the month. Everton scored in stoppage time through Jake O'Brien to salvage a 1-1 draw at home to West Ham. (AP)



Nair looks to replicate domestic cricket success in IPL

NEW DELHI, March 16: After a dazzling show in domestic cricket where he excelled in different formats, premier batter Karun Nair is confident of reclaiming his India cap but won't speculate much on his comeback to the national fold.

Nair also wants to carry his spectacular form into the upcoming IPL season and help Delhi Capitals win their maiden title.

A vital cog in Vidarbha's wheel, Nair has been in ravishing form in domestic cricket.

He relished a record-scripting run in the 50-over Vijay Hazare Trophy, where he smashed 779 runs in nine games, laced with five centuries and one fifty at a mind-boggling average of 389.50 and carried the momentum into red-ball cricket.

The unbeaten 132 on the fourth day of the Ranji Trophy final against Kerala was his fourth ton in the tournament, where he amassed 860 runs at 57.33.

"I have been playing cricket for a while, I have seen ups and downs and it's all about how you come back from the downs and treat the ups. I have learnt how to react to those situations," Nair said during a media interaction. "Obviously it



has been tough times, something that helped me to bring myself to this stage, push me for more motivation and hunger all the time. I think I am closer but don't know how close I am. That's not my focus but it's at the back of the mind.

"The only focus right now is to prepare well and what I need to do in the IPL and contribute in every game that I play. Go out there, play with freedom and express myself. Basically I am relaxed and taking the confidence into IPL. Just keep doing whatever is in your control rest will take care itself," he added.

He was roped in by Delhi Capitals for Rs 50 lakh for the upcoming IPL season.

"I am really happy to back at the Delhi Capitals, I am excited to join the side and to play with everyone. I will treat the game as important as the last one. I didn't change much at all, I just trusted the process and kept it going throughout the tournament and that's what was planned for this season," Nair said during an interaction with media.

"I will find my process, my rhythm as soon as I can and I will like to start well early and will try

to get better as the tournament goes on. The only thing that I have done is playing according to the situation, added a few shots and built the confidence to execute them when needed. I also now try to stay relaxed," he added.

Nair was full of praise for DC's new skipper Axar Patel.

"Axar has been around for a long time now and he is going to be a great captain. He is someone who knows all the facets of the game and understands everyone's situation and roles. He will be versatile like he is always, looking forward to meet him and know a lot of things," he said.

Nair is also excited to team up with star India batter KL Rahul in the upcoming season.

"It is exciting to be back with KL (Rahul). We have played together since the very first day. He has done well in the IPL for the last few seasons and very happy to be back with him," he said.

"The plan will be to replicate the past success we had domestically here for the Delhi Capitals and hope that Delhi can win its first title."

Ending runners-up in 2020 is DC's best result in the League thus far. (PTI)

New Zealand beat Pakistan by 9 wickets in the 1st T20I

CHRISTCHURCH, March 16: A new era for Pakistan white ball cricket got off to a rough start Sunday with a nine wicket loss to New Zealand in the first of five Twenty20 internationals.

First time captain Salman Ali Agha led a new look team into the match which followed Pakistan's poor performance at home in the 50-overs Champions Trophy and began its buildup to the 2026 T20 World Cup.

The Pakistan batting crumbled against the New Zealand pace attack and the tourists were all out for 91 in 18.4 overs, its fifth-lowest total in T20 internationals.

New Zealand easily ran down that total, reaching 92-1 from 10.1 overs with Tim Seifert making 44 from 29 balls and Finn Allen 29 from 17. Tim Robinson was 18 not out and took two runs from the first ball of the 11th over to complete the win.

"It was obviously difficult and we weren't up to the mark," Ali Agha said. "They bowled really well. They were bowling in the right areas and there was swing and seam for them as well."

"But our batting wasn't up to the mark. We have won day before the next game and we will try to gather ourselves and be better in the next game."

Pakistan was in trouble from the start with the new opening pair of Mohammad Haris and Hasan Nawaz, stepping in for the veterans Mohammad Rizwan and Babar Azam, both dismissed without scoring in the first eight balls of the match.

A fully fit Kyle Jamieson took 3-8 and Jacob Duffy 4-14 as Pakistan stumbled to 14-4 at the end of the six over powerplay. Jamieson and Duffy produced pace, bounce and swing on a brownish pitch at Hagley Oval and the Pakistan batters had no early response.

"It was really nice to be back on home soil," said Jamieson who bowled 18 dot balls. "We had some pretty favorable conditions which I'm sure me and



(Duffy) would take most places around the country. "It was nice to have those and just try to cash in as much as we could."

Salman and Khushdil Shah gave the Pakistan innings some impetus when they took 14 runs from the 10th over bowled by Ish Sodhi and 15 from the 11th bowled by Michael Bracewell to lift Pakistan from 28-4 after nine overs to 57-5 after 11. The Pakistan batters looked more at home against the spinners.

But Duffy returned to dismiss Khushdil for 32 and the rest followed quickly with only three batters reaching three figures.

