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● Lebanon, Israel to resume rare direct talks in Washington

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● Voter turnout figures in Bengal so far make me certain that BJP set for landslide victory: Modi

● No one will be able to infiltrate Bengal after BJP wins polls: Shah

Amritpal Singh on two-day police remand

Punjab Police take custody of chief of Waris Punjab De from Dibrugarh jail after NSA expiry

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, April 23: Amritpal Singh, chief of Waris Punjab De and Member of Parliament from Khador Sahib, was taken into two-day police remand by Punjab Police from Dibrugarh Central Jail on Thursday following the expiry of his detention under the National Security Act (NSA).

A Punjab Police team executed the arrest inside the jail in connection with the Ajnala police station attack case.

Singh's three-year NSA detention ended at midnight on April 22, after which he was formally taken into custody and shifted to Dibrugarh Police Station for interrogation.

The transfer was carried out under tight security, involving an 11-vehicle convoy comprising Punjab Police, Assam Police and commandos.

The operation was led by a Deputy Superintendent of Police from Punjab, with Dibrugarh Additional SP (Crime)



Atul Kumar overseeing the process.

The remand will allow investigators to question Singh regarding his alleged role in the Ajnala incident, where a mob reportedly stormed a police station to secure the release of an associate, resulting

in injuries to several police personnel.

Confirming the development, Singh's lawyer Jasbir Kaur said, "Amritpal Singh has been taken into two days police custody by Punjab Police. He will be interrogated at Dibrugarh Police Station in connection with the Ajnala police station attack case. After that, he will be brought back to Dibrugarh Central Jail."

She added that further trial proceedings will be conducted through video-conferencing from Punjab.

The move follows a ruling by the Punjab and Haryana High Court, which allowed Punjab Police to arrest Singh after the expiry of his NSA detention while permitting his continued lodgment in Assam, citing law and order concerns.

Singh has been lodged at Dibrugarh Central Jail since April 2023. He faces multiple charges under the Indian Penal Code, including attempt to murder, assault on public servants and criminal conspiracy. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Zubeen death case

Shymakanu's bail hearing ends, order on April 30

GUWAHATI, April 23: The hearing on the bail application of Shymakanu Mahanta, a key accused in singer Zubeen Garg death case, concluded on Thursday, with the special fast-track court reserving its order till April 30.

The hearing, which began on Wednesday, resumed in the morning, with Mahanta's counsel refuting the prosecution's arguments.

After the hearing concluded in the afternoon, Justice Sharmila Bhuyan reserved the order, stating it would be delivered on April 30.

Mahanta, organiser of the North East India Festival, had moved the bail plea on April 10, a day after the Assam Assembly polls. The court also heard another petition filed by Mahanta seeking the return of his seized documents and personal belongings.

His counsel argued that he should be granted bail as he would cooperate with the investigation and was not a flight risk. They also contended that his incarceration for over seven months war-



ranted relief.

Special Public Prosecutor Ziaur Kamar opposed the plea, saying discrepancies existed between Mahanta's statements and the evidence, particularly regarding the supply of alcohol to the late singer.

Kamar said the accused had claimed

to have sent an email stating Garg should not be given alcohol, but evidence suggested he had asked an Assamese resident in Singapore to purchase a bottle for the singer.

Another accused and the singer's manager, Siddhartha Sharma, filed a corrected bail (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Cong constitutes 7 teams to prevent 'irregularities' during vote counting

GUWAHATI, April 23: The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) has constituted seven special teams to ensure security measures are in place to prevent any irregularities during the vote counting process on May 4.

Following discussions between AICC general secretary and Assam in-charge Jitendra Singh and APCC president Gaurav Gogoi, the special teams were constituted to visit various districts across the state, ahead of the counting of votes for the assembly polls, a party release said on Thursday.

A record 85.96 per cent of Assam's 2.50 crore electorate exercised their franchise in the April 9 assembly polls, the Election Commission had said.

These teams have been instructed to inspect the 'strongrooms', meet party candidates, and hold discussions with district administrations from April 25.

In Upper Assam, the team comprises leader of opposition Debabrata Saikia, Raju Sahu, Upal Gogoi, Rajkumar Nilanetra Neog, David Phukan, and Mri-

tyunjay Duwarah and they will visit Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Charaideo, Jorhat and Golaghat districts.

For the North Bank districts, responsibilities have been assigned to former Rajya Sabha president Ripun Bora, Ghana Burhagohain, J P Das, Shailen Sonowal, Kartik Kurmi, Shankar Kutum, Meghanath Chettri, and Bipul Bora.

In Central Assam and the hill districts, the team includes Shibamani Bora, Diganta Barman, Satyabrata Kalita, Mira Borthakur Goswami, Swapan Kar, Mrinal Hazarika, Akram Hussain, Nirmal Langthasa, Ratan Engti, Augustine Engti, Ashok Teron, Pallav Chetia, and Charlankei Engti.

They will cover Hojai, Nagaon, Morigaon, Kamrup, Kamrup Metropolitan, Nalbari, along with Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong, and Dima Hasao districts.

For Lower Assam, Dhubri MP Rakibul Hussain, Pradip Sarkar, A K Rashid Alam, Deep Bayan, Gajendra Upamanyu, Arun Tiwari, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

BJP stages protest rally against INDIA alliance for opposing women quota bill



GUWAHATI, April 23: The BJP's women's wing in Assam on Thursday staged a rally here in protest against the Congress and the INDIA bloc for stalling the passage of the Constitution (131st

Amendment) Bill, 2026, seeking to implement 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies from the 2029 parliamentary polls.

Members of the party's mahila morcha, along with senior leaders, began the procession from the Veterinary Field at Khanapara and marched through major thoroughfares of the city.

Addressing the gathering, BJP state president Dilip Saikia accused the Congress of failing to take sincere steps to ensure political rights for women despite being in power for decades after Independence. He asserted that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the goal of 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies would soon be realised.

Saikia also accused the Congress and other opposition parties of promoting (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Indian seafarer among crew of ship held by Iran in Strait of Hormuz

NEW DELHI, April 23: At least one Indian seafarer was among the crew of a vessel taken into custody by Iran in the latest maritime escalation near the Strait of Hormuz.

Two of the three foreign-flagged commercial vessels fired upon by Iranian forces in the strait on Wednesday had 22 Indian seafarers, Mukesh Mangal, Additional Secretary in Ministry of Ports, Shipping & Waterways, said at a news briefing.

"All seafarers on board both the vessels are safe," he said. There was no Indian on board the third ship.

Iran on Wednesday captured two foreign container ships seeking to exit the strait and fired at a third one, as a retaliation to United States naval blockade of Iranian ports and capture of Iranian-flagged ships.

Iranian guards boarded and took custody of vessels Francesca and Epaminondas. While there is no Indian on Francesca, one

Indian is among the 21 crew onboard Epaminondas.

The third vessel, Euphoria, a container ship flagged with Panama, has 21 Indian seafarers onboard. "All of them are safe," he said.

Vessel Epaminondas, a container ship flagged with Panama has one Indian seafarer onboard. "He is safe," he said.

Epaminondas has a crew of 21 members made up of mostly Ukrainians and Filipinos and was bound for India. There was one Indian seafarer on this ship. "We have spoken to concerned authorities and he (the Indian seafarer on Epaminondas) is safe," Mangal said.

Epaminondas is also Francesca are on the western side of the Persian Gulf, he said without directly saying that they were in custody of Iranian guards.

The third vessel Euphoria, with 21 Indian seafarers, was on the eastern side, he said. A vessel on western (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Bengal polls phase-1: Close to 90 pc polling amid sporadic clashes, assault on candidates

KOLKATA, April 23: Close to 90 per cent of the 3.60 crore electors turned up to vote in the first phase of the West Bengal Assembly polls till 5 pm on Thursday, held under the shadow of large-scale name deletions under the SIR exercise, sporadic violence and assault on at least three candidates.

The voter turnout is among the highest in recent electoral history of the state.

