

6 WORLD

8 NATION

- More than 30 people killed, 84 injured in Russian missile attack
- Multi-racial society precious amid global troubles: Singapore PM
- BJP MP urges Centre to declare 4 Bengal districts as 'Disturbed Areas' under AFSPA
- Hundreds flee violence-hit Murshidabad, cross river to take shelter in Malda

State government reaffirms commitment to world-class cancer care; announces similar facilities in Silchar and Dibrugarh

CM Sarma dedicates Northeast's first Onco-Robotic Surgery facility in Guwahati



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 13: In a significant milestone for healthcare in Northeast India, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday inaugurated the region's first onco-robotic surgery facility at the State Cancer Institute, located within the Gauhati Medical College and Hospital (GMCH) premises.

According to an official statement, the state-of-the-art robotic surgery system has been procured by the Assam government at a cost of ₹14.99 crore under the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Stroke (NPCDCS) scheme of the Central government.

The machine is equipped with the latest 'Make in India' technology, offering enhanced surgical precision, superior control, and 3D visualization capabilities.

Speaking at the inauguration ceremony,

chief minister Sarma said, "Assam is beginning Rongali Bihu celebrations by dedicating Northeast India's first ever robotic surgery facility. Our government hospitals will now offer low-cost, highly precise, and least invasive oncological surgical procedures through 'Make in India' technology."

Sarma added that the advanced facility is expected to significantly reduce operation time and blood loss while enabling complex procedures to be performed with ease and safety.

The integrated system includes universal safety features, an articulating endoscope, and the latest software-based camera controls.

Highlighting the government's vision to expand access to modern healthcare, the chief minister also announced that similar robotic surgery units will soon be established in Silchar and Dibrugarh.

These facilities aim to provide advanced cancer treatment to residents of Upper Assam and the Barak Valley.

To build the necessary human resources for operating such high-end technology, the Chief Minister said that the government is initiating the establishment of nursing colleges across all cancer hospitals in the state. "These colleges will also offer language training in English and Japanese, opening wider career opportunities for our healthcare professionals," he said.

The event was attended by several dignitaries, including Minister for Industries, Commerce and Public Enterprises Bimal Bora, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council Chief Executive Member Tuliram Ronghang, Commissioner and Secretary for Medical Education and Research Siddharth Singh, Principal of GMCH Dr. Achyut Baishya, and Chief Operating Officer of the Assam Cancer Care Foundation Dr. (Major General) Jai Prakash Prasad.

Expressing gratitude for the collaborative effort, Sarma acknowledged the support of the ICICI Foundation, which donated high-end medical equipment to the State Cancer Institute under its CSR initiative.

He also extended thanks to the Assam Cancer Care Foundation, GMCH, and associated institutions for their partnership in bringing the project to fruition.

The inauguration of the onco-robotic surgery facility marks a significant leap in Assam's healthcare journey, with the government reiterating its goal to ensure world-class treatment and modern infrastructure for cancer patients across the state. (With inputs from PTI)

BIHU FERVOUR



Women buying Kopou phool (orchids) on the eve of Rongali Bihu at the Bor Asom Rongali Mela, held at Lakhidhar Bora Kshetra in Guwahati on Sunday. HT Photo

CM holds high-level meeting with Jeet Adani

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 13: In a significant step toward transforming Assam into an industrial and infrastructure powerhouse, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday held a crucial meeting with Jeet Adani, Director of Adani Ports and SEZ, along with his team at Lok Sewa Bhawan. The meeting comes in the wake of the major investment commitments made during the Advantage Assam 2.0 Investment and Infrastructure Summit held in Guwahati.

The Adani Group had announced a mas-

sive ₹50,000 crore investment across multiple sectors in Assam, aimed at catalyzing economic growth and employment generation. The discussion focused on expediting the formalisation and implementation of these commitments for the greater benefit of the state and its people.

Key focus areas of the meeting included the operationalisation of MoUs signed between the Govt of Assam and the Adani Group in sectors such as cement manufacturing, aerocity development, and thermal power generation. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

GREETINGS

The office of **The Hills Times** conveys heartfelt wishes to readers, hawkers, advertisers and well-wishers on the occasion of Rongali Bihu. The office will remain closed on June 14 and 15 on the occasion and that no edition will be available on June 15 and 16.

JNU assures priority to northeast students in Barak Hostel

NEW DELHI, April 13: Amid demands for reserving seats in the newly inaugurated Barak Hostel, Jawaharlal Nehru University has clarified that no hostel is reserved based on region or culture but priority is being given to students from the northeast in line with official directives.

The university said the hostel allotment process began on April 8 in a phased manner and "priority have been given to the northeast students in Barak Hostel."

"It, however, emphasised the existing policy would continue to be followed for all accommodations, including Barak Hostel... This is brought to the kind notice and information to all the concerned stakeholders... The Barak hostel was opened officially for allotment of JNU students on April 7," the university said in a circular, referring to the Inter-University (INU) agreement and the government-funded Barak Hostel project.

"Presently, all northeastern students are residing at all JNU hostels. No hostel is reserved based on a specific region or culture in JNU," the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Centre planning ₹ 10 lakh cr investment to rewire highways NE roads will match US standards: Gadkari

NEW DELHI, April 13: The Centre is planning to invest ₹ 10 lakh crore over the next two years to strengthen highways across the country, with special focus on the Northeast, where roads will rival those in the US, Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari said.

In an interview to PTI, he said the Centre is working to transform the country's infrastructure drastically in the next two years so that it matches the best in the world.

"We plan to take up projects worth ₹ 10 lakh crore in the next two years to strengthen highways across the country, with special emphasis on enhancing infrastructure in the Northeast and the border areas. In the coming two years, highways in the Northeast will be on a par with US roads," Gadkari said. There is an urgent need to augment the road infrastructure in the Northeast given its difficult terrain and proximity to borders, he said.

"It is our endeavour to transform the country's infrastructure drastically so that it matches with the

best in the world," he said, maintaining that works are underway in all states, including Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Rajasthan and Delhi.

Gadkari said 784 highway projects are going to be implemented in the eastern states at an estimated cost of ₹ 3,73,484 crore, covering 21,355 km.

Among them are projects of the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI), and the National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd (NHIDCL), he said.

"We currently have projects worth ₹ 57,696 crore in Assam, and about ₹ 90,000 crore in Bihar. We're also undertaking projects worth over ₹ 42,000 crore in West Bengal, about ₹ 53,000 crore in Jharkhand, and around ₹ 58,000 crore in Odisha," Gadkari said.

"In the Northeast, except Assam, we are undertaking projects worth about ₹ 1 lakh crore this year itself," he said. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Over 1,000 join BJP in West Karbi Anglong in major political shift



HT Correspondent

KHERONI, April 13: In a major political development, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Saturday welcomed over 1,000 new members from rival parties during a mass joining programme held under the 9th Number Amrenng MAC Constituency in West Karbi Anglong.

The event saw the participation of 700 families from the Indian National Congress (INC), 200 from the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC), and 103

from the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), all of whom officially joined the BJP.

Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) Chief Executive Member (CEM) Tuliram Ronghang welcomed the new entrants, saying, "We look forward to working together to create a future filled with opportunity and prosperity."

The programme was attended by a host of senior BJP leaders, including Member of Parliament Amarsing Tisso, Baithalangso MLA Rupsing Teron, KAAC

Deputy Chairman Avijit Kro, Executive Member Rina Terangpi, and several other Executive Members and MACs.

Also present were KAAC Board Chairmen, BJP West Karbi Anglong District President Radip Ronghang, District Secretary Sagorika Bora, Vice Presidents Dhonsing Dera and Bhudheswar Rongpi, and other senior party workers.

Among the prominent figures who joined the BJP were Chandrasing Phangchopi, a founding leader of the ASDC; Sarthe Ronghi, President of the Amrenng Congress Mandal Committee, along with his entire committee; and Parbinash Phongcho from the APHLC.

In a significant announcement during the event, MP Amarsing Tisso declared Taseng as a Model Village. Meanwhile, CEM Ronghang pledged to implement a series of development initiatives in the area. "We will provide 50 ring wells, construct an open stage, offer free land pattas to indigenous communities, and ensure quality drinking (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

State to mark Bhupen Hazarika's birth centenary with year-long celebrations

GUWAHATI, April 13: The Assam government announced a year-long celebration from September 8 to mark the birth centenary of music maestro Bhupen Hazarika.

Events across India, biography release and commemorative coin, among others, have been planned, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said at a press conference on Saturday after chairing a cabinet meeting here.

"To celebrate the life and times of Bharat Ratna Bhupen Hazarika, the cabinet has approved the commemoration of his 100th birth anniversary through a year-long celebration from September 8, 2025, to September 8, 2026," he said.

Sarma said a 50-member committee headed by him will be formed to plan the celebration.

The chief ministers of all other northeastern states will also be invited to be part of the committee, he said.

The opening and closing ceremonies will be held in Guwahati or New Delhi, and invitations will be sent to the prime minister and the president, he added.

Commemorative events will also be held in Arunachal Pradesh, where Hazarika spent his early years, in Kolkata where he lived extensively during his creative years, and in Mumbai where he spent his final years.

Sarma said a biography on Hazarika's life has been



commissioned and it will be gifted to 10 lakh people of the state, making it the highest printed edition of any book in the state.

"It will be translated into all Indian languages and sent to libraries across the country," he added.

A documentary on the musical genius and naming of a major infrastructure project or institution after him will also be undertaken, the chief minister said.

The state government will also pursue with the Centre the issuance of a commemorative coin in honour of Hazarika, Sarma added. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

IIT-Guwahati develops bamboo-based composites for constructing bunkers, defence shelters

New bamboo-based material offers eco-friendly solution for defence shelters

NEW DELHI, April 13: Researchers at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Guwahati have developed bamboo-based composite materials that can potentially replace conventional wood, iron and other metal components in the construction of bunkers and defence shelters.

According to officials, the bamboo composites possess bending strength equivalent to metallic components and are also bullet-proof. The composites developed by them are also being tested by the Indian Army.

Admecca Composites Pvt Ltd, a start-up incubated at IIT-Guwahati, have fabricated bamboo-based composite components at lab scale and tested their mechanical properties.

In a first, the team developed six-feet structural components such as I-section beams and flat panels using bamboo strips and



epoxy resin. "Due to their superior strength-to-weight ratio, glass fibre, carbon fibre, and sandwich composites are widely used in aerospace, civil, and naval sectors, but pose significant environmental challenges during their production and disposal.

"With increasing restrictions on tree cutting and a global push for green alternatives, IIT-Guwahati researchers are exploring bamboo-based composites as a viable substitute," Poonam Kumari, Professor at IIT-Guwahati told PTI. Bamboo, known for its rapid growth rate and renewable nature, matures within four to five years,

compared to traditional hardwood trees such as Saal or Teak, which take about 30 years. It is lightweight, eco-friendly, locally available, and historically used for furniture, huts, and single-storey cottages.

"While there are over 4,500 research articles evaluating the properties of bamboo composites, their structural and high-load applications remain largely unexplored. Initial tests revealed that these bamboo composites possess bending strength equivalent to metallic components, while being aesthetically appealing and significantly lighter," she added.

Kumari informed that a sandwich composite block designed using bamboo was also tested successfully for defence applications, including bunker protection. The composite panels demonstrated remarkable resilience under heavy loads (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

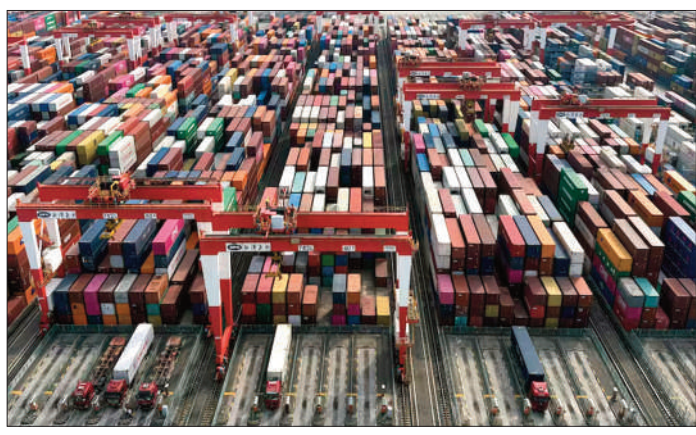
US curbs on Chinese goods open export window for Indian e-sellers: GTRI

NEW DELHI, April 13: The US tightening of low-value e-commerce shipments from China has opened up huge opportunities for Indian online exporters, as they can fill the gap if the red tape is eased and the government provides timely support, think tank GTRI said on Sunday.

With over 1 lakh e-commerce sellers and \$5 billion in current exports, India is well-positioned to fill the gap left by China particularly in customized, small-batch products like handicraft, fashion, and home goods, the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said.

From May 2, Chinese and Hong Kong e-commerce shipments under \$800 to the US will face a steep 120 per cent import duty, ending their duty-free entry. This move is expected to disrupt Chinese supply chains and open the door for other countries. Chinese firms Shein and Temu are major players in the sector. Over 1,400 million low-value packets entered the US in 2024 from the world, with China alone exporting USD 46 billion worth of such goods.

"India is well-positioned to fill the gap left by China particularly in customized, small-batch products like handicraft, fashion, and home goods, but only if it quickly



fixes bottlenecks in banking, customs, and export incentives," GTRI Founder Ajay Srivastava said adding seizing this opportunity requires urgent reforms.

India's current trade system is still geared toward large, traditional exporters, not small online sellers. "For these e-commerce players, red tape often outweighs support," he added.

Srivastava said that Indian banks struggle to handle the high volume and small-value nature of e-commerce exports.

RBI rules allow only a 25 per cent gap between declared shipping value and final payment, which is too tight for online ex-

ports, where discounts, returns, and platform fees often lead to larger differences, he said.

"Raising this limit to 100 per cent and giving banks flexibility to approve legitimate cases would help. Bank fees are also a problem. Reconciling each small shipment can cost ₹ 1,500-2,000, sometimes half the shipment's value. These charges should be waived for low-value exports, and processes must go fully digital," he added. The RBI should also set strict service timelines and grievance mechanisms to ensure timely support for exporters.

At the customs front, GTRI said India's customs system must move

online, with 24/7 automated inspections and easy-to-follow digital checklists for small exporters.

Courier-mode shipments should also be updated to accommodate terms like "Delivered Duty Paid," ensuring that paperwork matches real-world logistics and avoids unnecessary delays, it added.

Further, unlike large exporters, e-commerce sellers often lack access to affordable loans.

While big players get 7-10 per cent interest loans and purchase-order based financing, small online sellers pay 12-15 per cent and are left out of public credit programs.

Including them under priority sector lending could help level the playing field, it suggested.

Shipments sent by courier, common in e-commerce, do not qualify for key export incentives like RoDTEP, Duty Drawback, or the Advance Authorization Scheme. This puts online exporters at a disadvantage. Extending these benefits to e-commerce shipments is critical, it said. "To compete globally, India must modernize its banking, customs, and trade support systems to meet the needs of a fast-growing digital economy. If done right, this could spark a new era of inclusive export growth," Srivastava said. (PTI)

Tariffs: IndiGo CEO says long-term plans won't be impacted

MUMBAI, April 13: India's largest carrier IndiGo is confident that the global events triggered by tariff hikes will not impact its long-term plans.

The large domestic market, which includes a big untapped segment, will help airlines, the company's Chief Executive Pieter Elbers told PTI in an interaction. "Some of the more recent dynamics and the global scale are not changing any of our capacity (expansion) plans for next year," he said.

He, however, said a major economy like India cannot be insulated from a major world event like the tariff wars. Elbers said the company is desirous of doubling its size by the end of the decade and the same will not be impacted.

The long-term trajectory for the business is one of growth, and the company will not be affected if there is a quarter of a blip or higher achievement as well, he said. To a question on the duopoly in the Indian aviation market -- the Tatas are the only formidable competitors to IndiGo -- and how he sees it going ahead, Elbers suggested that having an airline of big size and scale that is able to compete globally would be helpful for India.

He said a similar consolidation has been observed in other aviation markets as well. To a question on the review of the seats framework by Indian authorities while negotiating with other countries, Elbers said parting seats represents a "missed opportunity" for Indian carriers, as the foreign carriers are benefiting from it.

India needs airlines and also the maintenance, repair and overhaul facilities given the employment potential, he said, adding that IndiGo itself sends its aircraft overseas for such works.

To underline the employment potential, Elbers said IndiGo employs over 60,000 people at present. On some voices pitching for capping of domestic airfares, he said the fares go up during seasons, and added that it is only during occasions like the Kumbh Mela when the fares really skyrocket. (PTI)

Tariff war opens door for India to emerge as global toy export hub

KOLKATA, April 13: As the US-China tariff war intensifies, the Indian toy industry leaders are calling the situation a "golden opportunity" to position India as a major export hub for toys, especially to the United States, a trade body official said on Sunday.

The US recently imposed a steep 145 per cent tariff on toy imports from China — a move that could reshape the global toy trade.

China, which previously accounted for nearly 77 per cent of US toy imports, is expected to see a significant drop in exports due to the high tariff, opening up space for alternate suppliers, an official said.

Akshay Binjrajka, President of the Toy Association of India, told PTI that India is well-positioned to fill the emerging vacuum.

"The US toy market, valued at around USD 41.7 billion, offers a massive opportunity for Indian manufacturers," he said, adding that Indian products can now compete with Chinese offerings on both quality and price.

India's toy exports have already witnessed a steady rise — from USD 40 million in 2014-15 to an estimated USD 152 million in 2023-24. More notably, toy imports from China to India have plunged from USD 235 million in FY20 to just USD 41 million in FY24, after India imposed strict control norms on imports

and boost in domestic sourcing.

"The Indian toy sector, once import-dependent, is now transforming with local manufacturers scaling up to meet domestic demand and aiming for global markets," said Binjrajka, who also chairs the Toy sub-committee at the Bharat Chamber of Commerce.

Despite policy tightening, he warned that "cheap, unregulated Chinese toys continue to flood the Indian market, and might get intensified after US tariffs," hurting domestic capacity and profitability.