Seifert put New Zealand on course to a comfortable win, taking 12 runs from the third over and 14 runs off the fifth as New Zealand reached 43-1 in the power play. Allen, unusually subdued, scored only nine runs in the first six overs.

New Zealand was 90-1 after 10 overs, needing only 2 runs to win, when the umpires unaccountably called for drinks. The second match is at Dunedin, New Zealand on Tuesday. (AP)

Bala Devi's hat-trick helps Sribhumi FC beat Sethu FC 3-2 in IWL

BARRACKPORE (West Bengal), March 16: Star Indian football team striker Bala Devi struck a hat-trick to help hosts Sribhumi FC beat Sethu FC 3-2 in the Indian Women's League here on Sunday.

The class and experience of Bala Devi were in full display as she scored in the 39th, 49th (penalty) and 65th minutes after Sethu took the lead through Hadijah Nandago in the 37th minute.

Lisham Babina Devi pulled one back for the visitors in the 88th minute, but it wasn't enough to change the course of the match at the Bibhuti Bhushan Stadium.

The two teams were locked 1-1 at half time.

The win took Sribhumi FC to 12 points from eight matches and to third place in the table, while Sethu have 10 points from eight matches.

In the other match played in Bhubaneswar, a second half brace from Manisha Naik helped Nita FA secure a 2-0 victory against HOPS FC at the Capital Football Arena.

Manisha (60th and 63rd) scored both her goals around the hour mark, putting the hosts in a comfortable position, in a match that they dominated from the get-go.

The result propelled Nita FA to the fifth spot with 10 points from eight matches. HOPS, meanwhile, languished at the bottom with a solitary point.

Nita FA's veteran midfielder Kamala Devi had one of her finest performances this season, as she completely dictated the proceedings from the middle. She was the vital cog in their machinery that allowed the hosts to dictate terms against the side from Delhi. (PTI)

BCCI's Medical Team head Nitin Patel puts in his papers

NEW DELHI, March 16: The BCCI's recently inaugurated Centre of Excellence (COE, earlier NCA) is expected to witness a few changes in composition of its staff in coming few months after Sports Science and Medical team head Nitin Patel recently tendered his resignation after a successful stint of nearly three years.

While Patel was unreachable for a comment, a senior BCCI official confirmed the development to PTI that one of the senior-most staffers of NCA is indeed "moving on". "Yes, Nitin has resigned as head of Sports Science and Medical Team. Nitin had a very good stint with BCCI and especially during this tenure, where he was instrumental in set-up of Sports Science and Medical team at NCA," a senior BCCI source told PTI on condition of anonymity. "One good thing that happened in the past couple of years is that whenever any injured player did his rehab, he only came back when after being more than hundred percent. Nitin's family lives abroad and managing COE's sports science and medical division is 365-days-a-year assignment," the source added.

Some of the notable injury management assignments which Patel dealt, include India's pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah, senior speedster Mohammed Shami, senior batter KL Rahul, lead spinner Kuldeep Yadav to name a few. The source said that a few Level 3 coaches and instructors along with some of the S&C coaches (Strength and Conditioning) coaches could make a move in some months time.

NCA head VVS Laxman's tenure is set to get completed by the end of this year and it is unlikely that he would seek an extension although the legend might be requested to carry on till the 2027 World Cup.

Before Patel, one of the NCA coaches Sairaj Bahutule also quit and joined Rajasthan Royals support staff.

Sitanshu Kotak has joined the senior men's team staff permanently.

Another reputed NCA coach Hrishikesh Kanitkar, who looks after India U-19 and occasionally India A teams is still on COE roster but it will be interesting to see if he hangs around once the U-19 World Cup in Zimbabwe and Namibia is finished early next year.

There are some specialist batting and bowling coaches, who would also be looking for greener pastures in months to come. (PTI)

Maybe the occasion got to players: DC head coach after third WPL final loss

MUMBAI, March 16: Delhi Capitals head coach Jonathan Batty says maybe the occasion got to the players as his team lost its third straight final in the Women's Premier League. Delhi Capitals should have chased down 150 against Mumbai Indians but fell short by eight runs on Saturday night. They had lost to RCB last season and Mumbai the year before. "Everyone's hurting a huge amount at the moment. I think 99 percent of the time you back yourself to chase 150 on that wicket there. Big match finals, maybe the occasion just got to the players but full credit to Mumbai Indians for the way they defended that total."

"They made it really hard for us and we were never ahead in the chase. We were in the game all the way through, just couldn't get over the line," said Batty in the post-match media interaction. The head coach insisted that the players did not carry baggage of the past going into another final. "The girls have been really positive, I can't fault them. There has been no negative talk at all like 'Oh we've messed up the last two finals, we're going to take that baggage into this one', none of that. I thought they were really positive, really confident."

"I don't think there is a mental block at all. If you look at the way we performed with the ball, we did a great job to keep them to 149 on that wicket. We have seen what had happened in the elimination game and the other games here. We were expecting 180 to be a par score, so we were really happy with that," he said. (PTI)

India ends Special Olympics World Winter Games campaign with 33 medals



NEW DELHI, March 16: India clinched 12 medals in four events on the final day, concluding their campaign at the Special Olympics World Winter Games with a total of 33 medals in Turin, Italy.