Polling in 16 districts began at 7 am on Thursday amid tight security to decide the electoral fate of 1,478 candidates, including 167 women, in 152 constituencies of the 294-strong state Assembly.

Long queues outside polling booths reflected strong voter participation in what is being seen as a crucial round in a high-stakes contest between the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the BJP.

The state recorded 89.93 per cent

voter turnout till 5 pm, with the Dakshin Dinajpur district leading with 93.12 per cent polling. With voting slated to continue till 6 pm, political observers said the turnout might cross 95 per cent.

Analysts say the turnout reflects both heightened political mobilisation and the statistical impact of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR), which pruned over 91 lakh names from the voter's list across the state.

The steady climb, from 18.76 per cent in the first two hours to 41.11 per cent by 11 am and 62.18 per cent by 1 pm, underscored a strong voter response across geographies -- from the tea gardens of North Bengal to the communally sensitive belts of Murshidabad and the politically volatile Jangalmahal.

Many of the districts that voted in the first phase had seen significantly higher turnouts in the 2021 Assembly elections

when polling was held in eight phases.

The SIR exercise, which shrank the electorate by nearly 12 per cent, loomed large over the phase. While the Election Commission has maintained that the revision improved the accuracy of the rolls, opposition parties, particularly the TMC, have alleged large-scale disenfranchisement, turning turnout itself into a contested political statistic.

That tension spilled onto the ground in multiple districts.

Clashes, allegations of intimidation and attacks on candidates, including on two of the BJP, were reported from several constituencies, prompting the Election Commission to seek detailed reports even as it maintained that polling was "largely peaceful".

In Birbhum's Khoyrasol, tension escalated dramatically in the final hours after voters alleged that (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Daughter kills mother in Karbi Anglong

Accused held; probe explores motive after brutal attack

HT Correspondent

KHERONI, April 23: In a shocking incident, a young woman allegedly beheaded her mother at Deramukh Lalung village under Kheroni Police Station in West Karbi Anglong, sending shockwaves across the region.

The victim, identified as Anumai Malong, was reportedly asleep when her daughter Puja Malong attacked her with a sharp machete (dao) late on Wednesday night.

According to police and family members, the accused also assaulted her father Premendra Malong and her sister during the incident, leaving them injured.

After the attack, she allegedly fled the house carrying the severed head of her mother and hid in a nearby bamboo grove.

Police reached the spot soon after being informed but could not locate the accused in the darkness. She was tracked down and apprehended early on Thursday morning from the bamboo grove, where she was found in possession of the severed head.

During the search, police recovered the weapon used in the crime along with several items, including a sickle, shampoo packets, oil, a comb, vermilion (sindoor), earthen pots and other materials. The presence of these items has raised suspicion among locals about possible links to superstitious or ritualistic practices.

"It is a total collapse of humanity. Seeing these items suggests something more disturbing," a local resident said, reflecting widespread fear and concern in the area. Police have (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'MODERN NUCLEAR RENAISSANCE'

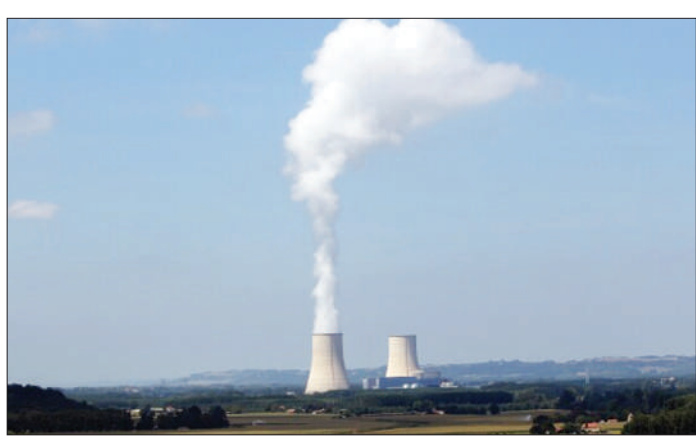
Nuclear energy having global revival 40 years after Chernobyl

BERLIN, April 23: The 1986 Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine fuelled global fears about nuclear power and slowed its development in Europe and elsewhere. Four decades later, however, there's a revival around the world, a trend that has been given a big boost by war in the Middle East.

Over 400 nuclear reactors are operational in 31 countries, while about 70 more are under construction. Nuclear power accounts for producing about 10% of the world's electricity, equivalent to about a quarter of all sources of low-carbon power.

Nuclear reactors have seen steady improvements, adding more safety features and making them cheaper to build and operate.

While Chernobyl and the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan diminished the appetite for such power sources, it was clear



years ago that there probably would be a revival, said Fatih Birol, executive director of the International Energy Agency.

With the war in the Middle East, "I am 100% sure nuclear is coming back," he added.

"It's seen as a secure electricity

generation system, and we will see that the comeback of nuclear will be very strong, both in (the) Americas, in Europe and in Asia," Birol told The Associated Press.

The United States is the world's largest producer of nuclear power, with 94 operational reactors ac-

counting for about 30% of global generation of nuclear electricity. And it is increasing efforts to develop nuclear energy capacity with a goal to quadruple it by 2050.

"The world cannot power its industries, meet the demands of artificial intelligence, or secure its energy future without nuclear power," US Undersecretary of State Thomas DiNanno said last month.

China operates 61 nuclear reactors and is leading the world in building new units, with nearly 40 under construction with a goal to surpass the US and become the global leader in nuclear capacity.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen has acknowledged that it was Europe's "strategic mistake" to cut nuclear energy and outlined new initiatives to encourage building power plants. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



NEW DELHI, April 23: As the world navigates through complex geopolitical challenges, the India-Africa partnership assumes particular significance, and it will be a message of "stability" and "reliability" in a turbulent and uncertain world, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said on Thursday.

Addressing a gathering at the unveiling of the logo, theme and website for the upcoming India-Africa Forum Summit-IV, Jaishankar also asserted that together, India and Africa are not just development partners, but also "partners in shaping a better world".

His comments come in the backdrop of multiple conflicts in various parts of the world, including the one in West Asia that has stretched for more than 50 days with global ramifications.

The logo for the upcoming summit features a lion, superimposed on an image depicting interlocked maps of India and Africa. It carries the theme 'Enduring Partnership Shared Vision' and the date of the summit, May 28-31.

Jaishankar said the upcoming summit presents a "unique opportunity" to further "deepen our engagement". It will offer a platform to shape the next phase of the partnership, "one that is more ambitious, more inclusive and more future-oriented".

"As the world navigates through complex geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges, our partnership assumes particular significance.

"It will be a message of stability in a turbulent world, of reliability in an uncertain one, and of solidarity in difficult times," Jaishankar said.

"Together, India and Africa are not just development partners, but also partners in shaping a better world," he asserted.

The event was attended by several ambassadors and diplomats from various African countries.

Jaishankar also underlined that India has expanded its diplomatic footprint in Africa in recent years by opening 17 new missions across the continent, taking the number of Indian missions in Africa to 46.

He emphasised that Africa occupies a "central place" in India's foreign policy today, and New Delhi's engagement with it is guided by a clear vision, rooted in the principle of equality, and of mutual respect and shared progress.

"We gather here to mark the next chapter in the enduring partnership between India and Africa through the India-Africa Forum Summit framework," he said. The India-Africa relationship is rooted in "our civilisational linkages", nurtured over centuries through cultural exchanges and (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Markets extend losses as crude hits USD 100 amid US-Iran imbroglio; Sensex tanks 852 pts

MUMBAI, April 23: Stock markets fell for the second consecutive day on Thursday, with the benchmark Sensex tumbling 852.49 points, as crude oil prices once again breached the USD 100 per barrel mark amid stalled US-Iran negotiations.

Sustained foreign fund outflows, along with a weak trend in Asian and European equities, also unnerved investors.

The 30-share BSE Sensex tumbled 852.49 points, or 1.09 per cent, to settle at 77,664. During the day, it slumped 942.31 points, or 1.20 per cent, to 77,574.18.

A total of 2,517 stocks declined, while 1,762 advanced and 170 remained unchanged on the BSE.