He urged the Centre to enforce stricter checks at ports and called on the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) to curb the entry of substandard toys.

Binjrajka also appealed to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to support the state's toy industry by developing a dedicated cluster — a longstanding demand.

"West Bengal has all the ingredients to become a toy manufacturing hub — strategic location, seaport access, good logistics, raw materials, and labour. But the final push from the state is still missing," he said.

He emphasised that the toy sector, a major MSME employer, could significantly boost investment and jobs in West Bengal. "If India becomes a global toy supplier, Bengal must lead that movement," he asserted. (PTI)

Bhumi and realme partner to empower over 80,000 youth through Tech-Driven education programs

IIT Bureau GUWAHATI, April 13: Bhumi, one of India's leading non-profit organisations working towards youth empowerment and social development, has partnered with smartphone brand realme to expand access to education and community-building initiatives across the country.

The collaboration aims to reach over 80,000 young individuals through a combination of skill development, leadership training, and digital learning opportunities.

The partnership supports a wide range of Bhumi's educational and civic engagement initiatives including the Bhumi Fellowship, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Program, Schools of Excellence, Ignite Shelters, and Bhumi Clubs.

These programs are designed to address educational inequities, promote leadership, and equip underprivileged students with life skills. At the centre of the initiative

is the Bhumi Fellowship, a two-year paid program that places fellows in under-resourced government schools. Fellows work on foundational teaching, parent engagement, teacher support, and school transformation.

Since its inception in 2020, the Fellowship has reached over 18,000 students through a growing cohort of changemakers.

The current batch of 75 fellows is impacting more than 13,000 students, with alumni continuing to work in the education sector.

Other initiatives like the SEL Program focus on building emotional intelligence and resilience in students, while the Schools of Excellence initiative works to improve school infrastructure and teaching methods. Ignite Shelters provides mentorship and academic support to children in shelter homes. Meanwhile, Bhumi Clubs encourage volunteerism and civic participation among college students.

Commenting on the collaboration, Vaishnavi Srinivasan, Executive Director of Bhumi, said:

"At Bhumi, we believe in the power of education to drive lasting change. With realme's support, we are not only expanding our reach but adding vital momentum to our mission. Their deep connection with young India and commitment to social impact make this a truly meaningful collaboration."

Chief Marketing Officer at realme India, added, "We view technology as an enabler of growth, not just connectivity. As a youth-driven brand, we believe it's our responsibility to actively invest in the next generation's future. Our partnership with Bhumi reflects our long-term vision to drive social transformation through innovation." Through this joint effort, more than 70,000 schoolchildren and 10,000 college students have already been impacted across India.

Nissan to launch 7-seater MPV in last quarter of FY'26, 5-seater SUV in Q1 FY'27

KOLKATA, April 13: Japanese automaker Nissan on Sunday said the company is set to launch in India a seven-seater multi-purpose vehicle in the last quarter of the 2025-26 fiscal, and a five-seater compact SUV towards the end of the April-June quarter of 2026-27.

As part of its plans to reshape new products for the India business, Nissan had earlier announced the launch of the seven-seater B-MPV (multi-purpose vehicle) and two compact SUVs (in five and seven-seater configurations), besides the existing new Magnite and the X-TRAIL.

"Let me be very clear, we will focus only on SUVs. These will have Japanese DNA and very strong Nissan technologies... We are now ready to share the timing of the new launches: the B-MPV seven-seater is going to come out in the last quarter of this fiscal, while the C-SUV (five-seater) will come at the end of the first quarter (2026-27 fiscal)," Nissan Motor India Managing Director Saurabh Vatsa said.

Vatsa said the timeline for the launch of the seven-seater compact SUV will be announced later. Nissan will manufacture the new products at its joint-venture plant in Chennai. The auto major is working on an "affordable" electric vehicle for the Indian market as well and it is likely to be launched in the 2026-27 fiscal.

Nissan would also look at expanding its network in

the country as the new vehicles are rolled out, adding more touch points (showrooms and workshops), he said. "At present, we have 282 touch points (159 showrooms and 123 workshops), and we are beginning to expand. We are looking at adding another close to 35-40 touch points this financial year, and another 50 next fiscal," Vatsa said at a media interaction here. The company has around 46-47 touch points in eastern India.

In a recent release, Nissan India had stated that under its 2025-26 plan, it aims to triple domestic sales and exports at 1 lakh each per year.

In the 2024-25 fiscal, the company recorded a total domestic sales volume of over 28,000 units led by the new Magnite introduced in October 2024. On the export front, it expanded operations from 20 markets to 65 and registered "unprecedented" sales of over 71,000 units, Vatsa said.

Asked about the growing competition in the SUV and MPV segments in India, the senior official said Nissan's new offerings "look different, are designed differently and feel different". "It's one of the most intensely fought segments in the market, but we have chosen to be there (in these segments) because we have very capable products. A lot of thought and planning has gone behind it," he added. (PTI)

DRI seizes 52.67 kg 'crystal meth' narcotic in Mizoram

NEW DELHI, April 13: The Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) has seized 52.67 kg methamphetamine tablets, valued at ₹ 52.67 crore in the international drug market, from the outskirts of Aizawl, Mizoram, the finance ministry said on Sunday.

Preliminary investigations indicate that the narcotic had been smuggled into Mizoram from Myanmar via the Zokhawthar se-

ctor. In a late-night operation on April 11, the DRI officers intercepted a 12-wheeler truck and seized 52.67 kg methamphetamine tablets, from the outskirts of Aizawl, the ministry said.

Total 53 meticulously packed, brick-sized packets were found hidden within the folds of the tarpaulin cover of the truck which was carrying the contraband.

The packets bore inscriptions

such as "3030 Export Only" and "999", alongside diamond symbols, and contained orange-pink tablets. Tests conducted using the NDPS Field Test Kit confirmed the tablets contained methamphetamine, the ministry added.

The truck, registered in Nagaland, had originated from Zokhawthar's sensitive border town near the Indo-Myanmar frontier and was enroute to Tripura. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

CM holds high-level

The parties also discussed the immense economic potential of the Jogighopa Multimodal Logistics Park, and how the Adani Group can play a pivotal role in activating economic activities around the park.

Chief Minister Sarma elaborated on the extensive multi-modal connectivity infrastructure—covering airways, roadways, railways, and inland waterways—already developed by the state government to support such large-scale projects. He stressed the importance of leveraging these assets to unlock new pathways of growth in logistics, tourism, and urban infrastructure.

The chief minister assured the Adani delegation of the government's full support, including fast-track approvals, land allotment, and facilitation of clearances to ensure swift and smooth execution of all proposed projects. Sarma also underlined the transformative potential of the partnership, stating that Adani Group's expertise in infrastructure can lay the foundation for a new era of industrialisation in Assam.

CM Sarma thanked Jeet Adani and his team for attending the meeting on a Sunday, a testament to the shared commitment to the state's development. He reiterated that the Assam government is working round the clock to deliver economic opportunities and better livelihoods for its people. Also present at the meeting were Minister of Industries, Commerce and Public Enterprises Bimal Bora, Chief Executive Members of KAAC and Dima Hasao Autonomous Council Tuliram Ronghang and Debolal Gorlosa respectively, Chief Secretary Ravi Kota, Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister KK Dwivedi, Secretary Industries & Commerce Lakshmanan S., and other senior officials. The discussions concluded on a positive note, with both sides expressing eagerness to take the partnership forward and set the stage for a robust economic landscape in Assam.

JNU assures priority to northeast

circular read. Reaffirming its commitment to maintaining diversity and inclusivity, JNU underlined that it is a "Central university which promotes and maintains social integrity, multiculturalism, inclusivity and diversity on the campus." Citing the office memorandum from the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) dated October 10, 2023, JNU said it was directed that the facility "should be put to use by INU without delay and priority shall be given to northeast students."

"The same matrix of allotment will be followed for Barak Hostel," it said, adding the hostel manual emphasises enabling students from different parts of the country to live together and build mutual cooperation and goodwill. The response came days after the North East Students' Forum (NESF) staged a silent protest during the hostel's inauguration, demanding that 75 per cent of the seats in Barak Hostel be reserved for students from the eight northeastern states.

NESF alleged that only five out of 88 seats in the first allotment list were given to northeastern students despite assurances made during the hostel's construction. The forum said the hostel was meant to serve as a culturally sensitive and secure space for students from the region.

While the university reiterated it is giving priority to students from the northeast as per official instructions, some JNU students have opposed any formal reservation policy in hostels, arguing it would undermine the inclusive ethos of the campus. In response, NESF clarified it was not seeking full reservation, but the fulfilment of assurances made in official communications.

"The demand for reservation of seats in this hostel is not a form of forced segregation but to promote representation and safety," the forum said. Barak Hostel, a five-storey building with 228 rooms and a capacity for 446 students, was funded by the North Eastern Council and the Ministry of DoNER. Though inaugurated in February 2024 by Union Home Minister Amit Shah, the hostel was made functional in April. (PTI)

NE roads will match

Gadkari said a mass rapid transport pilot project is underway in Nagpur at a cost of ₹ 170 crore. "The project involves a 135-seater bus that will run on non-polluting energy sources and is expected to be highly cost-effective. If successful, it will be replicated on important routes across the country, including the Delhi-Jaipur stretch, under the Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) model," he said.

The minister said the length of the National Highway network has expanded significantly, growing from 91,287 km in March 2014 to 1,46,204 km at present, with a significant improvement in standards.

The proportion of national highways below two lanes has dropped sharply -- from 30 per cent to just 9 per cent of the total network, he said. In 2024-25, NHAI constructed 5,614 km of national highways, surpassing its target of 5,150 km. (PTI)

Over 1,000 Join BJP in

water under the Jal Jeevan Mission," he said. The large-scale induction has bolstered the BJP's grassroots presence in the Amrenj constituency, reflecting the party's growing influence in the region ahead of upcoming political contests.

State to mark Bhupen

About other decisions taken at the cabinet meeting, he said 10 more co-districts have been approved to be operationalised by August 15 to ensure effective governance and better service delivery to citizens.

The cabinet also approved ₹ 250 crore towards the Assam Cancer Care Foundation (ACCF) to take forward the work of seven cancer care centres being currently constructed.

These centres are part of a network of 16 cancer care centres coming up in various parts of the state, with nine of these already completed, Sarma said. The council of ministers also okayed the handing over of four milk processing units at Bokakhat, Dibrugarh, Jorhat and Bajali to North East Dairy and Foods Ltd, a joint venture between the Centre and the state government. (PTI)

IIT-Guwahati develops bamboo

(up to 200 kg) and passed bullet-firing tests, indicating their potential for use in military structures. The research team is now working towards enhancing the robustness and scalability of these bamboo composite panels for commercial use in the construction and defence sectors.

"Our goal is to offer an eco-friendly, high-strength alternative to traditional materials. Bamboo composites not only reduce dependence on wood and metals but also support local economies by utilising locally available, renewable resources," she added. (PTI)

Seven Bangladeshi nationals

them in crossing the border in exchange for money. "We have registered a case against them and produced them before the court, seeking police remand for further investigation," the police added.

The arrested individuals have been identified as Robin Hossain (29), Mohammad Rafi (25), Amjad Hossain (27), Shahidur Jjaman (28), Fazzal (29), Rehan Mollah (21), and Gias Uddin (35).

Police also seized seven Android mobile phones, one keypad mobile, ₹ 1.64 lakh in Indian currency, and 1,01,935 Bangladeshi Taka from their possession.

Rainfall, price hikes slow AC sales in April, industry eyes growth

NEW DELHI, April 13: Intermittent rainfall in south India and recent thunderstorms with moderate rain in some parts of north and eastern regions have slowed down the pace of sales of room air conditioners in April, but the industry is still expecting a double-digit growth with recent weather forecasts suggesting an intense summer.

Manufacturers of room air conditioners (RAC), including Blue Star, Samsung, and Haier, are also going for a price increase of up to 5 per cent in April, extending the impact on raw material costs and currency exchange fluctuations amidst macroeconomic volatility.

Besides, the room AC industry is still dependent on imports of crucial components such as compressors, PCBs, and fan motors, mainly from China, and is anxiously looking at the tariff standoff triggered by the Trump administration.

Despite such odds, the RAC industry expects a double-digit growth in the June quarter, the season contributing a large chunk for sales of compressor-based cooling products, over the high base achieved last year, when it had reported around 35 per cent growth.

Godrej Appliances Business Head & Executive Vice President Kamal Nandi said there is a



mixed weather impact on sales of RAC so far. "If you look at the southern market, intermittent rainfall is happening. However, the temperatures in the north, west and east have picked up. Roughly 23 per cent of the market, which is the southern region, has not picked up yet. This is certainly going to impact the overall sales of air conditioners for sure," Nandi told PTI.

"April will be a challenge for sales. It will pick up in May and June as temperature has started rising," he said, adding that Godrej Appliances expects a high-digit growth of 50 per cent in the June quarter. In the current season, the number of sales and enquiries for heavy-duty air conditioners with high tonnage capacity and copper condensers guaranteeing improved

longevity and heat transfer are on the rise.

RAC units with higher energy efficiency and heavy duty are in demand as customers are also looking for powerful cooling solutions for extreme temperatures in summers like last year, besides saving on electricity costs while purchasing.

"Now people have started to focus on cooling capacity instead of tonnage," said Hair India President N Satish. Heavy-duty RAC has a price difference of ₹ 2,500-3,000 with a normal unit.

Haier India is also going for a price increase of RAC by 4-5 per cent from April 15, said Satish.

"This overall increase is because of the impact of escalation of raw material costs and currency exchange fluctuations," he said.

On the sales, Satish said so far in April, it is lower than last year but added that sales will pick up by the end of the month.

"There will be a 10-15 per cent growth in April year-on-year," he said, adding, "This year season would be good." Blue Star Managing Director B Thiagarajan said, "We have already increased prices up to 5 per cent because of the raw material and exchange rate. We were the first one to do so." (PTI)

Sikkim: 8 held for raping 13-year-old girl for months

GANGTOK, April 13: Eight people, including four boys, were apprehended for allegedly raping a 13-year-old girl for months in Sikkim's Gyalshing district, police said on Sunday.

The action was taken on the basis of a complaint filed by the Child Welfare Committee on Friday after the girl's school alerted them about her condition.

During counseling, the girl who always remained sick and lowly in class named a woman from her locality who would regularly call her to assist with domestic work. The woman allegedly coerced her into having sexual acts, involving her husband, police said.

It was also revealed that two other men were brought in and the girl was allegedly forced to engage in having sex with them in exchange for money, they said.

The survivor named four boys who were also allegedly involved in sexually assaulting her during the last one year, they added.

On the basis of her statement, police arrested the woman, her husband and the two men, besides taking the four juveniles into custody.

The girl is at present with the Child Welfare Committee and receiving counselling and medical treatment.

A case was registered under various sections of the BNS and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, police said. An investigation is underway, they said. (PTI)

Mizoram celebrates Palm Sunday with religious fervour

AIZAWL, April 13: Palm Sunday was celebrated with religious fervour in Christian-majority Mizoram to commemorate the triumphal entry of Jesus to Jerusalem ahead of his crucifixion. Children held Palm Sunday processions in the early morning in various parts of the state. They came out to the streets in towns and villages carrying palm leaves, chanting 'Hosanna' and singing songs to celebrate Jesus's triumphal entry to the holy city. The processions held by respective churches were also joined by some adults. Special prayer services were held at churches of different Christian denominations in the state.

Special teas were served by churches as part of the celebrations. (PTI)

Manipur Congress to file petition with SC against Waqf Act: Ex-CM Ibohi Singh

IMPHAL, April 13: Senior Congress leader Okram Ibohi Singh on Sunday said that the Manipur unit of the party will file a petition with the Supreme Court against the contentious Waqf (Amendment) Act.

The former three-time chief minister claimed that the Act is a gross violation of the Constitution. "We are totally opposed to this Act. India is a secular nation but the present NDA government is attacking Muslims and other minorities. The state unit of the Congress is preparing to fight the legislation. A team will leave for Delhi and by Wednesday, a petition will be filed at the top court challenging this Act," he told reporters.

"The Waqf (Amendment) Act is a gross violation of the Constitution and it will not be accepted," he added.

The senior Congress leader also questioned the imposition of President's rule in the state and wondered why the BJP was not forming the government despite having sufficient numbers to do so.

"We are not in favour of Presi-

dent's rule in Manipur. A democratic government is represented by the legislators. Imposing President's rule shows they could not rule the state and are not capable of upholding law and order. Even now, they (BJP) have sufficient numbers to form a government. But we don't know why this has not been allowed," he added.

He also urged the Kuki community to reconsider its opposition to the annual pilgrimage to Thangjing hills. One day or the other, we will have to live together. We are all Manipuris. We are not in favour of illegal immigrants. But indigenous people have to live together," he said.

His appeal came in the wake of at least six Kuki bodies opposing the Meitei community's annual pilgrimage to Thangjing hills. (PTI)

District Magistrate enforces immediate restrictions in Cachar

Amidst rising tensions over WAQF act protests

HT Bureau GUWAHATI, April 13: In view of escalating tensions and the looming threat to public peace arising from recent protests against the WAQF Act, the District Administration of Cachar has taken a decisive step to pre-empt any breach of law and order.

Acting on the report submitted by the Superintendent of Police, Cachar, which raised serious concerns about the potential disruption of public tranquility, Mridul Yadav, District Magistrate of Cachar, has promulgated urgent prohibitory measures across the district under Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS).

With immediate effect, any assembly of five or more individuals without prior permission has been strictly prohibited. The order also imposes a ban on organizing agitation programmes such as



bands, rallies, strikes, dharnas, and demonstrations unless officially authorized. Additionally, the carrying of weapons, explosives, or any suspicious materials has been forbidden to ensure public safety and prevent untoward inci-

dents. Further, the order clamps down on traffic disruptions, specifically targeting illegal parking and obstruction of roadways, which have often accompanied mass mobilizations in the past. Use of loud-

speakers or high-decibel sound instruments without due authorization has also been restricted to curb noise pollution and avoid public nuisance.