India's medal tally included 8 gold, 18 silver, and 7 bronze medals.

In Snowshoeing, India secured four more medals, adding to the six won earlier in the competition.

Vasu Tiwari, Shalini Chauhan, and Tanya each claimed a silver medal in the 25m Snowshoeing event, while Jahangir bagged a bronze in the same category.

The Alpine Skiing segment also saw stellar performances from Indian athletes.

Radha Devi and Nirmala Devi won silver medals in the Intermediate Slalom (F01 and F04 categories, respectively), while

Abhishek Kumar secured another silver in the Novice Slalom (M02 category).

Akrti demonstrated remarkable endurance in Cross Country Skiing, bagging a bronze medal in the 100m Classical Technique (F02 category).

In the Floorball event, Indian Women's Traditional Team showcased their teamwork and skill, claiming a bronze medal.

While India recorded 10 medals each in Snowshoeing and Alpine Skiing, six medals came in Snowboarding. Short Track Speed Skating, Cross Country Skiing and Floorball brought the country four, two and one medal respectively.

"Each medal won is a testament to their hard work and the unwavering support from coaches, families, and the entire Special Olympics Bharat family," Special Olympics Bharat President Malika Nadda said in a release.

"We are incredibly proud of their achievements and will continue to support their journey towards greater heights." (PTI)

Assam team gears up for 2nd Khelo India Para Games 2025

GUWAHATI, March 16: The Paralympic Association of Assam, in association with the Directorate of Sports & Youth Welfare, Government of Assam, organised a send-off ceremony for the Assam Team participating in the 2nd Khelo India Para Games 2025. The event is scheduled to be held in New Delhi from March 20 to March 27.

The ceremony also included the felicitation of Ababil Ali for winning the Silver medal at the World Para Athletics Grand Prix 2025. The selected athletes representing Assam in Para Athletics are Ababil Ali, Hukewar Deka, Amar Jyoti Gogo, Dhunu Taw, Arshad Uddin Borbhuyan, Dipti Phukan, and Juri Deka. In Para Badminton, Chiranjita Bharali has been selected to represent the state.

Dignitaries present during the send-off ceremony included Kausar Jamil Hilaly, secretary of Sports, Government of Assam; Dr. Sutapa Chakrabarty, Executive Member of the Paralympic Committee of India; Jitu Talukdar, Independent Director of APCL; Rajib Dey, general secretary of the Paralympic Association of Assam; and Chandan Baruah, president of Paralympic Association of Assam.



I don't want to go to room, sit alone and sulk: Kohli bats for family on tours



BENGALURU, March 16: Star batter Virat Kohli supported the presence of players' families on tours, saying he would always prefer having personal support around him to deal with tough and intense days on the field, instead of sulking alone in his hotel room.

A BCCI directive which was issued after India's 1-3 Test series defeat against Australia had curtailed the family time of players for no longer than 14 days on tours exceeding 45 days.

The wife, children or girlfriends of players could be with them for

a maximum of one week on shorter tours.

Kohli, Ravindra Jadeja and Mohammed Shami had their families in Dubai during the recently-concluded Champions Trophy but they did not stay at the hotel. The expense of the families' stay was borne by the players and not the BCCI.

"The role of family is very difficult to explain to people...how grounding it is to just come back to your family every time you have something which is intense, which happens on the outside," said Kohli during RCB's Innovation Lab summit which concluded here on Saturday. "I don't think people have an understanding of what value it brings."

Kohli said having the family around would help a player to recover from on-field disappointments that much quicker.

"I don't want to go to my room and just sit alone and sulk. I want

to be able to be normal. Then you can really treat your game as something that is a responsibility."

"Not in a vague sense, but in a very real way that you finish your commitment and then you come back to your house, you're with family, and absolutely normalcy in your house and normal family life goes on."

"So, for me, that is absolutely a day of immense pleasure. I won't miss any opportunities to go out and spend time with my family whenever I can," said Kohli.

The 36-year-old was "disappointed" because people with no real connection with such issues have been involved in such discussions.

"I feel quite disappointed about that because it's like people who have no control over what's going on are brought into conversations and put out at the forefront of that — 'oh, maybe they need to be kept away'."

"And if you ask any player, do you want your family to be around you all the time? You'll be like, yes," he said.

Kohli, one of the fittest cricketers around, said it was tough to convince his mother about his fitness regime, highlighting his strong bond with the family.

"Support system (for fitness) from the team's point of view wasn't tough. Convincing my mom what I was doing was way harder. She was very disappointed in the fact that I wasn't eating any parathas and I was looking weak on the field."

"And I was like, you know what, there are people who are playing in other countries asking me how I'm training. And how I'm very fit now. And you're telling me I'm looking weak. So I had to convince her that everything's fine, I'm not sick, don't worry. That was way harder," he added. (PTI)