The 50-share NSE Nifty dropped 205.05 points, or 0.84 per cent, to end at 24,173.05.

"Indian equity markets extended their decline, turning decisively negative as geopolitical tensions intensified. Sentiment deteriorated following stalled Iran peace talks despite US President Donald Trump announcing an indefinite ceasefire extension, which lacked clear confirmation from Iran.

"Escalating concerns around tightening control over the Strait of Hormuz and the continuation of the US naval blockade pushed the Middle East situation back to a critical juncture." Ponmudi R, CEO of Enrich Money, an online trading and wealth tech firm, said.

From the Sensex pack, Trent, Bajaj Finserv, Tech Mahindra,



Mahindra & Mahindra, Infosys and HDFC Bank were among the major laggards.

In contrast, Adani Ports, Larsen & Toubro, Sun Pharma, Bharti Airtel and Bharat Electronics were the winners.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, traded 1.89 per cent higher at USD 103.8 per barrel.

"Indian markets extended their losing streak, with the Nifty witnessing back-to-back bearish sessions and correcting over 400 points across the last two trading days. The price action reflects a clear shift in market tone - from resilience to risk aversion - as global uncertainties intensify and domestic triggers fail to provide immediate support," Hariprasad K, Research Analyst and founder, Livelong Wealth, said.

On the sectoral front, PSU Bank dropped 2.36 per cent, Auto (2.27 per cent), Realty (1.91 per cent), Consumer Discretionary (1.71 per cent), Consumer Durables (1.63 per cent) and Bankex (1.46 per cent). On the other hand, Healthcare jumped 1.66 per cent, Capital Goods (0.40 per cent), Power (0.40 per cent) and Industrials (0.11 per cent).

"Concerns surrounding disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz have significantly dented investor confidence, introducing a fresh layer of uncertainty into global markets. This has directly translated into a spike in crude oil prices. For an

import-dependent economy like India, this creates a dual pressure, rising inflation expectations and stress on corporate margins," Hariprasad said.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹ 2,078.36 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data.

The rupee extended its losing streak for the fourth consecutive session, settling 33 paise lower at 94.11 (provisional) on Thursday.

In Asian markets, South Korea's benchmark Kospi ended higher, while Japan's Nikkei 225 index, Shanghai's SSE Composite index and Hong Kong's Hang Seng index settled lower.

Markets in Europe were quoting lower in mid-session deals.

"Domestic equities witnessed a broad-based decline, as elevated crude prices above USD 100 per barrel, amid the impasse in US-Iran negotiations, continued to weigh on sentiment. The risk-off mood was further intensified by weak global cues, persistent FII outflows, and a depreciating rupee alongside higher US Treasury yields," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Investments Limited, said.

US markets ended higher in overnight trade on Wednesday.

On Wednesday, the Sensex tanked 756.84 points, or 0.95 per cent, to settle at 78,516.49.

The Nifty dropped 198.50 points, or 0.81 per cent, to end at 24,378.10. (PTI)

BitDelta launches crypto platform in India

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 23: BitDelta India has announced its official launch in India, introducing an institutional-grade virtual digital asset (VDA) trading infrastructure aimed at strengthening security and reliability in the rapidly growing crypto market.

Registered as a Virtual Digital Asset Service Provider with the Financial Intelligence Unit - India, the platform positions itself as a security-first and user-centric ecosystem designed to support disciplined participation in digital asset trading.

The company has integrated advanced custody solutions powered by Fireblocks' MPC (Multi-Party Computation) technology, along with a AAA-rated security architecture, to safeguard user assets and transactions.

MAFDA, AIDA call indefinite shutdown in Maharashtra over enforcement drive disruptions

NEW DELHI, April 23: The Maharashtra Fertilizers, Pesticides, and Seeds Dealers Association (MAFDA) and the All India Dealer Association (AIDA) on Thursday called an indefinite statewide shutdown, warning that an ongoing enforcement drive risks disrupting the supply of critical agri-inputs to farmers across the state.

In a show of solidarity, ten major national agri-input associations -- AIDA, BASAL, IMMA, OAMA, PMFAI, SFIA, VIA, MMA, TAPMA, and IAIMA -- operating under the IPNM SPC (Integrated Pest and Nutrient Management Steering and Planning Committee) coalition, have announced a one-day shutdown on April 27. Support has also poured in from associations in other states, according to an official statement. The shutdown is expected to involve over 10,000 manufacturers and 85,000 dealers and distributors in Maharashtra, potentially affecting farm-level availability of fertilisers, pesticides, and seeds.

Industry bodies alleged that dealers are being pressured to push non-subsidised fertilisers alongside subsidised products, and face threats of licence cancellation even when a single pack from an otherwise compliant batch fails quality tests. "There is constant pressure on dealers to push non-subsidised fertilisers along with subsidised products. Even if a single pack from a batch fails quality

parameters, strict actions like licence cancellation are threatened, despite the rest of the batch being compliant," Bipin Kasliwal, General Secretary, Maharashtra All India Dealer and Distributor Association, said.

Kasliwal added that quality issues could stem from storage conditions, climate variations, water exposure, or inadequate handling, but the burden was being placed entirely on dealers, distributors, and manufacturers.

Vijay Thakur, President, OAMA, described the shutdown as "a collective step to safeguard the dignity of agri-entrepreneurs," saying excessive and coercive enforcement was directly harming genuine businesses and the farmers they serve.

Suhas Budde, Convenor, IPNM SPC, said the broad industry support reflected the gravity of the situation.

"A fair, transparent, and balanced regulatory approach is essential to protect both farmers' interests and the stability of the agri-input industry," he said. Industry stakeholders also flagged pre-existing structural concerns, including intentional delays in source registration, introduction of alternative competing products, and hurdles in new business registration issues, which they said have been further compounded by the current enforcement environment. (PTI)

Oil cost losing ₹ 20 on petrol, ₹ 100 on diesel but no plans to raise prices: Govt

NEW DELHI, April 23: State-owned fuel retailers are incurring losses of about ₹ 20 per litre on petrol and roughly ₹ 100 per litre on diesel as pump prices remain frozen for nearly four years despite a surge in global oil prices, the government said on Thursday, signalling there is no immediate plan to raise retail fuel rates.

Dismissing reports of a potential ₹ 25-28 per litre increase in petrol and diesel prices after assembly elections, the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (MoPNG) said in a post on X that "there is no such proposal under consideration by the government".

At a news briefing on developments in West Asia, Sujata Sharma, Joint Secretary in MoPNG, said international prices of crude oil (raw material used to make fuel like petrol and diesel) and LPG rates have been very volatile, yet the government has not increased prices.

Crude which was USD 70 per barrel last year, averaged over USD 113 this month, she said. "There is a huge increase... in spite of that the government has not increased prices and the effort of the government has been to keep the prices stable."

Retail petrol and diesel prices have remained frozen since early April 2022 -- a period during which oil prices rose in some months and fell in other times. When prices fell, state-owned oil firms made handsome profits, which they used to set off losses when rates rose.

Sharma said despite the increase in oil prices after war in West Asia, the government has not increased retail pump rates. "The effort of the government has been to keep the price stable." The sharp increase in prices in international markets, on which India is 88 per cent dependent to meet its oil needs, has led to PSUs incurring under-recoveries on petrol and diesel, she said.

Under-recoveries -- the difference between retail price and the desired rate if domestic prices were aligned with import parity -- vary on daily basis.

"(Under-recovery) may be around ₹ 20 (per litre) on petrol and around ₹ 100 (a litre) on diesel," she said.

She, however, hastened to add that government interventions so far have been to provide stability in terms of

price and it will continue to do that.

The government last month cut tax on petrol and diesel by ₹ 10 a litre each so as to ensure that "the burden of high oil prices are not transferred to consumers," she said.

Alongside, the government also imposed a tax on fuel export so as to "motivate" refiners to prioritise domestic sales, she said. On cooking gas LPG, she said while the Saudi CP -- the benchmark for LPG pricing -- has increased 102 per cent between July 2023 and April 2026, rates in the country have fallen 17 per cent.