However, exceptions have been made for personnel on official duty belonging to the State and Central Governments, as well as for essential emergency services such as ambulances and fire brigades, thereby ensuring that vital public services remain unaffected.

Terminating the situation exigent, the order has been passed ex-parte, emphasizing the urgency and nature of the matter. The District Magistrate has warned that any violation of this directive shall invite strict action under relevant legal provisions. This proactive administrative move aims to restore calm and safeguard the peace and stability of the Cachar District during this volatile period.

Comprehensive review meeting for the upcoming Panchayat poll held

HT Correspondent TEZPUR, April 13: In connection with the forthcoming Panchayat Election 2025 in Sonitpur district, and as per the directions of the Assam State Election Commission, the designated Election Observers held a comprehensive review meeting recently at the Conference hall of the District Commissioner's Office, Sonitpur.

Bhupesh Chandra Das, Joint Secretary, Skill, Employment and Entrepreneurship Department, Government of Assam, has been appointed as the Election Observer for Mismari, Phulaguri, Dekargaon, Bihaguri, Parbatia, and Thelamara ZPCs. Bhaskar Das, Joint Secretary, Social Justice & Empowerment

Department, Government of Assam, is the Election Observer for Boragaon, Bhomoraguri, Phulbari, Haleswar, Mansiri, and Balipara ZPCs.

Kanta Das, Joint Secretary, Health and Family Welfare Department, Government of Assam, has been assigned as the Election Observer for Doomdooma, Panbari, Amiyapur, and Gupteswar ZPCs under Dhekiajuli Co-District.

Mukut Phukan, Additional Secretary, Printing & Stationery Department, Government of Assam, is overseeing the Chariduar, Nagsankar, Murhadol, and Jamuguri ZPCs under Naduar Co-District.

The meeting was held in the presence of District Commissioner

Ankur Bharali along with Superintendent of Police, Barun Purkayastha, District Development Commissioner, Lakhinandan Saharia, Co-District Commissioners of Naduar and Dhekiajuli, all Cell-In-charges for the election, Zonal Officers, and other key officials.

During the meeting, the observers reviewed the preparedness of various election-related cells such as Expenditure Monitoring, Transport, Personnel and Training, Model Code of Conduct (MCC), Postal Ballot, Media, and others. They urged all involved to diligently perform their respective responsibilities to ensure a participatory, smooth, and successful Panchayat Election in Sonitpur district.

New KSA leaders administered oath of office

HT Bureau DIPHUR, April 13: The newly elected president of Karbi Students Association (KSA - Inglongpho) Budho Terang and general secretary Barnabas Killing were administered the oath of office and were immediately handed over charge for the two year term of 2025 to 2027. The previous KSA president was Mirjeng Kro and general secretary was George Timung. The oath taking ceremony was held here at the conference hall of the KSA Central Executive Committee (KSA-CEC) office, Rongthang on Sunday.

Both Terang and Killing were elected as president and general secretary respectively, during the 52nd KSA annual general conference held on April 4 to 6 at Rongkangtui Aklam, Teke-langjun. The president Terang was vice president and earlier he was the general secretary, while Killing was the external affairs secretary in the KSA -CEC.

The oath of office was administered by the former general secretary, KSA, Tarzan Hanse, which was witnessed by former KSA leaders and members of various social organisations including former KSA general secretary Ajit Timung, former vice president Sing Timung and former president Bijoy Bey and adviser Philip Taro, president Karbi So-arlo Amei (KARSA) Bina

Terangpi and secretary Kareng Engtipi; Karbi Lammet Amei general secretary Liladhar Teron and president Karbi Anglong Women Justice Forum Beaulat Beypi.

The new president Terang after taking charge said the KSA will focus on three main issues i.e. to support and strengthen the Autonomous State movement with like-minded organisations, betterment of education and the cause of student community.

"During my tenure as president the KSA will strive on main three purposes i.e. to support and strengthen the Autonomous State movement by involving like-minded organisations, improvement of the education system in the district and solving the problems of the student's community. There are other things like inter-district and inter-state border issues, influx, economic opportunities, unemployment problem and many more. But we are stressing on the three main points that have been stated earlier," Terang said.

Terang also informed other posts and executive members will be inducted later at the CEC meeting to be held in a few days.

It may be mentioned that the KSA was formed on July 21, 1959. Since then, the Karbi student body has been a platform from which Karbi leaders have emerged.

NFR reports impressive freight loading of 10.681 MT in FY-2024 -25



HT Bureau GUWAHATI, April 13: Demonstrating steady progress in freight transportation, NFR recorded 1.054 million tonnes (MT) of freight loading across various commodities in March 2025.

In March 2025, several commodities recorded significant growth in freight loading compared to the same period last year. Cement loading recorded a 9.6% increase, while dolomite loading rose by 9.1%. Fertilizer loading grew by 28.6% and others loading recorded a hike with 9.6%. Additionally, in other segments, potato loading increased by 54.5%, stone chips registered a 61.9% and miscellaneous loading recorded a notable rise of 7.4% as compared to the previous

fiscal year. The consistent growth in freight loading reflects the rising economic activity in the region. In FY 2024-25 (as of March 2025), NFR's cumulative freight loading reached 10.681 million tonnes, reflecting a 4.3% increase compared to the same period in the previous fiscal 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.

Massive fire breaks out in Sapotgram Bazar in Dhubri

HT Correspondent DHUBRI, April 13: A massive fire broke out in the early hours of Sunday at an ice cream factory located in Sapotgram Bazar, Dhubri, causing widespread panic and devastation in the area. The blaze, believed to have been triggered by a powerful thunderstorm, rapidly spread to surrounding commercial establishments, reducing six to seven shops to ashes.

According to eyewitnesses, the fire began after a suspected lightning strike hit the ice cream factory during a fierce thunderstorm. Within moments, the flames engulfed nearby shops, including two medical stores, a jewellery shop, a shoe store, and two other small businesses run by local entrepreneurs.

Residents watched in horror as the flames consumed the shops, with many trying to salvage whatever they could. "It all happened so fast. One moment there was a thunderclap, and the next, the factory was in flames. The fire just kept spreading," said a local shopkeeper.

Emergency services responded swiftly, with sixteen to eighteen fire brigade vehicles dispatched from Gosaigaon, Kokrajhar, Bilasipara, Dhubri, and nearby towns. Firefighters battled the inferno for several hours before finally bringing it under control.

Preliminary estimates suggest that property worth over rupees fifty lakh may have been destroyed in the blaze. Fortunately, no casualties have been reported so far, though assessments are still underway. Authorities are currently investigating the exact cause of the fire, and a detailed report is expected in the coming days.

Altogether 2,450 candidates file nomination papers in Tezpur

HT Correspondent TEZPUR, April 13: A total of 2,450 candidates have filed their nomination papers for different panchayat and zila parishad AP member posts in various zila parishad and panchayat seats in Sonitpur District.

As per the updates received from the district election office here 49 candidates have filed their nomination for the Zila Parishad posts, 184 have filed nomination papers for the Anchalik Panchayat (AP-member) member's posts while a total of 2217 candidates have filed their nominations for the post of ward member. However, of the 184 nomination papers for the AP members have been rejected.

Road accident claims media person's life

HT Correspondent MORIGAON, April 13: Kishor Deka Raja, a member of the ETV Bharat family met with an accident and died on spot on Saturday night.

He left behind his wife and a son along with host of relatives.

The accident occurred when Raja was leaving for home from work at around 9 pm following which the vehicle that hit Raja fled the scene.

His death a cast pall of gloom in the district.

Vivek Chetry and Sabina Ray clinch first place in Baukhungri Hill Trekking competition



HT Correspondent KOKRAJHAR, April 13: The 12th edition of the Baukhungri Festival has entered into second day on Sunday that witnessed participation of a huge gathering. Vivek Chetry and Sabina Ray from Kalimpong, West Bengal have emerged as champions in the male and female categories respectively, in the 12th Baukhungri Hill Trekking Competition.

The event was a key highlight of the ongoing Baukhungri Festival which was organised by the Tourism Department, Government of Bodoland Territorial Council at the scenic foothills of the Baukhungri Hill in Harinaguri, Kokrajhar Bodoland. The annual hill trekking competition drew participation from hundreds of trekking enthusiasts from across Assam, West Bengal, Odisha, Meghalaya and Manipur. The challenging trek tested the endurance and determination of all competitors.

In the male category, Vivek Chetry secured first place, followed by

Lapynkhrav Thabah from Meghalaya in second and Jamon Makri also from Meghalaya in third place.

In the female category, Sabina Ray from Kalimpong West Bengal clinched the top spot. She was followed by Samili Singh from Kolkata in second place while Sangmair Terongpi from Karbi Anglong Assam, finished third.

A cycling competition was also conducted during the festival. In the men's division, Ronel K Singh from Manipur bagged the first position, Ashish Sherpa from Himachal Pradesh came second, and Thotmarchan Awaneshi from Manipur placed third.

In the women's division, the top three spots were claimed by Phyran Kyandait first and Dakahi Kyandait second from Meghalaya, and Kwisumwi Bala Basumatary from Udalguri Bodoland third.

Adding to the cultural vibrancy, a Bodo traditional food competition was held, featuring 101 varieties of indigenous vegetable leaves known as Gwkh Gwkhui along with a showcase of Geographical Indication (GI) tagged food items. The event was inaugurated by Assam Cabinet Minister UG Brahma. The Baukhungri Festival, now in its 12th edition, continues to promote the rich cultural heritage, unity, and tourism potential of the Bodoland region. It stands as a testament to the enduring traditions and community spirit of the indigenous people.

Palm Sunday celebrated



HT Correspondent DONGKAMUKAM, April 13: Along with the rest of the world, 'Palm Sunday' the most significant day of the Christian community was observed by all Christian community in their respective church in the district of West Karbi Anglong. The day marks the beginning of Holy Week and commemorates Jesus Christ triumphant entry into Jerusalem (Israel) riding on the back of donkey where he was welcomed by waving palm leaves and placing clothes on the ground. The Christian believes to be the time to reflect on love, sacrifice and triumph of Jesus Christ as well their own path to more faithful and meaningful life. At Mary Help of Christian Church, Satgaon Parish, Fr Albert Thyriang Parish Priest was the main celebrant along with Fr Pradeep Ekka of Sojong Parish.

The main theme was, 'Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest' Mathew 21:9

Fr Albert in his sermon urged several hundreds of faithfuls present on Sunday at Mass said to strengthen their belief more and more for Christ 2nd coming is near.

He referring to a chapter from Revelation in Bible said that several world disorder such as natural calamities will be seen like cloud burst, earthquakes, fighting against country neighbours, disputes, dangerous sickness etc. He finally asked to give forgiveness to all their enemies. Earlier, in the morning long procession was held from Satgaon High school playground to the Church, all singing the hymns with palm in the hand. At Sojong Parish Fr Abraham Kannath held Mass.

Bihu workshop for differently-abled in Jorhat

Workshop was conducted with the support of Sayera Rahman

HT Correspondent JORHAT, April 13: Well known Bihu dancer Chumki Hazarika taught spastics and other disabled children for free at a five-day workshop on Bihu dance and dhol playing for the students of 'Prerona Pratibandhi Sishu Bikas Kendra', Cinnamara, here, recently.

The workshop was conducted with the support of Sayera Rahman, Principal of the Kendra.

Manuranjan Borah and Nayan Jyoti Borah served as chief and assistant trainers, respectively for dhol playing at the workshop. It may be mentioned here that Prerona Pratibandhi Sishu Bikas Kendra is a non-govern-



ment, non profit and voluntary organisation working for children and adult with special needs and under-privileged, and was established in 1992.

An employee of the

kendra informed that the students were enthusiastic and eager to participate in the workshop, expressing their keenness to learn new skills and enjoy the experience. On the concluding day the

students of the Kendra performed at a cultural function, which was attended by Jayanta Bezbaruah, a former president, Aditi Bezbaruah, Secretary, Eliza Begum treasurer of the management committee of the Kendra.

Chetona Borgohain, a well-known bihu dancer and trainer, Amiya Madhuri Neog, also a noted bihu dancer, Prasenjit Lahon, a popular singer Utpal Das and Utpal Bora, both noted journalists, were amongst the invited guests who attended the function. Certificates were also presented to the students and the event concluded with vote of thanks offered by Chumki Hazarika.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

To catch a husband is an art; to hold him is a job.
- Simone de Beauvoir

Humanitarian crisis and war

Humanitarian crisis is at its peak as an aftermath of the wars in Middle East and between Russia & Ukraine. Despite the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas there is no respite from the bombings on hapless citizens of Gaza. If we go by the larger estimates over 100,000 have already been killed, majority of them being women and children. This has in fact turned out to be a blatant aggression by the Zionist regime of Israel to annihilate the Palestinians. The recent killing of Paramedical workers proves the point. The US administration is fully supporting Israel with latest high-powered bombs and is at the back of Israel in all circumstances. It authorized the release of 2,000-pound bombs to Israel in January 2025, a munition that had previously been held back. Similarly, the end to human sufferings as a result of Russia Ukraine war does not seem to be a reality in the near future. That the talks between US and the Russian governments to end the war will yield a result soon is uncertain. The European Union has taken strong exception on these talks. Many members of the EU countries have declared military support to the Ukraine government. According to figures released by Kyiv, U.N. statistics, and open-source data published by BBC Russia, the total death toll of Ukrainian and Russian soldiers, as well as Ukrainian civilians stands at 158,341 as of March 31, 2025. NATO stands strongly with Ukraine which irks Russia. The hope for end to this war is grim. If these wars continue the possibility of use of Nuclear weapons cannot be ruled out. The Israeli Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu had threatened the use of nuclear weapons.

In a recent commentary the violence in Gaza has been described using nuclear analogies, with reports indicating, for example, that the destructive power of Israeli explosives dropped on Gaza is equivalent to, or surpasses, those of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. These metaphors try to link Gaza to these nuclear targets. These reports also perhaps implicitly push back against the distinction between conventional and non-conventional weapons, since Gaza stands as a display of the immense damage and unimaginable violence that conventional weapons can cause. President Putin has increasingly used the threat of the nuclear arsenal during the ongoing war and Russia has placed its weapons on heightened alert.

At one time in the ongoing war there appeared a grave threat to the nuclear power plants. This threat is in abeyance for the time being but not abolished. The conventional wars provide precondition where more deadly weapons are developed. The nuclear threat has been seen to increase under these circumstances. It is therefore imperative that the conventional wars must be stopped if we have to abolish the nuclear weapons. It is unfortunate that the global community is either mute spectator or ineffective in the present situation. The UN too has failed to make the parties agree to end the wars. The trade war initiated by Donald Trump can any time add to the gravity of the situation. Global South which is already deprived region has landed into further precarious situation.

Rongali Bihu: The Soulful Symphony of Spring and Unity in Assam

As spring unfurls its tender embrace across the verdant valleys of Assam, the land awakens to the rhythm of Bohag Bihu, or Rongali Bihu, the grandest celebration in the Assamese calendar. Etymologically linked to the Sanskrit Bishu—a divine invocation for prosperity—this festival, spanning seven exuberant days in mid-April, heralds the Assamese New Year and the onset of the harvest season. Far beyond a mere agrarian milestone, Rongali Bihu is a vibrant symphony of cultural heritage, uniting the diverse ethnic communities of Assam and its neighboring North-Eastern states in a shared ode to life. With melodies that soar, dances that pulse, and culinary traditions that tantalize, the festival weaves a tapestry of resilience and pride, celebrating the earth's bounty while affirming the region's pluralistic identity.

Rongali Bihu is, at its heart, a tribute to the agricultural cycle that sustains Assam's fertile plains, where the Brahmaputra River nourishes both land and spirit. Farmers, transcending linguistic and religious divides, gather to express gratitude for past harvests and seek blessings for abundant yields. Yet, the festival's significance ripples far beyond ritual, blossoming into a celebration of Assam's rich ethnic mosaic. Comprising Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, Tai-Ahom, Kuki-Chin, Dravidian, tea garden labor, Muslim, and Bengali communities, Assam's populace infuses the festivities with distinct cultural hues. While some groups maintain exclusive festivals rooted in their unique traditions, Rongali Bihu emerges as a unifying force, harmonizing these diverse voices into a collective expression of joy. Over its seven days, the festival becomes a kaleidoscope of unity, where differences are cherished, and shared heritage is exalted through song, dance, and communal feasts. Among the Ahom, whose Tai ancestry shaped Assam's historical tapestry, Rongali Bihu begins with Garu Bihu, a day

dedicated to venerating cattle, emblems of agrarian prosperity. The community engages in rituals steeped in tradition, preparing pitha-jalpan—exquisite rice cakes savored alongside fresh vegetables and succulent pork dishes that reflect their culinary legacy. The Bihu husori, a spirited procession, weaves through villages, its cadence driven by the resonant beats of the dhol, the haunting melodies of the pepa (a buffalo hompipe), and the vibrant notes of the gavana (a bamboo instrument). These performances, known as Bihu nam, reverberate with cultural pride, binding neighbors in celebration. Ancestor veneration lies at the core of Ahom tradition, guided by a myth that warns of misfortune should offerings be neglected. However, the winds of modernity have softened some practices, with contemporary celebrations occasionally lacking the fervor of ancestral times, prompting a quiet resolve to preserve this heritage.

The Bodo Kachari tribe transforms Rongali Bihu into Baisagu, a seven-day odyssey of reverence and revelry. The inaugural day, magon or cow Bihu, honors cattle, adorned with paddy, their horns anointed with oil, and their bodies etched with intricate patterns of ash and rice flour before a ceremonial bath in rivers—a ritual that mirrors the tribe's symbiosis with nature. The second day, mansoi domahi or Manuh Bihu, is dedicated to ancestral spirits through the Bathai Puja, ensuring cultural continuity. The festivities crescendo with the Bagurumba dance, a mesmerizing spectacle unique to the Bodos, its fluid movements and rhythmic beats enchanting onlookers. The husori tradition, where troupes traverse villages spreading cheer, welcomes all—regardless of age or gender—into the celebration's embrace, fostering a spirit of inclusivity that defines Baisagu's warmth.