"Data is speaking for itself and the effort of the government is also visible," she added.

The clarification came after a report by Kotak Institutional Equities hinted of a steep increase in petrol and diesel prices once the polling for assembly elections in states like West Bengal ends on April 29. Kotak projected a ₹ 25-28 a litre increase in price based on crude oil staying close to USD 120 per barrel. The ministry said such reports are "designed to create fear and panic amongst the citizens and are mischievous and misleading".

"In fact, India is the only country where petrol and diesel prices haven't increased in the last four years," it said. "Government of India and oil PSUs have taken relentless steps in order to insulate the Indian citizens from steep increases in international prices."

International oil prices spiked after the US and Israel attacked Iran on February 28, and Tehran's sweeping retaliation that effectively shut the Strait of Hormuz -- one of the world's most critical energy arteries, linking the Persian Gulf to global markets and handling roughly a fifth of global oil trade along with significant volumes of liquefied natural gas.

After the Iran war, oil prices spiked from around USD 70 per barrel to USD 119 before seeing some correction. Renewed tensions have pushed Brent -- the world's most known crude oil benchmark -- to USD 103-106 per barrel. Despite a more than 50 per cent rise in input crude oil prices, petrol and diesel rates have remained unchanged in India. Petrol is priced at ₹ 94.77 a litre in the national capital and diesel comes for ₹ 87.67. (PTI)

ASUS unveils AI-powered ExpertBook Ultra

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 23: ASUS has launched its flagship business laptop, the ExpertBook Ultra, along with an expanded ExpertBook P series portfolio, aiming to deliver AI-driven performance and a "worry-free" computing experience for enterprises in India.

Positioned as a Copilot+ PC, the ExpertBook Ultra is designed for business leaders and professionals, combining ultra-light design with advanced AI capabilities, high-performance computing, immersive display and audio, all-day battery life, and en-

terprise-grade security.

The device also features military-grade durability and enhanced security support tailored for corporate users.

The company also introduced additions to its ExpertBook P series, including ExpertBook P3 and ExpertBook P5, which focus on scalability and AI-powered productivity for evolving business needs across sectors.

Speaking on the launch, Samson Hu, Global Co-CEO of ASUS, said the company's approach is driven by design thinking that prioritises user needs beyond technical specifications.

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Amritpal Singh on two-day

and is also named in several other cases in Punjab.

Despite being in custody, Singh contested and won the Khadoor Sahib Lok Sabha seat as an Independent candidate in the 2024 general elections and was granted brief parole to take oath in Parliament.

Shymakanu's bail hearing

petition after his earlier application was kept pending due to certain discrepancies. Sharma's bail hearing is scheduled for Friday. Proceedings for framing of charges against the accused will continue on a day-to-day basis in the special fast-track court.

The Gauhati High Court had on March 16 set up an exclusive fast-track sessions court for the case, with logistical support provided by the state government. A five-member special public prosecutors' team, headed by Kamar, had been earlier appointed by the government for the case.

The 52-year-old singer died while swimming in the sea on September 19 last year in Singapore, where he had gone to attend the fourth North East India Festival (NEIF).

Following the incident, the state government appointed a Special Investigation Team (SIT) under Assam Police's CID to probe the death, which filed a chargesheet before a local court here, naming seven accused who are now in judicial custody. Mahanta, Sharma, the singer's two band members, Shekhar Jyoti Goswami and Amrit Prabha Mahanta, face murder charges, while his cousin and suspended Assam Police DSP Sandipan Garg is charged with culpable homicide not amounting to murder.

Garg's two PSOs, Nandeswar Bora and Prabin Baishya, have been charged with criminal conspiracy and criminal breach of trust by misappropriating funds or property entrusted to them. (PTI)

Cong constitutes 7 teams

and Mustafa Khaddam Hussain have been nominated. They will visit Barpeta, Bongaigaon, South Salmara-Mankachar, Dhubri, Goalpara, and Bajali districts, the release said.

In the Barak Valley, Ajit Singh, Abhijit Paul, Aminul Islam, Biswajit Ghosh, Badrul Borbhuyan, Papon Dev, Pradip Gowala, and Hussain Ahmed Choudhury will carry out the responsibilities.

For the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), the team comprises Mehedi Alam Bora, Buddhadev Phandangari, Chohen Brahma, Bhabanath Nath, Stephen Lakra, Umesh Deka, Dipak Kalita, and Satya Nath Kalita. (PTI)

BJP stages protest rally against

dynastic politics, alleging that they had historically prioritised women from their own families. Former Union Minister Bijoya Chakravarty asserted that women must and will secure their rightful place in governance. State BJP Mahila Morcha president Nilima Devi also accused the Congress of being anti-women.

The opposition by the Congress and INDIA alliance to the Nari Shakti Vandan (Amendment) Act, 2026, is a direct affront to women's dignity and aspirations, an insult that the women of this nation will neither forget nor forgive, she said. Their anti-women ideology stands exposed as a hindrance to the nation's progress and inclusive development, she added.

Assam Finance Minister Ajanta Neog and Guwahati MP Bijuli Kalita Medhi were also at the forefront of the procession. NDA allies, including AGP's Purabi Talukdar, BPF's Begum Akhtara Ahmed, Rabha Hasong leaders Sita Rabha and Jonali Rabha also joined the rally. (PTI)

Indian seafarer among crew

side of the strait means it is in Iranian waters and in control of Iranian guards while the one on eastern side means it has sailed off the war zone. "Now you can make out which vessel is where," he said. Asked if the ships taken over by Iranian guards had Indian seafarers, he said, "that you can make out on your own (from the vessel position)."

Tehran said the vessels had violated transit rules or ignored warnings, while maritime sources indicated at least one ship had prior clearance. British maritime security firm Vanguard Tech said the container vessel that came under fire in the Strait of Hormuz was sailing under a Liberian flag and had been informed that it was authorised to transit the waterway.

Iran's semi-official Tasnim news agency, however, reported that the vessel had ignored warnings issued by Iranian forces prior to the incident. The firing followed the seizure of an Iranian commercial vessel by the United States in the Sea of Oman. The IRGC accused Washington of violating the ceasefire and engaging in "armed piracy", alleging that US forces had fired on the Iranian ship and disabled its navigation systems. (PTI)

Bengal polls phase-1: Close to 90

votes cast in favour of the TMC were being registered for the BJP. This triggered protests, a temporary halt in voting and clashes between locals and security personnel. Eyewitnesses said the situation spiralled following an argument between polling officials and voters, with locals gathering outside the booth and staging a protest. While forces intervened to disperse the crowd, stone pelting was reported later, and security personnel resorted to mild force.

Earlier in the day, BJP candidate Suwendu Sarkar was allegedly manhandled in Dakshin Dinajpur's Kumarganj, while BJP MLA Agnimitra Paul's car was attacked in Asansol Dakshin, with stones shattering its rear windpanes -- incidents the party cited as evidence of "targeted violence". The TMC denied the allegations, accusing the BJP of attempting to "engineer" unrest.

Tension escalated further in Naoda when stones were allegedly hurled at the convoy of AJUP chief Humayun Kabir during his visit to a polling area, forcing security personnel to intervene. The incident triggered a brief flare-up, adding to the volatility in the constituency.

Clashes erupted between supporters of the TMC and the Aam Janata Unnayan Party (AJUP), leading to a baton charge by central forces.

Meanwhile, in Birbhum's Labpur and Malda's Chanchal, BJP polling agents were allegedly assaulted by the TMC. In Murari, clashes between Congress and TMC workers left at least two injured. In Domkal, allegations surfaced that voters were prevented from reaching booths, necessitating a security escort.

The Election Commission, facing mounting pressure, reported receiving around 500 complaints by noon, with another 375 through the cVIGIL app. The TMC alone claimed to have lodged over 700 complaints by mid-afternoon, many related to alleged EVM malfunction and the conduct of central forces.

The EVM issue added another layer of political contestation to an already polarised phase where identity, citizenship, and the fallout of voter list revision have overtaken traditional issues like jobs and corruption.

Leader of the Opposition Suwendu Adhikari alleged that "TMC-sheltered criminals" were intimidating voters, while the TMC accused the BJP of using central agencies and forces to influence the electoral process.

District-wise data showed Dakshin Dinajpur recording the highest turnout of over 81 per cent, followed by Murshidabad at around 91 per cent, and Bankura and Cooch Behar, 92 per cent each.

The voter turnout was around 90 per cent in Malda, Jhargram and Paschim Medinipur, while Kalimpong recorded around 81 per cent polling.

The first phase, covering all 54 seats in North Bengal along with key constituencies in South Bengal, is central to the BJP's strategy of consolidating its northern stronghold, where it had surged in 2019 and remained competitive in 2021, and to the TMC's effort to blunt that expansion early in the contest.

In 2021, the BJP had won 59 of these 152 seats against the TMC's 93. (PTI)

Daughter kills mother in Karbi Anglong

taken the accused into custody and launched a detailed investigation to determine the motive, examining angles of mental health issues as well as possible superstition-driven factors.

The incident has highlighted deeper social concerns in remote areas, even as authorities continue their probe into one of the most gruesome crimes reported in the district in recent times.

Nuclear energy having global

Russia, meanwhile, has taken a strong lead in exporting its nuclear know-how, building 20 reactors worldwide. Chernobyl's Reactor No. 4 exploded on April 26, 1986, while Ukraine was still part of the Soviet Union. The accident contaminated nearby areas and spewed radiation across Europe.

Ukraine still relies heavily on nuclear plants to generate about half of its electricity. Those plants have played a vital role after Russia sent troops into Ukraine in 2022.

Moscow's forces have captured Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, and Kyiv accused Russia of a drone attack on the protective containment structure covering the damaged Chernobyl reactor.

Japan has restarted 15 reactors after reviewing the lessons of the earthquake and tsunami that damaged the Fukushima plant, and 10 more are in the process of getting approval to restart.

South Africa has the only nuclear power plant on the African continent, although Russia is building one in Egypt, and several other African nations are exploring the technology.

"The momentum we are seeing today is the result of a growing recognition that reliable, low-carbon electricity will be essential to meet the world's rising energy demand," said Rafael Grossi, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Europe sought to wean itself off Russian energy after the Ukraine conflict, but its dependence on hydrocarbons was underlined by the war in the Middle East.

The European Commission has shifted its perception of nuclear energy and views it as part of clean energy, along with wind and solar power, to achieve climate goals.

In 1990, nuclear energy accounted for about a third of Europe's electricity; now it's only about 15%, and von der Leyen has acknowledged that its reliance on imported fossil fuels puts it at a disadvantage. (AP)

India-Africa partnership will be

human interactions, the external affairs minister said. "Our bonds were further strengthened as India stood in solidarity with the African nations in their struggle against colonialism," he added.

Underlining that the story of India's freedom struggle is also closely linked with Africa, he said, "Our shared history of struggle, solidarity, resilience and aspirations continues to shape our partnership."

The minister underscored that the Viksit Bharat 2047 vision and Africa's Agenda 2063 are complementary roadmaps towards prosperity and progress through sustainable growth and inclusive development.

Jaishankar also said that the engagement between India and Africa has grown across key pillars with numerous high-level political interactions, with India consistently supporting Africa's rightful place in global governance. A "seminal step" in that direction was the inclusion of the African Union in G20 during India's presidency of the grouping in 2023, the minister said.

"It reflected our firm belief that the voices of the Global South must shape global governance in times to come," he added. Jaishankar also asserted that India has placed development cooperation and capacity building programmes at the "core of our partnership".

Defence, security and maritime cooperation play an important role in the engagement between the two sides, driven by the vision of MAHASAGAR to ensure stability in the Indian Ocean Region and safer sea lanes. (PTI)

NAME CHANGE
I have Changed my name from Abdul Hannan Borbhuyan to Abdul Hannan by swearing a Executive magistrate at Srimanta Sankardevnagar, Hojai (Assam) Abdul Hannan's/O- Late Istakar Hussain Vil-Moudanga Pather, P.O.- Borhwar P.S.-Murajhar, Dist-Hojai (Assam).

NAME CHANGE
I, RATUL KUMAR BORA, S/O KHARGESWAR BORA, R/O Birah Bebejia, Nagaon, Assam, have changed my name from RATUL KR BORA to RATUL KUMAR BORA by an affidavit sworn before Executive Magistrate, Nagaon on 02/04/2026. Henceforth, I shall be known by my full name RATUL KUMAR BORA for all purposes.

PROVISION OF ANTI-CLIMBING DEVICE IN MONKEY PRONE AREA

E-Tender Notice No.: TRD/LMG/5 of 2026-27 Dated: 21-04-2026. E-Tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following works:- **Tender No. EL-TRD-LMG-OHE-MOD-58 Dated: 21-04-2026.** Name of work: Provision of anti-climbing device in monkey prone area, Packing Saddle at Calenary Suspension Climp and False Catenary ending modification under ROB/FOB under Lumding Division. **Tender value:** ₹ 3,80,100/- **Date & time of closing tender:** 15.00 hrs. on 14-05-2026. The complete information with tender documents of above e-Tender will be available in www.ireps.gov.in

Sr. DEE/TRD/Lumding
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY
Serving Customers With A Smile

E-AUCTION PROGRAMME FOR THE MONTH OF MAY/2026 OF GSD PANDU DEPOT
The e-auction schedule for Sale of Scrap Lot through e-auction under the jurisdiction of GSD Pandu depot for the month of **MAY/2026** has been fixed as per following details:-

SN	Month/Year	Auction Schedule No	Auction Start Date/Time
1		GSDPNO26N2704	07-05-2026/11:00:00
2	MAY/2026	GSDPNO26N2705	19-05-2026/11:00:00
3		GSDPNO26N2706	28-05-2026/11:00:00

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

Dy. Chief Materials Manager, Pandu
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY
Serving Customers With A Smile

Vote counting for three LACs to begin May 4

Preparatory meeting discusses training, deployment and adherence to EC guidelines

HT Correspondent
SIVASAGAR, April 23: The counting of votes for 95 Demow, 96 Sivasagar and 97 Nazira LACs will start at 8 AM on May 4. The meeting, held for the purpose on Thursday, was chaired by District Commissioner-cum-District Election Officer Mridul Yadav, IAS and was attended by Senior Superintendent of Police Papri Chetia, IPS.

The meeting also discussed the possibility of providing necessary training to the election officers deployed to conduct the counting process smoothly.

In addition, one counting supervisor, counting assistant and micro observer will be deployed at each table through a randomization process as per the Election Commission's directives.

The District Election Officer urged all

concerned to perform their duties with dedication and responsibility. He also asked the representatives of political parties to get informed in advance about the relevant rules.

The meeting was attended by Chief Executive Officer of Zila Parishad and Returning Officer Satish Chandra Thakuria, District Development Commissioner Pavithra Kumar Das, ADC Meenakshi Perme, ADC Lukumoni Bora, Assistant Commissioners Gauripriya Deori, Sontrishna Gharphalia, Rananjay Bharadwaj, Election Officer Aditi Neog, Technical Officer Jagdish Buragohain, and nodal officers of the district.

Our Tezpur Correspondent adds: A review meeting on the preparedness for the upcoming vote counting scheduled on May 4, 2026, was held on Thursday



under the chairmanship of District Election Officer Ananda Kumar Das at the conference hall of the District Commissioner's office, Sonitpur. The meeting was attended by senior district officials, election authorities, concerned cell in-charges and officials from the police administration.

The meeting focused on ensuring comprehensive readiness for the smooth, transparent and efficient conduct of the counting process. Detailed discussions were held on several critical aspects related to the counting arrangements. Key issues deliberated included necessary construction and infrastructural arrangements at the Darrang College counting centre, traffic management planning for the day of counting and finalisation of designated entry and exit routes for officials, candidates/agents and authorised personnel to ensure orderly movement and security.