In Assam's Upper North Bank,



the Deuri community celebrates Rongali Bihu as Bohagiya or Bisu, infusing the festival with singular rituals. Commencing on the first Wednesday of the Bohag month, the festivities open with ghardew puja, a tribute to deities, followed by sacrificial offerings at the sacred gosainal. On Goru Bihu, villagers don vibrant attire, embodying the festival's exuberance, while the husori dance, led by the gosainis, threads through communities, echoing broader Assamese traditions with a distinct Deuri cadence.

The celebrations culminate on the weekend, as the community gathers at the gosainal for worship, their husori performances sealing the festival in harmony, a testament to their spiritual and cultural roots. The Missing community, by contrast, embraces a minimalist yet vibrant Rongali Bihu, prioritizing joy over elaborate rites. Their celebration hinges on the husori, where young men and women perform songs and dances across households, a tradition mandatory for unmarried youth and woven into their social fabric. Homeowners welcome these troupes with trays of betel nuts, leaves, and monetary offerings, honoring their role in cultural preservation. The festivities close with Apong, a traditional rice beer, its earthy tang adding a culinary flourish to the communal merriment, a reminder of the simple pleasures that bind the Missing people. The Rabha community observes Rongali Bihu as baikhu, a

three-day affair rich with reverence. The first day, garu Bihu, honors cattle, while the second, Bisuwa, pays homage to ancestors and deities, blending spirituality with festivity. This concise celebration encapsulates the Rabhas' cultural ethos, a vibrant thread in Assam's festive weave.

Among the Karbi, spring ushers in Rongker, a three-day festival aligned with the Assamese New Year, focused on village well-being and bountiful harvests. A male-centric event, it pauses agricultural work to unfold in four stages of rituals, sacrifices, and feasting, weaving spiritual and communal unity. Though distinct, its agrarian spirit resonates with Bihu's essence, reflecting a shared reverence for the land. The Moran community's Rongali Bihu unfolds across uruka, goru Bihu, and manuh Bihu, each marked by unique rites. The bormagu, a mid-festival feast, celebrates abundance with pitha, rice beer, and an array of vegetables—legend holds that 101 varieties are prepared, symbolizing plenitude. Guided by elders, the Moran husori reinforces cultural continuity, blending reverence with revelry in a celebration that honors their agrarian roots.

The Tiwa community's baishak-bisu spans a week, opening with tributes to deities like bagh-rajia (the Tiger God), Mahadev, and Kubre, guardians of agriculture. Cattle are honored on the first day, while husori songs weave melodies of cultural pride across the plains, their voices echoing the Tiwas' vibrant her-

itage. The festival's rhythms pulse with the energy of Assam's heartland, uniting communities in shared celebration.

In Assam's tea gardens, the Tea-community marks spring with Chaitra Parab or Charak Puja, a two-day festival of song, dance, and blessings. Adorned in traditional attire, they visit households, extending wishes for peace and prosperity, their procession a vivid testament to their bond with the land and its seasonal rhythms. This celebration, rooted in the tea gardens' labor and legacy, adds a unique cadence to Assam's vernal chorus. Rongali Bihu's resonance extends beyond individual communities, embodying Assam's collective gratitude for nature's bounty. For farmers, it is a sacred interlude to thank the divine and pray for future prosperity, transcending ethnic boundaries. The festival's fairs and gatherings—often held in open fields or village courtyards—draw Assam's diverse populace into a shared celebration of life. The air hums with the dhol's beat, the pepa's wail, and the fragrance of pitha, laru (coconut sweets), and ghila pitha (fried rice cakes), while the vigorous Bihu nritya dance, with its expressive gestures, ignites communal spaces. Traditional games like tekeli bhoga (pot-breaking) and buffalo races add to the fervor, creating memories that linger like the scent of spring blossoms.

Yet, Rongali Bihu also invites introspection. As modernity encroaches, some traditions—such as the Ahoms' ancestral rites—face dilution, urging communities to balance progress with preservation. The festival's enduring vitality lies in its adaptability, evolving while safeguarding its core: a celebration of Assam's land, people, and shared spirit. In every melody, every step, and every offering, Rongali Bihu sings of a people rooted in tradition, forever blooming like the spring it heralds, a testament to Assam's unyielding soul. *(The writer can be reached at dipakkurmigpltd@gmail.com)*

US withdrawal from global health programmes is ominous for Third World

By Kashish Aneja, Lawrence O. Gostin

This year's World Health Day falls against the backdrop of strained multilateralism and a crisis in global health funding. World Health Day serves as a stark reminder that good governance, sustained financing, and collective action are essential to safeguard public health worldwide. It is crucial, at this juncture, to reflect on the United States' withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) and dismantling of the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The WHO was established in 1948 as a major arm of the United Nations. Its constitutional mandate is to serve as the leading international health agency responsible for tracking disease outbreaks, coordinating global efforts to combat diseases, and strengthening health systems. It plays a crucial role in pandemic preparedness and response. The WHO led the eradication of smallpox and is on the verge of polio eradication. Its Expanded Immunisation Program (EIP) has protected children against vaccine preventable diseases like measles.

It was born with constitutional powers to negotiate health treaties and regulations, such as the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and the ongoing Pandemic Treaty negotiations, and it continues to update International Health Regulations (IHR), as seen with the recent major amendments adopted on June 1, 2024. The agency's primary job is norm-setting, scientific standards, and technical assistance. It plays a leading role in disease classification and synthesis of the best evidence around treatments. WHO also plays a unique coordinating role in responding to health emergencies such as novel outbreaks of Ebola, Marburg, and Mpox.

There has been, at least seemingly, a strong norm regarding the importance of international cooperation in health since WHO's creation. That is, until now.

President Donald Trump has notified the WHO of the US's intent to withdraw from the WHO within a year. His administration has also severely cut international development assistance for health, while dismantling USAID. As the United States has effectively withdrawn from global health engagement, the future of international solidarity led by the WHO is at risk.

For over 75 years, the US has sustained this status through its commitment to driving programs that tackle pressing global health issues. It has been a principal funder and a major driver of the WHO's agenda. Notably, in the 2022-2023 biennium, the U.S. contributed \$1.284 billion to WHO, which was 20 percent of its budget, surpassing contributions from other major global health stakeholders including the Gates Foundation, Gavi, and the European Union. This funding supports emergency response, childhood vaccinations, and disease eradication, among many others.

The US has spearheaded the fight against Ebola outbreaks in West Africa, been the major funder for HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the Global Fund. In 2023 alone, US's global funding constituted nearly three-quarters of international development assistance for HIV/AIDS, 40 per cent for malaria, and more than a third of the funding to combat tuberculosis. Since its formation in 1961, USAID has been instrumental in saving lives during various global crises.

USAID has provided life-saving prevention and treatment for diseases like HIV and polio in the world's poorest countries.

Other key US global health initiatives include the President's Malaria Initiative (PMI), support for Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and the Global Health Security Agenda (GHSAs). US has not only provided financial support but has also been a key player in international health diplomacy, as demonstrated by its role in driving the successful IHR negotiations in 2024, and the Declaration of Alma-Ata. American scientists, institutions, and public health experts have been key in shaping WHO policies, advancing research, and guiding responses to outbreaks.

On January 20, 2025, President Trump announced that the US would withdraw from the WHO, echoing a previous move in 2020 that was reversed by President Biden. The stated reasons for the withdrawal include the WHO's mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, failure to adopt urgently needed reforms, inability to demonstrate independence from member states' political influence, and unfairly onerous payments demanded from the US compared to other countries like China.

This withdrawal led to a pause in the transfer of vital US funds, support, and resources to WHO, including the pulling back of US officials from the Pandemic Treaty negotiations. Personnel of US's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention seconded to WHO were withdrawn, and the CDC was banned from communicating with WHO. Moreover, the US government is in the process of dismantling the USAID; specifically, it has issued a stop-work order for USAID-funded projects, including those in India, effectively halting critical programs that support disease surveillance, vaccination drives, maternal and child health, and pandemic preparedness. Recently, the US Supreme Court ordered the Trump administration to pay all of USAID's current financial obligations. But a trial court subsequently ruled that the administration could still cancel all future contracts and funding. All of this marks a shift in global health governance, moving away from a long-standing era of US leadership and international cooperation. This disengagement threatens to weaken international cooperation at a time when the world is implementing lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic and preparing for future ones. It risks undermining global pandemic preparedness by disrupting mechanisms for addressing transnational health threats. The withdrawal also weakens the WHO's financial stability and operational capacity, particularly in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs).

President Trump cited the organisation's mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic and other global health crises as a key reason behind withdrawing from the WHO. He also claimed the WHO failed to adopt urgently needed reforms and demonstrated an inability to be independent of the inappropriate political influence of WHO member states. Trump's administration believed the WHO continues to demand unfairly onerous payments from the US, far out of proportion with other countries' assessed payments. They pointed to China's lower contribution despite having a much larger population as evidence of this imbalance.

The withdrawal reflects a broader isolationist stance prioritising national interests over global

collaboration. This aligns with Trump's "America First" approach, which includes a sharp decline in international health funding.

Concerns were raised by the current administration about the WHO's failure to adequately obtain, vet, and share information in a timely and transparent fashion during the COVID-19 pandemic and its perceived lack of independence from China. The inability to definitively determine the origins of SARS-CoV-2 caused strains in US relations with both China and WHO. The Trump administration has also held concerns regarding the inefficient management of WHO's budget and finances. The US withdrawal threatens WHO's financial stability, as the US has historically been its largest donor, contributing 20 PERCENT of its budget in 2022-2023. President Trump also paused the transfer of vital US funds, support, and resources to WHO, including membership fees. This makes matters more acute, jeopardising vital WHO-led health programs including polio eradication, pandemic preparedness and response, and universal health coverage.

The freeze on USAID funding, as well as foreign-aid programs such as PEPFAR, has far-reaching implications for public health initiatives globally, particularly in LMICs, including India, that have historically benefited from USAID support in areas such as tuberculosis eradication, HIV/AIDS prevention, maternal and child health, neglected tropical diseases and healthcare infrastructure strengthening. Critical programs for global health security, including disease surveillance for emerging infectious diseases, are also impacted. Thousands of health workers in countries like Kenya and Ethiopia have reportedly been affected by the shutdowns. The freeze has impeded responses to outbreaks like Ebola in Sudan and Uganda, and Marburg in Tanzania, where USAID had previously played a coordinating role.

The withdrawal creates institutional uncertainty for the WHO, forcing drastic cost-cutting measures and budget cut proposals. The organisation is concerned about facing a "hand-to-mouth type situation" if US funding is lost. The concurrent suspension of USAID financing and exit from WHO undermine global trust and collaboration and upend current health initiatives, leaving impacted nations and organisations with little time to adjust. The withdrawal forfeits US influence in revising the International Health Regulations and shaping the Pandemic Accord, both essential for enhancing global preparedness and coordinated response to emerging health threats. The focus on short-term financial gains also overlooks how weakened WHO-led initiatives can drive cross-border health risks that may inevitably threaten US citizens. Outbreaks in any part of the world can find their way to the US, causing new flare-ups.

LMICs will be disproportionately harmed, as they rely on coordinated global mechanisms for access to vaccines and therapeutics and have weak health systems and scarce resources. This withdrawal has exposed how LMICs are often kept in a cycle of dependency on external support, making them vulnerable to sudden shifts in donor priorities. It erodes trust between nations and organisations committed to combating infectious diseases.

It also creates a leadership vacuum that other nations, like China and India, and blocs such as the BRICS nations, may seek to fill; although it seems very unlikely that any one of them can singularly

do so. This could lead to a realignment of global health governance with a more multipolar system. China, India, and other nations might be willing to take on a greater leadership role in global health governance, including within the Pandemic Treaty negotiations. South Africa and Brazil could play larger roles, given their recent hosting of the G20 and COP30, respectively.

While China has historically donated little to WHO beyond its fees and recently opposed increases in assessed contributions, it may increase its influence by filling personnel vacancies at WHO and expanding support for health programs through bilateral partnerships, but only to build influence with strategic partners. China might selectively step in to take over projects where the US freeze has caused abrupt halts; it is already providing increased funding in Southeast Asia. Historically, China has engaged bilaterally in global health, principally through its Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, China has not been a robust funder of multilateral institutions like the WHO, and that is unlikely to change.

The EU has traditionally supported multilateral health efforts, such as through the European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership. Other European donors, like Germany and the UK, are significant contributors to the WHO, though their individual contributions are much less than the US. However, many European donor countries have recently announced foreign assistance cuts and may be unable to fully compensate for the US funding gap. The EU and its member states, being collectively the world's largest Official Development Assistance provider, might selectively increase funding in critical areas like health and climate change in direct dialogue with affected partner countries.

With the US reducing engagement, India can work with like-minded countries to drive reforms at the WHO, including advocating for improved financing mechanisms. India has deep historical and economic ties with Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia and can expand South-South cooperation through collaborative research, regional vaccine hubs, and capacity-building programs. India's large-scale vaccine production capacity, particularly through the Serum Institute of India, positions it as a key player in global health.

Countries in the Africa Group are indicating a willingness to step up, with some nations and partners pledging increased funding to WHO. Regional organisations like the African Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations can play a greater role in coordinating health efforts within their respective regions. Some LMIC leaders are emphasizing the need to move beyond aid dependence and focus on self-reliance and domestic resource mobilization.

The US withdrawal and funding freeze also suggest a potential shift towards prioritising bilateral cooperation and potentially tying aid more closely to geopolitical interests. The administration might selectively restore funding to multilateral entities perceived as advancing US national interests. In essence, while other actors are attempting to respond to the potential void left by the US, and a shift to bilateral funding might offer some perceived advantages in direct control, it carries significant risks for the coherence, effectiveness, and equity of global health efforts. These risks include fragmentation of global health efforts, potentially

creating gaps and overlaps in efforts and increased administrative burdens, reduced political buy-in from other nations for global initiatives, potentially weakening their effectiveness, and undermining of international norms and standards. The WHO Pandemic Treaty, which remains under negotiation by the Intergovernmental Negotiation Body and will enter its final leg of negotiations later this month, aims to improve global coordination and ensure equitable access to medical countermeasures during health crises. It is an ambitious attempt to address the systemic failures revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic, including a lack of preparedness in countries and a fragmented global response. The treaty seeks to strengthen pandemic preparedness and response on a global scale. The US has been actively involved in these negotiations and therefore the absence of the US from the WHO, and consequently the Pandemic Treaty negotiations, carries significant implications.

The withdrawal creates new dynamics in the negotiations. First, while the US has acted somewhat as a bridge-maker in the talks, its absence might ironically create a path for consensus on valuable equity measures that the US has opposed, such as unhindered access to pandemic-related health products in an emergency and specifically provisions around Pathogen Access and Benefit Sharing (PABS) and technology transfers. However, the lack of US diplomatic engagement could also hinder the progress and scope of the agreement.

Second, the withdrawal of a major player like the US may also raise concerns about the treaty's legitimacy and subsequent effectiveness. As a major funder of global health initiatives and a key player in international health diplomacy, its absence from the Treaty could be viewed as a setback for multilateralism and might embolden skeptics, potentially leading other countries to follow suit (Argentina has already announced its withdrawal from the WHO). The WHO itself relies on the cooperation of member states.

Finally, even if a treaty is finalised without US participation, which is the hub of R&D and host to major pharmaceutical companies, the lack of US commitment could weaken its global enforcement and effectiveness.

The potential decline in US engagement in global health, marked by a possible withdrawal from the WHO and funding freezes, necessitates a new paradigm in global health governance. The world cannot afford to let global health fall into crisis because of declining US engagement. The interconnected nature of health threats, as highlighted by ongoing outbreaks and the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, demands urgent and coordinated action.

The global community must actively work to reform the WHO - financially, structurally, and politically - to reduce its reliance on any single major donor and ensure its continued ability to coordinate global health efforts. Diversifying funding for global health can also lead to more balanced global health priorities. This is also an opportunity for increased regional collaborations and strengthening of local capacities to enhance disease surveillance, outbreak response, and health system resilience. Self-reliance in public health funding and infrastructure is imperative for long-term sustainability and therefore, countries must prioritise and increase domestic investments in public health initiatives. *(IPA Service)*

Twirling to the Melodies and Rhythms of Bihu

By: Monali Kakoty

"Phool phulise Boxontor
Tumi jaanmoni bohaagor...
Pratitu bohagote morom jaasu tumak an-
taror..."
Translation:
The flowers are blooming in the spring,
You are the essence of the Bohag (spring
season)...
In every Bohag, love grows in the heart for
you..."

These lines, from a beloved Bihu song, capture the spirit of Rongali Bihu—the celebration of spring, renewal and love. Bihu is more than a festival; it is a vibrant expression of Assamese identity. Centered around the agricultural cycles of Assam, Bihu marks the changing seasons. Among the three Bihu festivals—Rongali (Bohag Bihu), Kongali (Kati Bihu), and Bhogali (Magh Bihu)—Rongali Bihu stands out as the most lively and significant, heralding the arrival of spring. Traditionally celebrated in the Assamese month of Bohag (mid-April), it marks the beginning of the sowing season and the start of the Assamese new year. At the heart of this celebration is the Bihu dance, an expressive art form that captures the rhythm and energy of life, and the cycles of fertility, growth and renewal. Each dance movement has a meaning, each Bihu song tells a story.

One of the most distinctive elements of Bihu dance is its theatricality. While it may not adhere to the traditional definitions of theatre, the dynamics of Bihu performances are unmistakably theatrical. It is an art form that transcends the individual, turning the stage or the open field into a space for communal expression. The performance is not just an exhibition of technique, it is an immersive collective experience that pulls everyone into its narrative. The dance itself creates a sense of drama, especially as the tempo and intensity of the music increase. The theatrical nature of Bihu dance is also seen in the way the dancers' movements create visual spectacle. The bright, flowing costumes, the energetic twirls and the synchronized footwork all contribute to a dramatic, almost cinematic effect. The incorporation of both dance and music creates a dynamic interplay between movement, sound and space, creating an experience that is not just witnessed but felt deeply by all involved.