The District Election Officer also reviewed protocols concerning round-wise counting updates, emphasising strict adherence to Election Commission guidelines to maintain transparency and accuracy in result dissemination. Arrangements for food and refreshments

for officials and staff on duty were also discussed to ensure uninterrupted functioning throughout the counting process.

Further, the preparedness of counting halls for each Legislative Assembly Constituency (LAC) was assessed, including layout planning, table arrangements and necessary facilities. Discussions were also held on manpower engagement, deployment strategies and the status of training for counting personnel to ensure efficiency and error-free operations.

District Election Officer Das stressed the importance of coordination among all concerned departments and directed officials to address any gaps on priority. He reiterated that all arrangements must be completed well in advance, adhering strictly to prescribed guidelines to uphold the integrity of the electoral process.

Sivasagar BJP women's wing criticises Opposition over women's reservation bill



HT Correspondent
SIVASAGAR, April 23: The Sivasagar District BJP women's unit, led by Surovi Rajkumari and Asomi Gogoi, on Thursday strongly criticised the Congress and other Opposition parties for their opposition to the 33% seat reservation for women in the legislature. They said they would continue to raise public awareness about the Opposition's failure to understand the implications of the bill

brought by the NDA government in Parliament. The women leaders added that, unlike the BJP, the Congress party is not at all interested in the upliftment of women in society.

The BJP Women's Morcha vowed to take various actions on the issue in the coming days. The unit said it would send the views of the women of the district to the state office regarding the reservation bill.

Two drug peddlers arrested in Pratapgarh, drugs seized

HT Correspondent
BISWANATH CHARALI, April 23: Acting on a tip-off, a team of Biswanath police managed to apprehend two drug peddlers and seized a total of nine containers containing 10.50 grams of drugs from their possession at the entrance gate of Pratapgarh Tea Estate on Thursday evening.

The apprehended drug peddlers were identified as Mafijul Haque and Suleman Hussain, both originally hailing from Biswanath.

The police team also seized a motorcycle bearing registration number AS 32 A 9474 from their possession.

NFR revises train timings to improve speed, punctuality

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, April 23: Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has undertaken a comprehensive revision of the timings of several Mail/Express and passenger trains across its network with the objective of improving punctuality, enhancing operational efficiency and ensuring faster services for passengers. The revised timings will be implemented from April 27, 2026 for most services, while certain trains will adopt the new schedule from April 24 and April 28, 2026.

The revision covers major divisions including Katihar, Alipurduar, Rangiya, Lumding and Tinsukia and includes a wide range of important train services. Several trains such as Farakka Express, Teesta Torsa Express, Kulik Express, Garib Nawaz Express, Paharia Express, Intercity Express and DEMU passenger services have undergone changes in their arrival and departure timings at multiple stations. These adjustments have been undertaken to enhance operational efficiency, improve punctuality and strengthen connectivity across different sections.

Among the major trains affected by the revision are 15743/15744 (Balurghat-Bhatinda-Balurghat) and 15733/15734 (Balurghat-Bhatinda-Balurghat) Farakka Express, 13063/13064 (Howrah-Balurghat-Howrah) Express, 13161/13162 (Kolkata-



Balurghat-Kolkata) Tebhaga Express, 13053/13054 (Howrah-Radhikapur-Howrah) Kulik Express, 15463/15464 (Balurghat-Haldibari-Balurghat) Intercity Express, 15716 (Ajmer-Kishanganj) Garib Nawaz Express, 15719/15720 (Katihar-Siliguri-Katihar) Intercity Express (via Barsoi), 15710/15709 (New Jalpaiguri-Malda Town-New Jalpaiguri), 13141/13142 (Sealdah-New Alipurduar-Sealdah) Teesta Torsa Express, 75705/75706 (Siliguri-Radhikapur-Siliguri) DEMU Intercity Express and 15721/15722 (New Jalpaiguri-Digha-New Jalpaiguri) Paharia Express along with DEMU passenger and other connecting services.

Under the revised schedule, timings at several stations have been advanced to enable faster running and improved punctuality. For instance, at Gangarampur, timings have been preponed from 11:18/11:20 hours to 11:15/11:17 hours, while at Buniadpur, timings have been advanced from 11:05/11:07 hours to 10:58/11:00 hours. Similar speed-up adjustments have been implemented across multiple sections, resulting in reduced travel time, while timings at some stations remain unchanged to ensure minimal inconvenience.

The details of stoppages and timings of these trains are available on the IRCTC website and are also being notified in various newspapers and social media platforms of N.F. Railway. Passengers are requested to verify the details before undertaking their journey. NFR remains committed to safe, efficient, and passenger-friendly services, continually enhancing the travel experience across the region.

DRSC reviews road safety measures in Tamulpur

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, April 23: The monthly meeting of the District Road Safety Committee (DRSC) of Tamulpur district was held on Thursday in the conference hall of the Deputy Commissioner's office, Tamulpur. The meeting was chaired by the District Commissioner and Chairperson of the District Road Safety Committee, Simi Karan, IAS.

During the meeting, detailed discussions were held on the current road safety scenario in the district, the causes of road accidents and the measures to prevent them. The Police Department presented statistics and analysis of road accidents, stating that 10 accidents were reported in the district during the past month. The District Commissioner reviewed the causes of these accidents and discussed preventive measures with the concerned departments.

Emphasis was laid on taking strict action against traffic rule violators, strengthening regular vehicle checking and enhancing awareness. The Transport Department informed that accident-prone areas have been identified and necessary measures such as installation of signages and speed breakers will be undertaken at those locations. The Health Department highlighted steps to improve immediate medical response following accidents.

It was also decided to intensify road safety awareness programmes in schools through the Education Department, which are already ongoing. Officials from various departments attended the meeting and shared their views. At the end of the meeting, the importance of public cooperation in ensuring road safety was strongly emphasised.

'Accounts and Activity Management' workshop held at Bodoland University

NSS programme officers trained on PFMS, reporting and activity management

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, April 23: A day-long workshop on 'Accounts and Activity Management' was held on Thursday in the Department of Chemistry, Bodoland University, organised by the National Service Scheme (NSS) Cell of Bodoland University. The workshop was attended by 31 Programme Officers, Assistant Programme Officers and office assistants from 21 colleges affiliated to Bodoland University having NSS units.

The workshop was inaugurated by Prof Babu Lal Ahuja, Vice Chancellor of Bodoland University. He shared his experiences as a former Programme Officer during his earlier career and narrated suggestions regarding NSS activities. He also highlighted key NSS rules and urged the participants to study them in detail.

Omar Faruk, Internal Auditor, Directorate of Sports and Youth Welfare, Assam, who attended as resource person from Guwahati, outlined the objectives of the workshop. The welcome address and purpose of the workshop were presented by Prof Hiloljoyti Singha, Programme Coordinator (Asst) of the NSS Cell, BU, while the vote of thanks was delivered by Dr Anosh Narzary, Programme Officer of Bengtol College, Bengtol.

The workshop also served as an interactive platform where Programme Officers introduced themselves and discussed operational challenges. They shared issues and interacted with the resource person, with assistance from Detsinfa Basumatary, Assistant Cashier, Bodoland University, for possible solutions.

Prof Hiloljoyti Singha delivered a lecture on making reports more innovative, effective and meaningful and on planning activities beyond routine programmes. Hands-on training on the Public Financial Management System (PFMS) was provided by Omar Faruk with assistance from Detsinfa Basumatary.

During the valedictory session, conducted by Dr Hemaprobha Saikia, Programme Officer, NSS Unit, BU, feedback was formally presented by Dr Anosh Narzary. Omar Faruk expressed satisfaction over the participation of most college Programme Officers and suggested that such workshops should be held annually.

Prof Hiloljoyti Singha later summarised the workshop and certificates of appreciation were distributed to all participants. The vote of thanks was delivered by Dr Joydip Narzary, Programme Officer, NSS Unit, BU.



Nagaon administration briefs parties on vote counting arrangements

HT Correspondent
NAGAON, April 23: The Nagaon district administration held an important meeting on Thursday with representatives of various political parties and contesting candidates to discuss preparations for the assembly election vote counting scheduled for May 4.

The meeting, chaired by District Commissioner Devashish Sarma, clearly informed all representatives that mobile phones will be strictly prohibited inside counting halls. No one will be allowed entry into the centres without valid identity cards issued for the election.

Three centres have been designated for the seven Assembly constituencies in Nagaon district. In Dawson Higher Secondary and Multi Purpose School, counting for Dhing, Rupahihat and Samaguri constituencies will be conducted simultaneously in separate halls, while in Nagaon Government Girls' Higher Secondary School, counting for Nagaon-Batadroba and Raha constituencies will be held. In Nagaon Government Boys' Higher Secondary School, counting will be carried out for Barhampur and Kaliabor constituencies. Each constituency will have 14 counting tables, with counting proceeding on all tables at the same time.

Political parties or candidates may appoint one counting agent per table. In addition, one agent may be appointed for the Returning Officer's table, one for each postal ballot counting table and one agent per constituency for checking QR codes on EVMs.

The list of agents, along with copies of photo ID and passport-size photographs, must be submitted to the District Commissioner's office by 12 PM on April 27. Postal ballot counting will begin at 8 AM, followed by EVM counting. The District Commissioner urged political parties to refrain from victory processions and bursting firecrackers after counting and sought everyone's sincere cooperation to complete the counting process peacefully, upholding India's democratic traditions.

CEO, Nagaon Zila Parishad Manoj Sikaria, District Development Commissioner Debajani Choudhury, Additional Commissioners, Election Officers, other officials and representatives of all political parties attended the meeting chaired by DC Devashish Sarma.

Nagaon DC reviews poor HSLC results

HT Correspondent
NAGAON, April 23: District Commissioner Devashish Sarma on Thursday held a review meeting with the heads of schools in Nagaon district where less than 30% of students passed the recent High School Leaving Certificate (HSLC) Examination. The meeting, held at the District Library auditorium was attended by principals or headmasters of 39 such schools. The DC examined the results of these schools for the past three years and sought explanations from each school head.

Addressing the gathering, DC Sarma said efforts would be made to resolve issues related to teacher transfers and appointments if such problems exist. However, he urged them to perform the "sacred duty" of teaching with dedication, stating that poor results ruin both the future of students and the image of the teaching community.

He made it clear that students' exam results must improve. A repeat of this will not be tolerated under any circumstances, he further warned. The DC expressed deep concern over three government schools in the district recording zero pass percentages.

The meeting, conducted by Inspector of Schools Mridul Kumar Nath, was also attended by Additional Commissioner Gopal Sarma.

Obituary

Srimanta Deka, a noted social worker, former president and adviser of the Kamrupiya Sanatan Dharma Mandali and an actor who once shared the stage with cultural stalwarts, passed away on Wednesday night at a private hospital in Tezpur. He was 94. A resident of Ushanagar, Deka had been undergoing treatment for age-related ailments for the past 15 days. He breathed his last at around 10:30 PM. A dedicated social worker, Deka was closely associated with the Kamrupiya Sanatan Dharma Mandali, a prominent religious, cultural, and social institution of Tezpur. He also actively participated in theatre and performed female roles on stage.

Deka is survived by his wife, two sons, grandchildren and a host of relatives and admirers.

Locals raise concerns on pollution, demand safeguards and job opportunities in Dhubri

Public hearing on environmental clearance for 3200 MW Adani power project

HT Correspondent
BILASIPARA, April 23: A public hearing on environmental clearance for the proposed 3200 MW (4x800) coal-based ultra supercritical thermal power project of Adani Power Limited was held at Charuabakhra under Chapar Revenue Circle in Dhubri district on Thursday.

The hearing was conducted by the Assam Pollution Control Board (APCB) at the project site located at the playground of Charuabakhra Primary Health Booth (Old), under Chirakuta Gaon Panchayat. The programme began at around 11:30 AM and witnessed the participation of a large number of local residents from Charuabakhra, Santoshpur, Chirakuta and adjoining areas.

During the hearing, people expressed their views, concerns and suggestions regarding environmental impact, pollution control measures and livelihood issues. Several speakers highlighted the need for proper safeguards to protect the environment and local communities.

It may be mentioned that the proposed thermal power project



will be set up across Charuabakhra, Chirakuta-I & II and Santoshpur areas under Chapar Revenue Circle. The Assam government has already cleared nearly 5,000 bighas of land through an eviction drive for the project, which is expected to be one of the largest thermal power plants in Northeast India.

Senior officials from the Pollution Control Board, district administration and other concerned departments were present during the hearing. While many locals and organisations welcomed the project for its development potential, they also urged the company to prioritise employment opportunities for educated local youth.

Officials associated with the project assured that advanced scientific and environmental protection measures would be implemented to minimise pollution and ensure sustainable development.

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QUOTE OF THE DAY

The universe seems neither benign nor hostile, merely indifferent. - Carl Sagan

Trump-Pope conflict

The conflict between President Trump and Pope Leo XIV is unprecedented. While popes have commented on politics before, Trump's personal insults toward the Pope are unusual. Although reports suggest his tone has softened, his discomfort is still clear. In 250 years of US history, no president has personally attacked a Pope. Such public disagreements create only confusion. Trump publicly condemned Pope Leo XIV after the Pope criticised the actions of the US and Israel regarding Iran. This marked a significant confrontation. The conflict between President Trump and Pope Leo XIV is unprecedented in modern history, highlighting a rare clash that blends political power with religious symbolism, which can deeply influence public opinion and faith communities. Catholics, as the largest swing voting group, are affected by this dispute, which could influence their voting decisions and shape future election outcomes. Tensions peaked during Holy Week, further shaping public opinion and underscoring their stake in the conflict. Trump also criticised the conclave, arguing that Leo was "selected" by the Church to "match Trump's presence. All the major cardinals and bishops who made statements are supporting the Pope and criticising Trump." The President's approval rating among white Catholics dropped from 59% in February 2025 to 36% in January 2026, and among Hispanic Catholics, it fell from 31% to 23%. Tensions rose when Trump accused Pope Leo of being "weak on crime and ineffective in foreign policy," likely in response to calls from Catholic leaders for more compassion in his immigration policies.

Earlier, many Popes have criticised political leaders, though this is rare. Pope Leo has called for peace and has publicly opposed the ongoing U.S.-led war against Iran. It is unclear why Trump claims that Leo supports nuclear weapons in Iran. Pope St. John Paul II called for solutions to conflicts in the Middle East and Lebanon in 1979 while addressing the United Nations on Human rights. In 2013, Pope Francis led a peace vigil for Syria and wrote to President Putin to oppose military actions. After a chemical attack in 2017 that killed about 70 people, he expressed his outrage and urged leaders to stop the violence, saying that he does not hear the prayers of those who wage war.

Pope Leo criticised leaders who waste billions on war, stating that the world is "being ravaged by a handful of tyrants." These strong remarks were made during his visit to Cameroon, where he condemned those who misuse "the very name of God" for their own gain. Pope Leo has been a strong critic of warfare in general, particularly condemning the combat operations launched by the US and Israel during their surprise attack against Iran on February 28. He also labelled Trump's threat to destroy Iran's "whole civilisation" as "truly unacceptable."