In many ways, Bihu dance serves as a living, breathing theatre that exists in the moment. It does not require elaborate props or set designs; the performers themselves become the set, their bodies and movements the primary tools of storytelling. The audience too becomes part of the spectacle, clapping and cheering in time with the beat. The connection between performer and audience is integral to the performance's success—each footfall, each clap, each cheer adds to the energy, creating a dynamic, ever-evolving performance that is unique every time it is performed.



Bihu dance is characterized by a rich interplay of footwork, arm movements, and torso motions, each contributing to its dynamic expression and symbolic meaning. As a rule of thumb, the dance is performed in groups and both men and women take part, though their styles are slightly different. A defining element of Bihu dance is its intricate footwork. The steps are swift and smooth, creating a seamless flow that mirrors the pulse of life and the rhythms of nature. These rapid foot movements evoke the constant and unbroken cycle of life itself. As the dancers move in a circle, the steps echo the agrarian cycles—sowing and reaping—which also reflect the perpetual passage of time, the patience of nature, and the earth's enduring fertility. The footwork, incorporating leaps, stomps and slides, brings to life the earth's energy with every step. This dynamic contrast between rapid, forceful movements and softer, more graceful moments represents the balance between nature's intensity and its gentleness, of the vigor and serenity found in the cycles of growth, and the ebb and fall. It represents the hidden layers of nature—the unseen forces nature and the strength of life beneath the surface.

While the footwork is intense and rhythmic, the arm movements in Bihu dance provide an equally expressive counterpart. The arms raised in graceful arcs or extended to the side speak of the wind that blows through the paddy fields or the rivers that gently meander through the landscape. There is a delicate balance between the sharpness of the footwork and the fluidity of the hands. The hand gestures themselves are symbolic, representing both elements of nature and human expres-

sions. For instance, when the dancers raise their arms to the sky, it evokes the expansive horizon of Assam, the vastness of the fields that stretch beyond sight. At other times, the arms move closer to the body, signifying the intimate connection between the dancer and the land. The hand gestures in Bihu are not simply decorative; they serve as an important symbolic language, communicating everything from the delicate flowering of nature to the playful flirtation between the dancers.

In Bihu dance, the movement of the torso plays a key role as well. The movements of the body in Bihu dance are both expressive and communicative. The torso often sways gently from side to side, mirroring the motion of crops rippling in the wind, or as birds take flight, the movement of the sun and the moon, reflecting the natural flow and rhythm of life itself. The subtle shifts and rotations of the torso not only reflect the rhythm of the dance but also echo the inner emotional state of the performers. The swirling and twirling of the dancers' can be seen as a manifestation of the dancer's internal energy and spirit, expressing the joy, energy and anticipation of the festival and life. This fluidity contrasts beautifully with the sharp, rapid foot movements, making the dance both visually striking and emotionally resonant. In Bihu dance, the torso's movement plays a vital role in embodying the connection between the dancer and the natural world. Unlike the more energetic footwork, the torso's movements often serve to ground the dance, creating a connection to the earth beneath.

In addition to the fast twirls, there is also a noticeable contrast in the rhythmic pauses. These brief moments, where the dancers

freeze or slow down their movements, serve to accentuate the rhythm of the music, much like the way the changing seasons create moments of stillness between bursts of growth. These pauses invite reflection, allowing the audience to absorb the emotional depth of the performance before the dancers launch into their next flurry of movement. This dynamic interplay between speed and stillness, lightness and weight, is part of what makes Bihu dance such a vibrant and emotionally charged experience. The dance is more than just physical movement—it's a conversation between the body and the earth, the past and the present, the individual and the community.

The accompanying music is just as integral to the dance's energy. The dhol, sets the pulse and echoes the rhythm of the earth. The booming beats dictate the energy and pace of the dance, while the high-pitched sounds of the pepa (buffalo hornpipe) introduces transitions. A single pepa note often signals a shift in movement or intensity. The gogona, a jaw harp, produces a distinctive melody that is both haunting and beautiful, adding an element of mysticism to the performance. The taal (cymbals) and jaw harps add layers to the music that gives the dancers cues for fluid movements. The xutuli (clay whistle) provides a subtle, soothing undertone offering a sense of continuity and calm amidst the intensity of the dance.

Bihu songs or Bihugeet are a central part of the cultural fabric of Assam and offer another layer of depth to the Bihu performance. The lyrics of Bihugeet often celebrate themes of love, yearning, the cycles of nature and the everyday joys and struggles of the Assamese people. Their melodies are simple but evoca-

tive, and they are performed with as much passion and feeling as the dance itself. Whether sung by a solo performer or in a group, these songs bring the celebration to life. At its core, Bihugeet serves as a communal act of storytelling, a way for the people of Assam to share their experiences, their hopes and their desires. Much like the dance, Bihugeet creates a powerful connection between the performer and the audience, drawing them into the emotional landscape of the song.

Bihu is no longer confined to the rural villages of Assam—it has evolved significantly. Traditionally performed in open fields and village gatherings, Bihu dance is now showcased on theatrical stages, cultural festivals and national competitions. It is a testament to the adaptability and vitality of the art form. Structured choreography has replaced much of the improvisation, but efforts are being made to preserve its raw, spontaneous energy. The rise of social media platforms has brought new visibility to Bihu dance, making it accessible to a global audience. For the Assamese diaspora, Bihu is a cultural and emotional connector. Whether in the busy streets of London, the suburbs of New York, or the coastal cities of Australia, Bihu performances provide an opportunity for Assamese people around the world to celebrate their heritage, share their culture and feel connected to their homeland.

An important aspect of Bihu dance is its portrayal of gender dynamics. Unlike many traditional Indian folk dances that tend to adhere to rigid gender roles, Bihu dance exists in a space of fluidity and equality. The roles of men and women in the performance are balanced, with each playing an equal part in the storytelling. The men's movements are characterized by strength and energy, while the women's movements are graceful and flowing, creating a dynamic interplay between the two. This balance reflects the egalitarian nature of the dance, where the performers, regardless of gender, are united by a shared purpose. There is no competition or dominance; instead, there is a harmonious collaboration, a shared sense of rhythm and movement. The dancers embody the natural cycles of attraction and connection. The courtship element in the dance highlights the flirtation between men and women, but it is always playful and respectful.

Bihu dance is not just a folk tradition; it is a living, breathing expression of Assam's cultural spirit. Its movements reflect the pulse of nature, flowing with the energy of the wind, the rippling of rivers and the swaying of golden paddy fields. With time, Bihu has embraced structured performances while retaining its spontaneous essence, adapting to the evolving social landscape while remaining deeply rooted in its cultural heritage. It has transcended its rural origins to become a global cultural phenomenon. *(The author is a writer, researcher and educator currently pursuing a PhD in Humanities and Social Sciences at BITS Pilani, Rajasthan. She can be reached at monali.kakoty@gmail.com)*

Global celebration of Rongali Bihu The cultural splendor of Bohag Bihu festival

By: Lalit Nath

Bihu is a vibrant national festival of the Assamese people. Among the three Bihus, Rongali Bihu is the most cherished, heartfelt and beloved. If there exists a truly spontaneous and eternal festival in the world, it is Rongali Bihu. During this springtime festival of Bohag, people of all ages young and old dream anew with fresh emotions. Fow worship, bonds of love and affection, reverence and devotion, love for nature and the worship of the divine are some of the core characteristics of Bohag Bihu. In the season of Bohag, the hearts of energetic young boys and girls overflow with love. The enchanting beauty of dancing girls adorned with 'gejeng' and 'nahor' flowers inspires love in the hearts of Bihu dancers. The intense fragrance of the nahor flower makes hearts flutter like cotton in the wind.

"Gharoto nabaho mon mor chenai oi Paroto nabaho mon. Kamao tulabor jenekoi urise Tenekoi uribor mon".

The lively and playful Bihu songs awaken the hearts of boys and girls. The rhythm of Bihu songs and the beats of the dhol inspire dancers and drummers to express their deepest emotions. They joyfully dance under trees and in open fields.

However, with changing times, the rural landscapes of Assam have moved towards urbanization. The once sprawling green fields and lush natural surroundings are gradually being transformed into concrete jungles. As a result, the natural Bihu under trees has now shifted to stage performances under bright lights. With the advancement of science and technology, Bihu has taken on a new form. Bihu festivals and stage based events are now widely publicized and broadcasted through digital media. Today, Rongali Bihu is also celebrated grandly outside Assam. Even thousands of miles away from their birthplace, Assamese people in the diaspora celebrate Rongali Bihu with joy and enthusiasm to keep their culture and traditions alive. On April 19, 1976, Rongali Bihu was celebrated for the first time on foreign soil in Nottingham, England, by the Assam Association. Since then, Assamese people in cities like London and many others in the UK have been celebrating the festival with great

pomp. Additionally, Assamese organizations in America, Canada, Europe, and the Middle East have made significant efforts to preserve Assamese traditions. These organizations arrange Bihu songs and dances, Jeng Bihu, Husori and also prepare traditional Assamese cuisine. To introduce the new generation born abroad to the Assamese language and culture, they organize educational camps, dance lessons, recitation competitions, and more. During these Bihu events, the diaspora Assamese people remember their parents, relatives and motherland with emotion and try to forget the pain of being away from home by immersing themselves in the joy of the festival. In doing so, they keep the Assamese tradition and culture alive abroad.

Especially, organizations like the United Kingdom Assam Association and Assamese Community of Scotland and Assam Society of the United Kingdom organize Rongali Bihu celebrations across the UK.

In the United States too, Assamese diaspora communities celebrate Rongali Bihu in various states. With the initiative of different Assamese organizations, these festivals include Bihu songs and dances, Sattriya dance, traditional cuisine and cultural events.

Organizations like the Assam Society of America, Assam Association of North America, Assam Association of Southern California, Assam, Assam Association of Georgia, Assam Association of Assam Association of Michigan, Association of Greater Chicago, Dallas-Fort Worth, Assam Association of Washington D.C. and Assam Association of Southern Florida celebrate Rongali Bihu every year with enthusiasm, thus preserving cultural awareness among the Assamese diaspora.

This festival carries the message of Assamese heritage, culture and joy of brotherhood to the land of America. In cities like Sydney and Melbourne in Australia, Assamese people celebrate Rongali Bihu with great excitement, cherishing their tradition and cultural identity. Local cultural organizations organize Bihu dance, music and prepare traditional food where locals also joyfully participate. In cities like Melbourne and Sydney, organizations such as the Assam Association of Australia and Sydney Bihu Committee organize Bihu festivals with much delight, thereby awakening

cultural consciousness among the Assamese diaspora and upholding Assamese tradition and identity on Australian soil. In Canadian cities like Toronto and Vancouver, Rongali Bihu is celebrated with great enthusiasm by the Assamese diaspora. Local Assamese national and cultural organizations organize events that include Bihu dances, songs and traditional Assamese food.

Organizations like the Assam Association of Canada and the Assam Association of North America have been celebrating Rongali Bihu in various parts of Canada, preserving cultural unity and traditional bonds among the diaspora.

Even in India's major metropolitan cities, Assamese communities celebrate Bihu in a grand manner. In Kolkata, a vibrant Bihu event is organized at Madhusudan Mancha by the 'Kolkata Assamese Cultural Society,' where renowned artists from Assam showcase traditional dances and songs. In Delhi, local Assamese cultural organizations organize events with traditional Bihu dance, music and regional food, participated in by people from various communities.

In Mumbai, the colorful Bihu celebrations organized every year by local Assamese groups feature performances of Bihu dance and songs by local artists. These events give prominence to Assamese tradition, culture and folklore, thus keeping the Assamese heritage alive amidst the hustle and bustle of Mumbai.

These examples clearly show that Rongali Bihu is no longer confined to Assam, it is now celebrated globally. The celebration of Rongali Bihu abroad has become a shining symbol of Assamese cultural identity, heritage and brotherhood. Even while living far from their motherland, Assamese people in the diaspora continuously strive to keep their traditions alive through this festival. Through the celebration of Rongali Bihu, they establish a deep connection with their roots and also present Assam's cultural pride on the global stage.

The diaspora Assamese are also helping the new generation to understand the value of language and culture and are encouraging its continued practice. Let Rongali Bihu be celebrated even more widely, both within and outside the country, this is our heartfelt wish. *(The author can be reached at 954139493)*

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

Bohag Bihu, also known as Rongali Bihu, is the most exuberant and significant festival of Assam, celebrated with unmatched enthusiasm and fervor. It marks the Assamese New Year and heralds the arrival of spring, symbolizing hope, renewal, and prosperity. Deeply rooted in Assam's agrarian culture, this festival unites people in joyous revelry, transcending barriers of caste, creed, and class. Its cultural significance extends beyond the confines of a mere festival; it embodies the very spirit of Assamese identity, tradition, and heritage. With its vibrant music, rhythmic dance, and delectable cuisine, Bohag Bihu showcases the richness of Assam's folklore and lifestyle, making it a festival of profound cultural pride.

Bohag Bihu is fundamentally an agrarian festival, deeply intertwined with the rural lifestyle of Assam. Agriculture has always been the lifeline of the region, and this festival celebrates the onset of a new farming cycle. It is a time when farmers prepare their fields, pray for a bountiful harvest, and seek divine blessings for prosperity. The festival not only marks the beginning of the Assamese New Year but also signifies nature's cyclical rhythm, where the old makes way for the new. The festival's name, 'Rongali Bihu,' itself is derived from the Assamese word 'Rong,' meaning happiness and merriment. This perfectly encapsulates the spirit of the celebration, which is characterized by vibrant cultural performances, communal feasting, and heartfelt social interactions.

The festival spans several days, each carrying distinct traditions and customs that reflect the diversity of Assamese culture. The celebrations commence with Goru Bihu, a day dedicated to the welfare of cattle, which are indispensable to agricultural activities. On this day, farmers take their cattle to the riverbanks, where they are bathed and adorned with garlands. Ritualistic chanting and traditional practices emphasize the deep connection between humans and animals in Assamese society. This day serves as a reminder of the agrarian roots of the festival and reinforces the harmonious coexistence of nature and human life. It is a testament to Assam's deep respect for all living beings and the integral role they play in the ecosystem.

Following Goru Bihu is Manuh Bihu, which is centered around human renewal and social bonding. It is a day of new beginnings, where people cleanse themselves, wear new clothes, and seek blessings from elders. The exchange of Gamosa, a beautifully woven handloom cloth, is an essential tradition on this day, symbolizing respect and goodwill. People

visit temples, offer prayers, and engage in social gatherings, strengthening community ties. The air resonates with the beats of the dhol, the rhythmic sounds of the pepa, and the melodious Bihu songs that narrate tales of love, nature, and daily life. These traditional Bihu Geets are a fundamental aspect of the festival, reflecting the joys and sorrows of Assamese life through poetic verses and enchanting melodies.

The most visually captivating aspect of Bohag Bihu is the traditional Bihu dance, performed by young men and women dressed in their finest attire. The women, draped in the exquisite Mekhela Sador, move gracefully to the beats of the dhol and the strains of the toka, creating an enchanting spectacle. The men, adorned in traditional dhoti and kurta, complement the performance with energetic and rhythmic movements. This dance, characterized by its expressive body language and swift footwork, embodies the joy and exuberance of spring. It is not just a form of entertainment but a means of preserving and passing down Assam's rich cultural heritage to future generations.

Another integral part of the festival is its culinary traditions. Assamese households prepare a variety of delicacies that highlight the rich agricultural produce of the region. Pitha, a type of rice cake filled with coconut or jaggery, and laru, sweetened coconut or sesame balls, are staple treats during the festival. Traditional rice-based dishes such as jolpan and doi-chira form an essential part of the celebratory feasts. These dishes are not merely food items but symbols of Assam's agrarian abundance and culinary artistry. Sharing these delicacies with friends and family fosters a sense of togetherness and reinforces the communal spirit of the festival.

Bohag Bihu is also a time for fairs and community gatherings, where people come together to participate in various cultural and recreational activities. Traditional games, such as buffalo fights, egg fights, and racing competitions, add an element of fun and excitement to the celebrations. Though some of these games have become less common in modern times due to ethical concerns, they remain an integral part of Assamese folklore. The Bihu fairs, known as Bihu Melas, serve as platforms for local artisans, musicians, and performers to showcase their talents, thereby promoting indigenous art forms and crafts. These fairs reflect the cultural vibrancy of Assam and provide a space for people to rejoice in their shared heritage.

In contemporary times, Bohag Bihu has evolved beyond its rural origins and has found expression in urban settings as well. Various organizations, cultural institutions, and Assamese diaspora communities celebrate the festival worldwide,

ensuring its continuity and relevance. Bihu dance performances, musical events, and Assamese folk festivals are organized in different parts of India and abroad, highlighting the festival's growing global appeal. Despite modernization, the essence of Bohag Bihu remains unchanged, as it continues to be a festival that unites people in joyous celebration and cultural pride.

The significance of Bohag Bihu extends beyond mere festivity; it plays a crucial role in preserving Assamese identity and fostering a sense of belonging among its people. In a rapidly changing world, where cultural homogenization threatens indigenous traditions, festivals like Bohag Bihu serve as cultural anchors, keeping age-old customs alive. The festival instills a deep sense of pride in Assamese heritage and strengthens social bonds through collective participation in traditional rituals, music, and dance. It is an embodiment of the Assamese ethos, emphasizing harmony, joy, and reverence for nature.

Moreover, Bohag Bihu has an inherent message of sustainability and ecological balance. The festival's customs, from the reverence for cattle to the preparation of organic, locally sourced food, reflect an environmentally conscious way of life. The traditional attire, handwoven with indigenous silk, represents the rich textile heritage of Assam and supports the livelihood of artisans. Even the Bihu songs, which celebrate the beauty of nature and the changing seasons, reflect a deep-rooted ecological awareness. In this way, Bohag Bihu is not just a cultural festival but a reminder of the harmonious relationship between human civilization and the natural world.

As Assam continues to evolve, Bohag Bihu remains a constant, a cherished festival that resonates with every Assamese heart. It is a time to reconnect with one's roots, to embrace the joy of life, and to celebrate the spirit of unity and togetherness. Whether in the lush green fields of rural Assam or in the bustling cities where Assamese communities reside, the spirit of Bohag Bihu thrives, echoing through its music, dance, and festivities. It is a festival that transcends time, carrying with it the essence of Assamese heritage, culture, and tradition. In its songs and dances, in its rituals and feasts, Bohag Bihu tells the story of Assam—a story of joy, resilience, and an unbreakable bond with nature and tradition. As each year brings another Bohag Bihu, the people of Assam continue to celebrate their past, embrace their present, and look forward to a future where their cultural splendor remains as vibrant as ever. *(The writer is the Editor in Chief of the Assamese E-magazine SAMPROTIK)*

More than 30 people killed, 84 injured in Russian missile attack

KYIV, April 13: At least 32 people have been killed in a Russian missile strike on the Ukrainian city of Sumy on Sunday, officials said. Two ballistic missiles struck the heart of the city at around 10:15 a.m. as people gathered to celebrate Palm Sunday, according to officials.

Images posted from the scene on official channels showed lines of black body bags lying on the side of the road, while more bodies were seen wrapped in foil blankets among the debris.

Video footage also showed fire crews as they fought to extinguish the shells of burnt-out cars among the rubble from damaged buildings.

"On this bright Palm Sunday, our community has suffered a terrible tragedy," acting Mayor Artem Kobzar said in a statement on social media. "Unfortunately, we already know of more than 20 deaths."

At least 32 people were killed as

a result of the attack, including two children, the State Emergency Service of Ukraine said in a statement. A further 84 people were injured, including 10 children, it said.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy confirmed that rescue efforts were ongoing and said "dozens" had been killed in the double missile attack.

"According to preliminary information, dozens of civilians were killed and wounded. Only filthy scum can act like this — taking the lives of ordinary people," he said.

The attack on Sumy is the second large-scale attack to claim civilian lives in just over a week, following a deadly missile strike on Zelenskyy's hometown of Kryvyi Rih on April 4 that killed some 20 people, including nine children.

Zelenskyy also called for a global response to the attack. "Talks have never stopped ballistic missiles and aerial bombs. What's



needed is an attitude toward Russia that a terrorist deserves," he said.

Elsewhere in Ukraine, the mayor of the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, Ihor Terekhov, said Sunday that a Russian strike had hit one of the city's kindergartens, shattering windows and damaging

the building's facade. No casualties were reported.

The strikes come a day after Russia and Ukraine's senior diplomats accused each other of violating a tentative US-brokered deal to pause strikes on energy infrastructure, underscoring the challenges

of negotiating an end to the 3-year war.

The two countries' foreign ministers spoke at separate events at the annual Antalya Diplomacy Forum, a day after US envoy Steve Witkoff met with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss peace prospects.

"The Ukrainians have been attacking us from the very beginning, every passing day, maybe with two or three exceptions," Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, adding that Moscow would provide the US, Turkey and international bodies with a list of Kyiv's attacks during the past three weeks.

His Ukrainian counterpart, Andrii Sybiha, contested that claim, saying Saturday that Russia had launched "almost 70 missiles, over 2,200 (exploding) drones, and over 6,000 guided aerial bombs at Ukraine, mostly at civilians" since agreeing to the limited pause on strikes. (AP)

Israel strikes hospital in Gaza, forcing evacuation as attacks intensify



DEIR AL-BALAH (Gaza), April 13: Israel struck a hospital in northern Gaza early on Sunday, forcing patients to evacuate as attacks intensified.

The pre-dawn strike hit Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza City, after Israel issued an evacuation warning, according to Gaza's ministry of health. One patient, a girl, died during the evacuation because medical staff were unable to provide urgent care, it said.

The hospital is run by the Diocese of Jerusalem, which condemned the attack in a statement, saying it happened on "Palm Sunday, the start of the Holy Week, the most sacred week of the Christian year". Palm Sunday commemorates Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

Israel said it struck a command and control centre used by Hamas at the hospital to plan and execute attacks against Israeli civilians and soldiers, without providing evidence. It said prior to the strike, steps were taken to mitigate harm, including issuing warnings, and using precise munitions and aerial surveillance.

Hours later, a separate strike on a car in Deir al-Balah in central Gaza, killed at least seven people — six brothers and their friend — according to staff at the morgue of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, which received the bodies.

The Israeli military also said they targeted another command and control centre in the area of Deir al-Balah when many Hamas militants were present and planning to carry out an attack against Israeli soldiers. This was not connected to the strike on the car in the same area, which the army said it was looking into.

The strikes came hours after Israel's defence minister said that military activity would rapidly expand across Gaza and that people would have to evacuate from "fighting zones".

Israel also announced Saturday the completion of the Morag corridor, cutting off the southern city of Rafah from the rest of Gaza, with the military saying it would soon expand "vigorously" in most of the

small coastal territory.

Israeli authorities have vowed to pressure Hamas to release the remaining 59 hostages, 24 believed to be alive, and accept proposed new ceasefire terms. The director of Al-Ahli Hospital, Dr. Fadel Naim, said they were warned of the attack before it was struck. In a post on X, he wrote that the emergency room, pharmacy and surrounding buildings were severely damaged, impacting more than 100 patients and dozens of medical staff. The health ministry said the strike destroyed the ward for outpatients and laboratories and damaged the emergency ward.

Images of the aftermath showed the hospital's caved-in cement roof, surrounded by debris. Dr. Munir al-Boursh, the health ministry's director general called the evacuation frightening, with people carried out into the streets in hospital beds. "It was very scary for the patients... we did not know what happened," he said. The health ministry said patients have since been transferred to three other hospitals in Gaza City, including Shifa, Al-Quds and the Kuwait Field Hospital.

In the last 24 hours, Gaza's health ministry said that 11 people were killed and more than 100 wounded. Medical facilities often come under fire in wars, but combatants usually depict such incidents as accidental or exceptional, since hospitals enjoy special protection under international law.

In its 18-month campaign in Gaza, Israel has stood out by carrying out an open campaign on hospitals, besieging and raiding them, some several times, as well as hitting multiple others in strikes while accusing Hamas of using them as cover for its fighters.

Last month Israel struck Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis city, the largest in southern Gaza, killing two people and wounding others and causing a large fire, the territory's health ministry said.

The facility was overwhelmed with dead and wounded when Israel ended the ceasefire with a surprise wave of airstrikes. (AP)

Multi-racial society precious amid global troubles: Singapore PM

SINGAPORE, April 13: Singapore's multi-racial and diverse society is precious and amid global troubles, all efforts must be made to protect it, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said on Sunday.

"What we have here is precious, and what we have here must always be protected and cherished," Wong told residents at a Hari Raya (Eid) celebration at a local community gathering.

Despite coming from different backgrounds and cultures and having different perspectives, "we will always be one Singapore", stressed Wong who heads for the general election due this year.

"And when we celebrate a festival, like now, whether it's Hari Raya, Deepavali or Chinese New Year... we all celebrate as one family together. So long may this spirit of solidarity and unity continue in Singapore," he said. Wong also reiterated his message on the need for Singapore to be resolute and united in the face of a changed world.

"We know that we are living in very difficult times globally. The recent developments have made for a very uncertain outlook in the world. But we will do everything we can to make sure, despite the turbulences and uncertainties, that Singapore will always remain a beacon of stability and harmony," The Straits Times quoted Wong as saying. His comments come after a statement in parliament on April 8 where Wong said the recent tariffs imposed by the US would hurt the Singapore economy.

He released a video on April 4 detailing the "harsh reality" of the tariffs. Fears of a trade war continued to escalate after the US imposed sweeping trade tariffs on countries worldwide, including trade-finance-focused and export-oriented Singapore.

Wong's island-wide engagements have stepped up a gear in past weeks, with appearances across the island of six million people, in the lead-up to the upcoming general election, widely expected in the coming months.

Wong's ruling People's Action Party, which has ruled Singapore since independence with an absolute majority, has started announcing candidates for the upcoming general election, followed by naming potential candidates by smaller political parties. (PTI)

Roadside bomb kills 8 bus passengers in Nigeria

MAIDUGURI (Borno), April 13: A roadside bomb suspected to have been planted by Islamic extremists in northeastern Nigeria struck a passenger bus, killing eight people and wounding more than a dozen others, authorities said.

The bus was travelling along the Damboa-Maiduguri highway in the conflict-battered Borno state on Saturday when it drove over the explosive device, Borno state police spokesman Nahum Daso said in a statement.

Islamic extremists with the Boko Haram group took up arms in 2009 to fight Western education and impose their radical version of Islamic law. The conflict, Africa's longest struggle with militancy, has spilled into Nigeria's northern neighbours and has left some 35,000 civilians dead and more than 2 million displaced, according to the UN.

The insurgents who once controlled dozens of villages in the region have mostly been pushed to remote forests and the fringes of the Lake Chad. However, they still carry out ambushes and rampart attacks on communities where security forces are outnumbered and outgunned. The latest attack renewed fears among residents and travellers in the state. (AP)

50 years after Lebanon's civil war began, bullet-riddled bus stands as reminder

BEIRUT, April 13: It was an ordinary day in Beirut. In one part of Lebanon's capital, a church was inaugurated, with the leader of the Christian Phalange party there. In another, Palestinian factions held a military parade. Phalangists and Palestinians had clashed, again, that morning.

What happened next on April 13, 1975, would change the course of Lebanon, plunging it into 15 years of civil war that would kill about 150,000 people, leave 17,000 missing and lead to foreign intervention.

Beirut became synonymous with snipers, kidnappings and car bombs.

Lebanon has never fully grappled with the war's legacy, and in many ways it has never fully recovered, 50 years later. The government on Sunday marked the anniversary with a small ceremony and minute of silence, a rare official acknowledgement of the legacy of the conflict.

The massacre
Unrest had been brewing. Palestinian militants had begun launching attacks against Israel from Lebanese territory. Leftist groups and many Muslims in Lebanon sympathised with the Palestinian cause. Christians and some other groups saw the Palestinian militants as a threat. At the time, Mohammad Othman was 16, a Palestinian refugee in the Tel al-Zaatar camp east of Beirut.

Three buses had left camp that



morning, carrying students like him as well as militants from a coalition of hardline factions that had broken away from the Palestinian Liberation Organisation.

They passed through the Ein Rummaneh neighbourhood without incident and joined the military parade. The buses were supposed to return together, but some participants were tired after marching and wanted to go back early. They hired a small bus from the street, Othman said. Thirty-three people packed in.

They were unaware that earlier that day, small clashes had broken out between Palestinians and Phalange Party members guarding the church in Ein Rummaneh. A bodyguard for party leader Pierre Gemayel had been killed. Suddenly the road was blocked, and gunmen began shooting at the bus from all sides, Othman recalled. Some passengers had guns

they had carried in the parade, Othman said, but they were unable to draw them quickly in the crowded bus. A camp neighbour fell dead on top of him. The man's 9-year-old son was also killed. Othman was shot in the shoulder.

The shooting didn't stop for about 45 minutes until they thought everyone was dead, he said. Othman said paramedics who eventually arrived had a confrontation with armed men who tried to stop them from evacuating him.

Twenty-two people were killed.

Conflicting narratives
Some Lebanese say the men who attacked the bus were responding to an assassination attempt against Gemayel by Palestinian militants. Others say the Phalangists had set up an ambush intended to spark a wider conflict.

Marwan Chahine, a Lebanese-French journalist who wrote a

book about the events of April 13, 1975, said he believes both narratives are wrong.

Chahine said he found no evidence of an attempt to kill Gemayel, who had left the church by the time his bodyguard was shot. And he said the attack on the bus appeared to be more a matter of trigger-happy young men at a checkpoint than a planned operation. There had been past confrontations, "but I think this one took this proportion because it arrived after many others and at a point when the authority of the state was very weak", Chahine said.

The Lebanese army had largely ceded control to militias, and it did not respond to the events in Ein Rummaneh that day. The armed Palestinian factions had been increasingly prominent in Lebanon after the PLO was driven out of Jordan in 1970, and Lebanese Christians had also increasingly armed themselves.

The Kataeb would say that the Palestinians were a state within a state, Chahine said, using the Phalange Party's Arabic name. But the reality was, you had two states in a state. Nobody was following any rules." Selim Sayegh, a member of parliament with the Kataeb Party who was 14 and living in Ein Rummaneh when the fighting started, said he believes war had been inevitable since the Lebanese army backed down from an attempt to take control of Palestinian camps two years earlier. (AP)

B'desh court issues arrest warrant against Hasina, her sister Rehana, British MP Rizwana in graft cases

DHAKA, April 13: A court in Bangladesh on Sunday issued arrest warrants against ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina, her sister Sheikh Rehana, British MP Tulip Rizwana Siddiq, and 50 others in connection with the alleged illegal acquisition of land by abusing political power.

Dhaka Metropolitan Senior Special Judge Zakir Hossain passed the order after considering three separate chargesheets filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), the Dhaka Tribune newspaper reported.

Judge Hossain fixed April 27 to review reports on the execution of the arrest orders, the newspaper quoted ACC Assistant Director (Prosecution) Aminul Islam as saying.

Citing court sources, Bengali newspaper Prothom Alo reported that the ACC recently submitted chargesheets to the court against 53 people in three separate cases on corruption charges in plot allocation.

At 53 accused, including Hasina, were absconding, the court issued arrest warrants against them, the paper said.

On April 10, the same court issued arrest warrants against Hasina, her daughter Saima Wazed Putul, and 17 others in a separate corruption case related to Rajuk plot allotments.

Putul has been serving as the South East Asian regional director for the World Health Organisation (WHO) based in New Delhi since November 1, 2023.

On January 13, ACC filed a case against Rehana for allegedly acquiring a 10-katha plot in the Purbachal New Town Project through abuse of authority. The case named 15 accused, including Hasina and Rehana's daughter British lawyer Tulip Rizwana Siddiq. Rehana did not hold any official position in the past regime.

After the investigation, ACC submitted a chargesheet on March 10 against 17 individuals, adding

two more names.

In a second case, ACC filed charges against Azmina Siddiq for similar irregularities in acquiring a 10-katha plot in Purbachal. This case initially listed 16 accused, including Tulip Siddiq and Sheikh Hasina. The final chargesheet, submitted on March 10, named 18 people. The ACC filed a third case the same day against Rehana's son Radwan Mujib Siddiq, accused of obtaining a plot using political influence. Tulip Siddiq and Sheikh Hasina were among the 16 named in the initial complaint. The final chargesheet also included 18 accused.

Hasina is also accused of numerous charges like mass murders and crimes against humanity, enforced disappearances while these cases were being filed with Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal.

Hasina's 16-year-long Awami League regime was toppled on August 5 last year in a student-led violent mass uprising. (PTI)

Hong Kong's biggest pro-democracy party gets mandate to move closer to disbandment



HONG KONG, April 13: Hong Kong's biggest pro-democracy party on Sunday received its members' mandate to proceed with steps toward a potential disbandment, part of the erosion of political freedoms as China cracks down on dissent in the southern city.

Democratic Party Chairman Lo Kin-hei said over 90 per cent of the members who took part in the vote supported the motion to let the central committee take up the procedure toward disbandment. He said he hopes there will be a final vote in the coming months.

"Unless there is a big change, I believe this inclination will be maintained in the next general meeting," he said, adding that the party would continue with its work until then. The process might not finish this year, said vice chair Mok Kin-shing.

The party's decision reflects the dwindling semi-autonomy and freedoms promised to the former British

colony when it returned to China's rule in 1997. The moderate political party has effectively become a pressure group, members say. Lo earlier said the decision was made based on the current political situation and social climate. Party veterans told The Associated Press that some members were warned of consequences if the party didn't shut down.

Massive anti-government protests in 2019 led China to impose a sweeping national security law that was used to prosecute many leading activists. Some of the party's former lawmakers are now in prison, and the party has been absent from elections after authorities overhauled the electoral system to ensure only "patriots" can run. The Democratic Party, founded in 1994, is one of the few remaining pro-democracy groups that still speak out from time to time following the closure of dozens of civil society groups under the shadow of the security law. They include the city's once second-largest pro-democracy party and a decades-old group that organized the annual vigils to commemorate Beijing's Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. The party had long positioned itself as a moderate pro-democracy force. Some of its former members joined the government as senior officials. Its willingness to negotiate with Beijing led to its proposal being included in a 2010 political reform package — a move that drew harsh criticism from some members and other democracy advocates who wanted more sweeping changes. (AP)

Southeast Asia water festival begins, but earthquake recovery blunts Myanmar's celebrations

BANGKOK, April 13: Several Southeast Asian countries kicked off their annual water festival holiday on Sunday, but in the wake of a devastating earthquake last month, Myanmar is missing out on the fun.

The holiday is an occasion for merrymaking during what is usually the hottest time of the year. In Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, millions normally take part in a mix of raucous play with uninhibited splashing of water on friends and strangers alike, and sober ceremonies to show respect to one's elders.

Temperatures this time of year can creep above 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit). Many who have moved to cities for work return to their native villages and towns to reunite with their families. The celebration is normally spread over several days, culminating on the actual New Year's Day.

In Myanmar, the holiday is called Thingyan. But this year, the country is struggling to recover from the 7.7 magnitude earthquake on March 28 that devastated its central heartland, killing more than 3,600 people and levelling structures from new condos to ancient pagodas.

Central Myanmar was shaken again on Sunday by a 5.5 magnitude earthquake in one of the biggest aftershocks since the March 28 temblor.

Even before last month's quake, Myanmar was reeling from a repressive military that seized power in 2021 and is carrying out a brutal war on the pro-democracy forces trying to unseat it. In 2020, the pandemic also quashed celebrations.

Still, the holiday offered a brief respite from the grim struggles of daily life in one of the region's poorer countries, and this is the



first year Myanmar could celebrate Thingyan's inclusion on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, an honour attained last December.

A few days after the quake, the military government announced that this year's festival would be observed peacefully in pursuit of

traditional culture and would not include joyous singing and dancing, due to a nationwide grieving period.

People are free to celebrate privately and quietly, and items related to the festival, including water guns, are being sold in malls and stores. However, there is no government-organised entertain-

ment. In Yangon, the country's largest city, major festival pavilions and decorations that were already being built in front of the City Hall were dismantled.

People's Square, a major celebration spot in Yangon, will not host the festival this year, but a traditional charity feast will be held without music and dance, the state-run Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper reported on Thursday.

In Yangon, the downtown area near City Hall was quiet, in sharp contrast to many past occasions.

The only visible signs of the holiday were the sights of children playing with water in the streets of residential neighbourhoods, and mostly elderly people going to Buddhist monasteries and pagodas for traditional prayers.

In the capital, Naypyitaw, state-media reported Saturday that a quiet celebration of the holiday's recognition by UNESCO would

include events such as applying Thanaka, a yellowish-white paste made from ground tree bark as a traditional natural cosmetic, gently washing the heads and cutting the nails of elderly people as a gesture of respect, and donating food.

Neighbouring Thailand, where the holiday is called Songkran, was expected to celebrate with revelry as usual. It sees a mass exodus of the workforce in the capital, Bangkok, return to their upcountry home towns, often extending what is officially a three-day holiday into an entire working week.

Foreign tourists join locals in almost orgiastic water fights, especially in Bangkok's Khao San Road backpackers district. Water pistols are merely small arms. It is not unusual to see huge buckets of water dumped on any convenient target. Moving vehicles serve as both platforms and targets for attacks. (AP)

BJP MP urges Centre to declare 4 Bengal districts as 'Disturbed Areas' under AFSPA

KOLKATA, April 13: BJP's Purulia MP Jyotirmay Singh Mahato has written to Union Home Minister Amit Shah urging the Centre to declare select bordering districts of West Bengal as "disturbed areas" under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), alleging repeated attacks on the Hindu community.

In his letter dated April 13, Mahato alleged that districts such as Murshidabad, Malda, Nadia and South 24 Parganas have witnessed violence against Hindus, with the state administration turning a "blind eye" due to what he called the ruling Trinamool Congress' "appeasement" politics.

He claimed that over 86 Hindu homes and shops were looted or destroyed in Murshid-



abad district recently and that civilians, including a man named Hargobindo Das and his son, were murdered. In Jhaubona village, he said, betel leaf plantations were set ablaze

in what he described as "targeted economic sabotage".

These are not isolated incidents. Similar unrest has unfolded across bordering districts, leaving the "Hindu

population vulnerable and voiceless", the MP said.

Referring to violence that broke out over the Waqf (Amendment) Act, Mahato alleged that mobs attacked Hindu homes, public property and even police forces. The Calcutta High Court had to intervene and order central armed police force deployment, highlighting the "state's administrative failure", he added. Drawing a parallel with the 1990 exodus of Kashmiri Pandits, the BJP MP warned that a similar situation could emerge in Bengal if immediate steps were not taken.

"I most respectfully urge you to consider declaring AFSPA in the bordering districts of West Bengal," he wrote, adding that such a move would help restore law and order, deter future vio-

lence and assure Hindus that they are not abandoned.

Mahato concluded the letter with a plea for "decisive action to ensure justice, security and the rule of law."

Meanwhile, Ranaghat BJP MP Jagannath Sarkar also wrote to Shah and urged the Union Home Minister to intervene urgently in the light of the "deteriorating" law and order situation in Murshidabad district of West Bengal.

He requested a high-level investigative and monitoring team from the Ministry of Home Affairs and reinforcement of central forces in vulnerable areas.

Sarkar stressed the need for strict legal action against the perpetrators to restore peace and uphold constitutional rights. (PTI)

Hundreds flee violence-hit Murshidabad, cross river to take shelter in Malda

KOLKATA, April 13: Hundreds of people affected by communal violence in West Bengal's Murshidabad district have crossed the Bhagirathi River and taken shelter in adjoining Malda, officials said.

The local administration has arranged for accommodation and food for the fleeing riot-hit families and sheltered them in schools, while deploying volunteers at the river bank to assist those arriving in boats.

Several areas in Muslim-majority Murshidabad, including Suti, Dhulian, Jangipur and Shamsheganj, have witnessed violent protests against the Waqf (Amendment) Act that spiralled into communal violence, sparking the exodus.

Visuals on the media showed burnt shops, hotels and houses in these parts of Murshidabad.

"We escaped from Mandirpara area of Dhulian as our houses were set on fire and women and girls molested by a gang of outsiders and some locals," a young woman, who fled the area along with four other family members, told reporters.

"They hurled bombs, blamed us for the Waqf (Amendment) Act and asked us to immediately leave our homes. They beat up the men of our houses. We were afraid for our lives and escaped our homes with the help of central forces," the woman added.

Another elderly woman said, "We folded hands before the marauders seeking their forgiveness even though we did not commit any wrongdoing. Brandishing arms, the attackers committed so much of atrocities. I, my son, daughter-in-law and grandson fled with some of our belongings. Otherwise, we would have been killed." Leader of the opposition in the state assembly, Suwendu

Adhikari, claimed that 400 people have fled Dhulian following the violence.

"More than 400 Hindus from Dhulian, Murshidabad driven by fear of religiously driven bigots were forced to flee across the river & take shelter at Par Lalpur High School, Deonapur-Sovapur GP, Baisnabnagar, Malda. Religious persecution in Bengal is real.

"Appeasement politics of TMC has emboldened radical elements. Hindus are being hunted, our people are running for their lives in their own land! Shame on the state govt for allowing this breakdown of law & order. I urge the central paramilitary forces deployed in the district, the state police and the district administration to ensure the safe return of these displaced Hindus & protect their lives from this jihadist terror. Bengal is burning. The social fabric is torn. Enough is enough," he said in a post on X.

Deonapur-Sovapur gram panchayat pradhan Sulekha Choudhury said that initially a few hundred were coming in boats, but the numbers increased since Friday afternoon.

"The number of people who have arrived till Saturday night crossed 500, with most of them being women," she said.

Choudhury said they have been sheltered in schools in the area and food has been arranged for them. Kaliachak 3 Block Development Officer (BDO) Sukanta

Sikdar said there was sporadic arrival of affected people till Saturday afternoon but the numbers might have gone up afterwards.

Trinamool Congress' Baisnabnagar MLA Chandana Sarkar said 20 youths have been deployed at the river bank to assist those coming in boats from Murshidabad. (PTI)

Governor gives assent to Odisha University (Amendment) Bill

BHUBANESWAR, April 13: With Governor Hari Babu Kambhampati giving his assent, the Odisha University (Amendment) Act, 2024 has come into effect from Sunday marking a significant reform in the state's higher education sector.

The bill was passed on April 2, after extensive deliberation in the Odisha Assembly and it got governor's assent on April 12.

Expressing his gratitude to the governor, Odisha's Higher Education minister Suryabanshi Suraj described the development as a "new dawn" for higher education in the state. He said the act will bring transformative changes aimed at strengthening the education system, addressing longstanding challenges and enhancing academic excellence.

"The act aims to bring about substantial reforms, ensuring autonomy for universities and enhancing the efficiency of academic functions," Suraj said.

According to the provision of the act, the recruitment of faculty in universities will not be conducted through the Odisha Public Service Commission (OPSC). Instead, universities will form a committee comprising educationists for faculty recruitment.

This will allow the recruitment process to be completed within a specified period, without unnecessary delays, the minister said, adding that it will ensure that faculty appointments align with the requirements of undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, as well as subject-specific demands.

Regarding the appointment of vice-chancellors, the act has provision of forming a three-member committee for the selection of the VCs. Only distinguished educationists from the field of higher education will be part of this committee. The age limit for VCs has been increased from 67 to 70 years.

The new act also ensured the reintroduction of the senate in universities. The senate is the highest advisory body of a university, comprising educationists, faculty, students, administrative staff and it plays a vital role in the development of the university and the higher education sector. (PTI)

CAG must audit how policies benefited private firms: Cong on fuel excise duty hike

NEW DELHI, April 13: Accusing the government of "looting" people by increasing excise duty on petrol and diesel, the Congress on Sunday called for fixing accountability and demanded that the CAG should audit how government policies benefited private companies.

The opposition party also demanded that the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) and Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) should investigate whether there was deliberate negligence or collusion in this.

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh in a post on X said, "The people of India are being looted — on one hand the Modi government is increasing the tax burden and

picking people's pockets, while on the other hand private and government oil companies are making profits! This is open economic exploitation!"

"The truth is: In May 2014, the excise duty on petrol was ₹ 9.20 and on diesel ₹ 3.46. Which is now ₹ 19.90 on petrol and ₹ 15.80 on diesel in the Modi government — an increase of 357% and 54%!" he said in his post in Hindi.

The Congress leader claimed that the government earned ₹ 39.54 lakh crore from the petroleum sector in the last eleven years, yet it did not give any relief to people. "In May 2014, crude oil was USD 108/barrel, today it is only USD 65.31 — i.e. 40% cheaper, yet the prices of petrol and diesel are higher than the UPA

era," Ramesh said.

"In 2014, petrol in Delhi was ₹ 71.41 and diesel ₹ 55.49 per liter. Today the same petrol is ₹ 94.77 and diesel ₹ 87.67 per liter — the public is being openly looted. Who is benefiting?" he asked.

The Congress leader said along with government companies, the private oil companies are also earning huge profits from refining and marketing, while the common man is burdened with expensive petrol and diesel.

"The issue is serious! CAG should audit how the government policies benefited these private companies. CVC and CBI should investigate whether there was deliberate negligence or collusion in this?" Ramesh said.

"Public money needs to be ac-

counted for — ? accountability must be fixed," he asserted.

The Congress general secretary shared a media report, which stated that oil firms were benefiting big time but now lowering prices for people. The Congress had last week taken a swipe at the government over the hike in excise duty on petrol and diesel, with Rahul Gandhi stating Prime Minister Narendra Modi finally gave a befitting reply to "tariffs".

Gandhi had also said that people suffering from inflation had been given another gift of "government loot". The government hiked excise duty on petrol and diesel by ₹ 2 per litre each. The excise duty on petrol was hiked to ₹ 13 per litre and that on diesel to ₹ 10 a litre. (PTI)

BJP working on agenda to make people fight over religion, caste: Rajasthan Cong's Jolly

JAIPUR, April 13: Rajasthan opposition leader Tikaram Jolly Sunday accused the BJP of working on an agenda to make people fight over religion and caste while claiming the ruling party's ex-MLA Gyandev Ahuja, suspended for 'purifying' a temple, would be reinstated soon.

Ahuja sprinkled Ganga water at a Ram temple in Rajasthan's Alwar to "purify" it last week, a day after the Congress' Tikaram Jolly attended the consecration ceremony there. Congress leaders, including Jolly, decried the act as an insult to a Dalit.

Asserting there was no caste angle to his action, Ahuja, however, defended his act, saying Congress leaders have "no moral authority" to attend such ceremonies as the party's leadership had questioned the existence of Lord Ram and "boycotted" the consecration ceremony in Ayodhya last year.

The BJP has suspended Ahuja from the primary membership of the party.

Slamming the BJP, Jolly, the Leader of Opposition in the Rajasthan Assembly, said Gyandev Ahuja was suspended from the BJP earlier too and was later re-

instated. "That will happen this time too. People understand everything," Jolly said.

Talking to reporters in Kishangarh of Ajmer district, the Congress leader targeted the BJP and said, "The agenda is to make people fight in the name of religion sometimes and sometimes in the name of caste."

While travelling from Jaipur to Ajmer, Jolly halted at Kishangarh briefly. He, along with Kishangarh MLA Vikas Chaudhary, attended a blood donation camp being organised at the blood bank of Government Yagya Narayan Hospital.

About Ahuja's action, Jolly further said neither Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma nor the state president of BJP Madan Rathore uttered a word about it.

"Ahuja's suspension is only an eyewash. This too will be withdrawn," the Congress leader said. BJP state president Rathore had earlier said that the party did not support Ahuja's statement and action. "Whether it is Madan Dilawar's statement of getting DNA tests of tribals done or Gyandev Ahuja's act of purifying the temple with Ganga water, all this has a set agenda," Jolly said. (PTI)

Cooperative movement had remained in shambles: HM Amit Shah

BHOPAL, April 13: Union Co-operation Minister Amit Shah on Sunday said the cooperative movement had remained in shambles in the country as laws were earlier not tweaked accordingly.

Madhya Pradesh has a lot of possibilities in the agriculture, animal husbandry and co-operative fields, Shah said at a state-level cooperative conference in Bhopal.

A lot of work needs to be done to exploit these possibilities to the fullest, the minister added.

"Cooperative movements had remained in shambles as laws



were earlier not tweaked accordingly. But after 75 years of independence, the cooperative ministry was formed to boost the cooperative movement, which has gained traction," he said.

Shah said no thought was given by the previous central governments to bolster the cooperative sector.

"The reason for this was that there was no ministry in the country for the field of cooperatives. After 75 years of independence, Prime Minister Narendra Modi established the Ministry of Cooperatives," he said.

"In some states, this movement has gained momentum, while in some places, it has been completely destroyed. The main reason for this was that the laws, which should have been changed with time, did not happen," Shah said.

Earlier, the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) signed an agreement with the Madhya Pradesh State Co-operative Dairy Federation here to enhance milk production in the state.

The pact was signed in the presence of Shah at the cooperative conference. (PTI)

My govt committed for welfare of all sections of society: Nitish

PATNA, April 13: Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Sunday said his government is committed for the welfare of all sections of society. Addressing the 'Bhim Samvad', a programme organised by his Janata Dal (United) on the eve of birth anniversary of Babasaheb

Bhimrao Ambedkar, Kumar appealed to people from all sections of society to live together and in an atmosphere of peace and harmony. Paying tributes to Ambedkar, the JD(U) supreme recalled his visit to the house of Babasaheb while he

was serving in the Union Cabinet headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee. "Our government is committed for the welfare of all sections of society including Dalits, mahadalits, backward and extremely backward classes, Muslim community and upper castes. Babasaheb will remain an inspiration for us.

"I visited his house and met his family members when I was a union minister. I appeal to the people from all sections of the society to live together in an atmosphere of peace and harmony," said the CM while

addressing the gathering. Top JD (U) leaders, including Union minister Rajiv Ranjan Singh alias Lalan, party's national working president Sanjay Kumar Jha, ministers in the state cabinet were among those present at the function held inside the sprawling Bapu Sabhagar auditorium here.

Meanwhile, at the historical Gandhi maidan, a stone's throw from the Bapu Sabhagar, a 'Jai Bhim' padyatra was launched by the BJP, the JD(U)'s alliance partner. Those who joined the padyatra in-

cluded: Union minister Mansukh Mandaviya, state BJP president Dilip Jaiswal, Deputy Chief Ministers -- Samrat Choudhary and Vijay Kumar Sinha - and several other party leaders.

"On the eve of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar's birth anniversary, more than six thousand young colleagues of MY Bharat organised 'Jai Bhim Padyatra' in Patna, on Sunday. Babasaheb was the architect of the Constitution, he laid the foundation of India's strong democracy. (PTI)

DUTY AMID DESPAIR

Unseen sacrifice of India's Agromet workers fighting climate chaos

NEW DELHI, April 13: When the government ordered the closure of 199 District Agrometeorological Units (DAMUs) in January 2024, around 130 employees chose to stay — unpaid but unwavering — because farmers still relied on them.

They went to court, secured a stay and kept working, helping farmers navigate worsening weather and rising climate risks.

On March 31 this year, their salaries were finally released following court intervention — a long-awaited relief after a year marked by sacrifice, resilience and quiet hope.

"I could not pay my daughter's school fees. I folded my hands before the principal and promised to pay soon. I kept my head down, but inside, I was breaking," said one DAMU employee from Rajasthan, requesting anonymity.

His voice quivered as he recalled how his family had to cut back on food. "We stopped buying tomatoes or onions when prices shot up.

Sometimes, we skipped vegetables altogether. We survived on lentils and rice. My children would ask, 'Why don't we eat like we used to?' How do I explain that we just do not have the money?"

At times, he felt so hopeless he considered switching to a lower-paying job, just to earn something.

Another DAMU staffer from Rajasthan, who is soon to become a father for a second time, told PTI his family has been surviving on the kindness of others. "Every month, I tell my landlord the same thing: 'Abhi salary nahi aayi hai'," he said, his tone conveying more than his words. He spoke about the pain of watching his loved ones let go of life's little joys. "I want to take my family out for a meal or buy something nice for my child. But I cannot. I feel helpless."

"When someone in the family gets sick, I just pray it's not serious. Because we simply do not have the money for treatment," he said. In



Uttar Pradesh, one DAMU observer allegedly lost his mother to illness. His colleagues say he could not "arrange timely care because he had not been paid in months". PTI could not speak directly to the staffer, but it mirrors the pain many DAMU staff describe — a silent capitulation under the weight of neglect.

In Maharashtra, another staffer received repeated notices from the

bank after defaulting on his home loan. "My daughter would show me messages from her school's WhatsApp group — other parents sharing fee receipts. I had nothing to show. I felt like I failed her."

From Madhya Pradesh, a DAMU employee said he delayed buying chronic medicine for a chronic condition. "I bought it on March 31, the day my salary landed. That was the first thing I did."

Now in his mid-thirties, he says he feels stuck. He is too qualified for some jobs, not qualified enough for others. "Private companies want different skill sets. And at this age, getting a secure government job is like winning a lottery."

What keeps him going? "When farmers say, 'because of you, we did not lose our harvest'. That means everything."

One DAMU employee from Uttar Pradesh was miles away when his father passed away. "I could not get leave. By the time, I reached home, he was already cremated. That's a pain I will carry forever. I did my job with devotion. What did I get?" Mahesh Yadulwar, a DAMU employee from Maharashtra, said salary delays were nothing new. "When I joined, we got regular salaries for three-four months. Then the delays began. During the Covid period, we worked without pay for over a year." (PTI)

Punjab Police quizzes Bajwa over his statement on bombs in state

CHANDIGARH, April 13: Punjab Police on Sunday questioned senior Congress leader Partap Singh Bajwa over his purported statement that "50 bombs have reached Punjab, of which 18 have exploded".

Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann also questioned the particulars of Bajwa's statement, saying neither Punjab Police Intelligence nor a Central Intelligence agency have shared an information.

Mann said strict action will be taken if Bajwa's statement was meant only to create panic.

The Leader of Opposition in Punjab assembly, in an interview to a private television channel, had claimed, "I have come to know that 50 bombs have reached Punjab. Of this, 18 have exploded, 32 are yet to go off."

On the chief minister's direction, a Punjab Police team led by Assistant Inspector General of Police Ravjot Kaur Grewal visited

Bajwa's residence on Sunday and questioned him.

AIG Grewal, speaking to reporters outside Bajwa's residence, said the police team arrived to find the source of Bajwa's information since it was a matter of national security.

"So far, he has not given any input useful to us," she said.

Meanwhile, Mann said in a video message on Sunday, "Bajwa gave a statement, saying 50 bombs have reached Punjab. Neither the Punjab Police Intelligence Office nor any other Intelligence agency in the country have shared such an information. Then how did Bajwa make such a statement? Does he have a direct connection with Pakistan? Did any agency in Pakistan call him up and share the information?" Mann said it is Bajwa's responsibility to share the details. "Are you waiting for the bombs to explode and people to die?" he asked. (PTI)

Desperate CSK look to arrest steep slide against LSG

LUCKNOW, April 13: Chennai Super Kings have never experienced a worse phase in the Indian Premier League and their faltering batters will have to deliver to arrest their steep slide in a must-win game against an upbeat Lucknow Super Giants here on Monday.

CSK have never lost five games in a row, including an unprecedented three at the Chepauk, their proverbial fortress. If there is anyone that can get CSK out of the doldrums, it is MS Dhoni but even his return to captaincy following Ruturaj Gaikwad's injury

could not turn their fortunes in their previous outing on Friday.

Considering their struggles against spinners at home, the batters would not mind playing an away game in a desperate attempt to find form. The absence of their best batter, Gaikwad, thus makes their comeback bid all the more difficult. CSK have been accused of sheltering players past their prime in the past and those questions have expectedly resurfaced after a record losing streak. The lack of power-hitters in their squad has also become a talking point with Dhoni

himself conceding that even targeting 60 runs in the powerplay is a tad too ambitious for them.

Openers Rachin Ravindra and Devon Conway are two fine batters but expecting them to go hammer and tongs from ball one goes against their style of play. Rahul Tripathi, coming in place of Gaikwad at three, will be under immense pressure to perform. The team also needs to get more out of veteran all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja.

Shivam Dube needs more support on the power-hitting front and best placed to do that is Dhoni himself but

his constant change of batting position, the last outing was at no.9, makes the task tougher for the World Cup winning skipper.

After the last game, CSK batting coach Mike Hussey said that his team is not going to throw in the towel just yet. "I still think we've got the right players. There's a lot of talk about the style of our play. But the players we've got, we don't want to ask them to play in a completely different way; that's natural to them," said Hussey after the loss to KKR.

Their opponents, LSG, will be look-

ing for their fourth win on the trot having gained some much-needed consistency in a tournament of fine margins.

Their bowling was their weakest link at the start of the competition with injuries to main pacers but it was the bowlers who helped them tide over Gujarat Titans here on Saturday.

It was remarkable how the likes of Avesh Khan, Ravi Bishnoi and Shardul Thakur were able to stem the flow of runs at the back end of Titans' innings after a flying start from the opposition.

The Lucknow pitch, traditionally

slow, has been better for batting and that is suiting the likes of Nicholas Pooran, who is striking the ball as cleanly as ever.

The absence of Mitchell Marsh at the top of the order allowed Rishabh Pant to open alongside an in-form Aiden Markram on Saturday.

Short of runs, Pant did alright at the top of the order but will he give himself more opportunities as an opener following Marsh's return? The Australian has been one of their best batters thus far, making Pant's promotion to the top trickier. (PTI)

Arunachal State Games 2025 set to begin from April 18

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 13: The Arunachal Olympic Association (AOA) is all set to host the 4th edition of Arunachal State Games - a flagship multi-sport event scheduled from April 18 to 22, according to an official press release from the AOA. Formerly known as the State Olympic Games, the event has been re-branded to reflect the evolving vision and inclusivity of the sporting movement in the state. The competitions will be held across multiple venues in the Itanagar Capital Region, with the Golden Jubilee Stadium in Yupia serving as the central venue for both the opening and closing ceremonies.

The Games aim to revive sports culture at the grassroots level and identify budding talent across Arunachal Pradesh. It is also part of the state government's broader vision to create a vibrant sports ecosystem with improved infrastructure, expert coaching, and structured competition formats. The initiative emphasises youth participation, healthy lifestyles, unity, and discipline through sports.

A total of 3,890 participants, including 2,400 athletes, 450 support staff, 440 technical officials, and 400 volunteers, are expected to take part. The athletes will compete in 22 sports disciplines, ranging from popular events like athletics, football, boxing, and badminton to traditional and strength-based games such as arm wrestling, tug of war, and Pencak Silat.

For the first time, the Arunachal State Games will incorporate a Games Management System (GMS), introducing a digital approach to logistics, registration, scheduling, and performance tracking. Athletes and officials will receive digital accreditation cards, bringing the event closer to the operational standards of national and international sporting events.

Former Regional Director of SAI, Dr. Subash Basumatary has been appointed chairman of the Games Technical Conduct Committee, ensuring the highest level of professionalism in the event's execution.

The opening ceremony on April 18 will feature a football match and a cultural showcase, with Arunachal Pradesh's Hon'ble Chief Minister as Chief Guest. Olympic bronze medalist boxer Lovlina Borgohain will grace the occasion as special guest, adding inspiration for young athletes.

The closing ceremony on April 22 will conclude with the football final and award distribution. With wide participation and a strong support system, the Arunachal State Games 2025 is poised to transform the state's sports landscape and pave the way for future champions.

KOHLI NOW HAS 100 FIFTIES AND NINE CENTURIES FROM 405 T20 MATCHES

SALT, KOHLI POWER RCB TO 9-WICKET WIN OVER ROYALS



JAIPUR, April 13: Phil Salt's explosive 33-ball 65 laid the foundation and Virat Kohli's 100th T20 fifty provided the finishing touch as Royal Challengers Bangalore cruised to a dominant nine-wicket win over Rajasthan Royals in the IPL here on Sunday.

RCB's decision to bowl first paid off on a surface that stayed low and offered variable bounce, even as rising India opener Yashasvi Jaiswal's fluent 75 off 47 balls stood out in Rajasthan Royals' total of 173/4.

On a slow, tacky Sawai Mansingh Stadium pitch where stroke-making was far from easy, Salt's counterattack stunned the hosts.

He smashed six sixes and five fours in his fiery innings, putting RCB's bowlers under pressure from the start.

His assault, followed by Kohli's ice-cool unbeaten 62 not out off 45 balls (4x4, 2x6), helped RCB chase down 174 with ease, finishing the job in just 17.3 overs.

This was RCB's fourth win of the season -- all coming in away matches.

Salt signalled his intent from the

outset, top-edging Jofra Archer for a six in the opening over and also survived a close lbw shout.

He constantly shuffled across the stumps to access the leg-side and raced to his second fifty of the season in just 28 balls, bringing the required target under 100 in the eighth over.

He had moments of fortune along the way. On 23, a powerful flick ricocheted off Sandeep Sharma's outstretched hand in a tough return catch attempt.

Later, on 40, Jaiswal dropped a sharp low chance at cover, which also offered a run-out opportunity, but the stumps weren't hit. Salt made the Royals pay dearly for those lapses.

Meanwhile, Kohli was happy to play second fiddle, beginning cautiously with just seven off his first six balls.

He too had an early life -- a miscue off Sandeep's slower ball was put down by Riyan Parag at mid-off, a straightforward chance. But the RCB's iconic batter regrouped quickly and settled into his anchor role.

Together, the duo stitched a 92-

run opening stand, with 65 runs coming in the powerplay alone, a phase that decisively tilted the contest RCB's way.

Salt was eventually dismissed for 65, bowled by Kumar Kartikeya, leaving RCB needing just 82 from 68 balls.

From there, Kohli took charge, pacing his innings with 25 singles and picking off the boundaries with surgical precision.

He brought up his landmark 100th T20 fifty in style, dancing down the track to loft Wanindu Hasaranga straight over his head for a boundary. That over, the 15th of the innings, yielded 14 runs and brought the equation down to 28 off 30 balls to seal the result beyond doubt.

Kohli now has 100 fifties and nine centuries from 405 T20 matches.

Earlier, 23-year-old Jaiswal struck 10 fours and two sixes, handling the sluggish track with poise while others around him struggled.

After seeing off a disciplined opening burst from Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Josh Hazlewood, and Yash Dayal, Jaiswal began to open up in

the fifth over with a six and a four off Dayal.

He reached his second fifty of the season in 35 balls and stitched a 56-run stand with Riyan Parag (30 off 18) that came in just 39 balls.

Parag looked fluent with a six and three boundaries but couldn't capitalise on a life on 13, when Dayal dropped a regulation chance at point.

He eventually fell to Dayal's cleverly disguised back-of-the-hand slower ball, miscuing it to Kohli at short cover.

Sanju Samson (13 off 16) endured a scratchy stay, bogged down by seven dot balls and tight bowling. He survived a run-out chance early on but was eventually stumped after misjudging a low delivery from Krunal Pandya.

Jaiswal kept the scoreboard ticking with inventive strokeplay, including a lap and a reverse sweep.

He even scooped Hazlewood for a six over fine leg before falling to him in the same over, missing a sweep and getting trapped plumb in front. (PTI)

Our total score was really good but RCB's intent was better: Samson

JAIPUR, April 13: Rajasthan Royals captain Sanju Samson on Sunday credited Royal Challengers Bengaluru's "better intent" for the visitors' comprehensive nine-wicket win in the IPL here, though he acknowledged that his side's 173-run total was defendable on a tacky Sawai Mansingh Stadium pitch. Phil Salt's explosive 33-ball 65 laid the foundation and Virat Kohli's 100th T20 fifty provided the finishing touch as RCB chased down what looked like a big target without much ado.

"After losing the toss on a slow wicket, 170-odd was a really good score. It was hard to bat in the powerplay," said Samson, following the team's second successive defeat. RCB, though, made merry on the same pitch where the hosts struggled to complete the task with 15 balls to spare and Samson said RR lost the match in the powerplay itself.

"Knew Salt and Kohli would come hard at us. They won the game in the powerplay," he added, without blaming the several dropped catches by his butter-fingered fielders.

"They also dropped our catches. We also dropped their catches. It is okay, they batted better. Have to give it to RCB,



their intent was better. Got to say toss helped. I would have liked to take this game to the 19th or 20th over.

"People have been honest in saying they committed some mistakes. We are in a good mindset. We have to put this game behind us, come back fresh," added Samson.

RCB skipper Rajat Patidar acknowledged the contribution of Kohli, who used his vast experience on domestic pitches to make it a one-sided contest.

"The wicket was not easy to bat, we targeted 150-170. Really enjoyed batting from dugout. The way VK bhai rotated the strike was special. We are not a team that looks at venue, we look to play positive and good cricket," said Patidar.

Devdutt Padikkal, who scored an unbeaten 40 at the back-end and shared an 83-run stand with Kohli, said the win augurs well for the upcoming home game against Punjab Kings on April 18. (PTI)

Madhya Pradesh, Punjab set up title clash in hockey nationals

JHANSI, April 13: Madhya Pradesh and Punjab won their semi-final matches against Manipur and Uttar Pradesh respectively, to set up a title clash in the National Hockey Championship here on Sunday.

In the first semi-final match, Madhya Pradesh defeated Manipur 5-3 to seal their spot in the final.

Captain Yousuf Afifan (5', 34') and Ali Ahmad (7', 15') scored a brace each for Madhya Pradesh, while Mohammad Zaid Khan (49') also contributed with a goal.

Moirangthem Rabichandra Singh (47'), skipper Chinglensana Singh Kanguiam (50') and Laishram Dipu Singh (53') scored for Manipur.

In the other semi-final, Punjab emerged victorious over Uttar Pradesh with a scoreline of 4-3 in a closely contested game.

Jasjit Singh Kular (14', 40') registered a brace for Punjab while Harjeet Singh (22') and Jugraj Singh (45') struck one each. For Uttar Pradesh, Sharda Nand Tiwari (41', 43') added two goals to his tally and Pawan Rajbhar also recorded a goal to his name. (PTI)

Barcelona protect its La Liga lead with a narrow win at Leganes

BARCELONA, April 13: Barcelona eked out a 1-0 win after an own goal from relegation-threatened Leganes to protect its lead in the Spanish league.

Raphinha, Barcelona's breakout player of the season and the Champions League's leading scorer, came through again for Hasni Flick's team in attack -- and defense.

Raphinha's dangerous cross was turned into the net by Leganes defender Jorge Sáenz for the game's only goal in the 48th minute. The Brazil forward then showed hustle when he disrupted a promising pass for Leganes' top scorer, Daniel Rabaseda, late in the first half.

The hard-earned win extended Barcelona's lead to seven points over Real Madrid before the titleholders visit Alaves on Sunday. After this weekend there are seven rounds left, including a "clasico" next month.

"These games are where leagues are won," Barcelona's Éric García said. "It was a night to put the pressure (on Madrid)."

Leganes shocked Barcelona 1-0 in December, during a dip in form by the Catalan club. But since the start of 2025, Barcelona has now gone 24 games without a loss and is in the running for a treble of titles including the Copa del Rey, where it has set up a final against Madrid.

"To win this match was very important," Flick said. "I am really proud about my team. What they are doing the last weeks and months is incredible." Barcelona kept up its momentum before it visits Borussia Dortmund on Tuesday aiming to make good on its 4-0 first-leg win in their Champions League quarterfinal. Sáenz's error spoiled an otherwise strong performance from the southern Madrid side,

which generated more scoring chances than the front-runners.

Like their first match this season, Leganes' five-man backline frustrated the lauded attack of Robert Lewandowski, Lamine Yamal and Raphinha at Butarque Stadium.

At the other end, Barcelona struggled with the counterattacks led by Rabaseda.

Alejandro Balde left with an apparent leg problem in the first half. But his replacement, Gerard Martín, helped decide the match when he stole a ball and sparked the quick attack that finished with Sáenz's own goal.

Flick said that Balde "was not so good" but added that the team would have to wait to see what Sunday's medical exam of the player determined to see if he would be available for the return leg in Dortmund.

Far from rolling over, Leganes continued to threaten. Substitute Diego García sliced a shot just by the far post, and Inigo Martínez had to disrupt a good scoring chance by Munir El Haddadi in injury time.

Martínez said his slide to strip the ball from the Leganes striker "feels like scoring a goal, or even better."

Leganes was left in 19th and two points from safety.

"We leave with our hands empty after having played well against a Barca that wasn't as effective as usual," Leganes defender Renato Tapia said.

Espanyol striker Roberto Fernández, who arrived on loan from Braga in the winter market, scored two goals to lead a 2-0 win at Celta Vigo.

Joan García, who leads the league in saves, added another superb stop to his collection this campaign when he stretched to palm a curler by Iago Aspas over the bar with the visitors up 1-0. (AP)

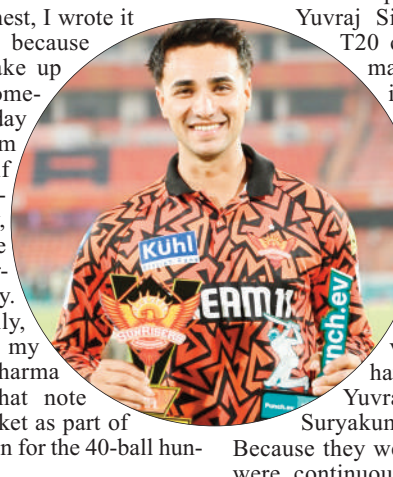
How a random wake-up thought spurred Abhishek to smash record-breaking hundred

HYDERABAD, April 13: It was a 'random' thought Abhishek Sharma wrote in his diary that led him to smash the highest individual score by an Indian in the IPL. Sharma raised the power-hitting bar with a sensational 141 off 55 balls as Sunrisers Hyderabad made short work of the 246-run target set by Punjab Kings to end to their four match losing streak on Saturday. But to his own admission, Sharma too was under pressure to perform after a string of failures and he overcame a bout of sickness to play one of the most memorable knocks in the IPL.

Sharma was running high fever for majority of the six-day break that SRH got ahead of the home game but he woke up on Saturday

envisioning a match-winning contribution.

"To be honest, I wrote it today only because usually I wake up and write something. So, today I got a random thought that if I do something today, that will be for the Orange Army. So, luckily, today was my day," said Sharma who took that note from his pocket as part of his celebration for the 40-ball hundred.



Sharma categorically spoke about the role played by mentor Yuvraj Singh and India's T20 captain Suryakumar Yadav in keeping him in good spirits when the runs were not flowing from his bat.

"To be honest, I was sick for four days. I had tempera- But I am very grateful to have people like Yuvraj Singh and Suryakumar around me. Because they were the ones who were continuously calling me,"

said Sharma when asked about the six day break.

"Because they knew that I can do something like this. But still, as an individual, you can start doubting yourself. But they believed in me and when someone like them believes in you, you obviously start believing again.

"So, it was just a matter of one innings for me," said the south-paw. Sharma had luck on his side as he was dropped once and caught off a no ball before going on to demolish Punjab Kings bowlers all around the park. He admitted to feigning the heat before the game.

"If I say no, it will be a lie. Obviously, there is pressure if you are not doing 3-4 innings well. Espe-

cially if you are losing the match. But, as I said earlier in the ceremony, I didn't feel that there was anyone in the team who was down after losing four games in a row."

Punjab Kings did not bowl enough dot balls on a better of a wicket and not being able to take half chances cost them the match, said spin bowling coach Sunil Joshi. "We knew it was going to be a big scoring game... few catches went down that is a big thing (in a high scoring game like this).

"On a good wicket like this, we need to improve our dot ball percentage. The dot ball percentage could prove to be the difference in the middle overs and we could not latch on our half chances," said Joshi. (PTI)