DEGREE OF THOUGHT
By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

One of the most crucial and sensitive issues in India's economic structure and Centre-State relations is the question of ownership and control over natural resources. Even after nearly eight decades of independence, the economic backwardness of a resource-rich state like Assam raises a profound question. Assam is endowed with natural gas, crude oil, coal, tea, and abundant water resources. However, it is unfortunate that instead of utilizing these vast resources as instruments of its own economic advancement, they have primarily been used as a major source of revenue generation for the Central Government. In India's federal system, the policies governing the control and management of resources are largely centralized. As a result, the state has been deprived of the true value of the resources found within its own land. From a realistic perspective, it becomes evident that the lion's share of profits generated from resources extracted from Assam flows to large corporate groups and the Central Government, while the state receives only a fixed rate of royalty or nominal tax. This system has created a form of economic disparity where, despite being the owner of resources, Assam remains dependent on central grants. The dominance of the Central Government in the process of resource extraction is so overwhelming that the role of the state government is reduced almost to that of a silent spectator. For instance, in the case of mineral resources, the authority to determine royalty rates lies entirely with the Centre. Often, these rates are not revised for years, resulting in the state's earnings becoming negligible in comparison to inflation. On the other hand, the vast difference between the base value of resources and the market value of the finished products does not benefit the state in any significant way. This system not only undermines Assam's economic autonomy but also adversely affects critical sectors such as infrastructure development, education, healthcare, and employment generation.

The sector that has had the most significant impact on Assam's economy is the oil and natural gas sector, and it is precisely in this sector that the Central monopoly is most evident. Assam produces a considerable share of India's crude oil and natural gas. Major central public sector enterprises like Oil India Limited and ONGC have been extracting millions of tons of crude oil from Assam's soil for decades. However, the royalty that Assam receives in return is extremely minimal compared to the actual international market value of oil. More importantly, the large-scale industrial development that should have taken place based on this resource has not occurred in Assam but in other parts of the country. A glance at history shows that pipelines were laid to transport Assam's crude oil to Barauni in Bihar for refining, and the people of Assam had to sacrifice their lives to secure a refinery within the state. This clearly demonstrates that the policies of the

Central Government have always been focused on extracting raw materials from Assam rather than establishing industries within the state to generate employment. Even today, the same situation prevails in the case of natural gas. Industries outside Assam benefit from the state's gas, while many regions within Assam still lack adequate gas supply and infrastructure for industrial use. Moreover, the environmental damage caused by oil and gas extraction is borne entirely by the people of Assam. Incidents like the devastating fire and gas leak in Baghjan stand as stark evidence of this reality. During such disasters, the scale of environmental destruction and human suffering is immense, yet the compensation and future safety measures remain grossly inadequate. The Central Government collects substantial revenue from excise duties, cess, and other taxes on crude oil, but only a very small portion of it returns to Assam. While rising oil prices enrich the Central treasury, the state gains little direct financial benefit. This entire process effectively nullifies a state's rightful ownership over its resources and reduces it to a colonial-style extraction zone, which cannot be considered a feature of a healthy federal economy.

The tea industry is another pillar of Assam's economy, where a continuous process of resource outflow has persisted since the British era, and even after independence, central policies have only reinforced this system rather than reforming it. Assam produces more than half of India's total tea output and serves as a major source of foreign exchange earnings for the country. However, the majority of the profits generated from the tea industry are not reinvested in Assam. Most large tea companies have their headquarters in cities like Kolkata, Mumbai, or Delhi. This means that tea is produced on Assam's soil, the laborers of Assam toil tirelessly, but the taxes and corporate profits generated from tea sales flow to the Central Government, leaving the state with little direct financial gain. Even after the establishment of a tea auction center in Guwahati, a large portion of premium tea is still sold through auction centers outside the state. Furthermore, the living standards of millions of tea garden workers remain extremely poor. While large companies accumulate wealth and the Centre earns revenue from their labor, there is little evidence of strong policies or commitment from the Central Government to ensure workers' health, education, and fair wages. The significant financial allocation that should have been made for the development of tea garden infrastructure by the Centre remains largely unrealized. Meanwhile, small tea growers have made substantial contributions to Assam's tea production in recent times, yet they continue to face neglect in terms of support prices, market access, and basic facilities. Tea is not merely an agricultural product; it is a major industry that sustains the livelihoods of millions in Assam. However, the Centre has largely viewed it only as an export



commodity for revenue and foreign exchange generation. The unique brand value of Assam tea has not been effectively leveraged at the international level to strengthen the state's local economy. As a result, despite possessing such a valuable resource, the transformative impact it could have had on Assam's rural economy has not been realized.

A similar pattern of central dominance and exploitative policy is evident in the management of Assam's water resources, forest wealth, and other minerals. Major rivers like the Brahmaputra and Barak are invaluable assets for the state, yet they have primarily been viewed by the Centre as instruments for hydroelectric power generation. Large dam projects like the Lower Subansiri are clear examples of this approach. Central agencies have undertaken the construction of massive dams along the Assam-Arunachal border with the aim of generating electricity, which is largely fed into the national grid and used to power industries in other states. However, the responsibility for the downstream impacts—such as floods, erosion, and environmental threats faced by the people of Assam—is not fully assumed by the Centre. The recurring flood problem in Assam has still not been recognized as a national issue, and adequate financial support for a permanent solution has not been provided. Similarly, in the name of coal mining, extensive environmental destruction has taken place in regions like Margherita, Digboi, and the Dehing Patkai forest due to unregulated activities by centrally controlled entities. While the revenue from coal goes to the Centre, local communities suffer from pollution and health hazards. The situation is no different for forest resources. Instead of promoting value addition and developing local industries based on valuable timber and medicinal plants, these resources are largely transported out as raw materials. All these developments clearly indicate that in India's current federal framework, a resource-rich state has very limited control over its own assets. The state lacks authority to regulate extraction, determine prices, or utilize resources according to its own needs. This monopolistic system has gradually depleted Assam's resources without providing the strong economic and infrastruc-

tural foundation that the state rightfully deserves. Addressing this situation requires not emotional rhetoric or political blame games, but a realistic economic analysis and a strong, data-driven negotiation with the Centre to assert Assam's rightful share.

Balanced development in a vast and diverse country like India demands equitable distribution of resources between the Centre and the states; otherwise, severe economic disparities are inevitable. In the context of Assam, addressing this imbalance requires fundamental reforms in the existing policies of resource extraction and central taxation. First, the mechanism for determining royalty on mineral resources must be revised and directly linked to current market prices so that the state's revenue automatically increases with price fluctuations. Second, corporate entities operating in Assam and utilizing its natural resources must be mandated to spend their entire Corporate Social Responsibility funds within the state on sectors like education, healthcare, and skill development. Additionally, instead of exporting raw materials, the Centre should facilitate the establishment of value-added industries within Assam, creating large-scale employment opportunities for local youth. In the tea sector, policies should be formulated to encourage companies to shift their headquarters to Assam, ensuring that the state receives its rightful share of tax revenues. Regarding water resources, the Centre must adopt a comprehensive approach that considers flood control, inland water transport, and agricultural development alongside hydropower generation. The issue of central monopoly over Assam's resources cannot be resolved through emotion or political slogans alone. It demands sustained and rigorous engagement with the Centre, grounded in accurate data, legal reasoning, and economic analysis. The state government and its representatives must assertively present these concerns in Parliament and other national platforms. Until Assam secures its rightful ownership and fair economic returns from its resources, true development will remain elusive. Establishing this just claim over its resources is the most crucial and necessary step toward securing Assam's economic future.

The evolving bond between India and South Korea



AUTHOR
By: Satyabrata Borah

The world today feels like a ship navigating through a heavy fog where the waves of change are both constant and unpredictable. In this shifting landscape, the partnership between India and South Korea has emerged as a steady anchor for both nations. Looking at the map, these two countries might seem far apart, separated by vast stretches of sea and land, but their current connection is deeper than simple geography. They find themselves at a unique crossroads in 2026, where shared democratic values and a mutual desire for stability are drawing them closer than ever before. This bond is no longer just about selling cars or electronics; it is about two major Asian powers realizing they are much stronger when they face the world together.

For years, the story of India and South Korea was primarily a business ledger. We saw Samsung phones in every hand and Hyundai cars on every street corner. While that economic success provided a solid foundation, the relationship often felt a bit one-sided. India frequently spoke about a growing trade deficit, feeling that while it welcomed Korean goods with open arms, its own products and services were meeting invisible walls. This created a sense of imbalance that needed a human touch to fix. Leaders in both New Delhi and Seoul have finally recognized that a partnership cannot survive on trade alone if one side feels left behind. They are now working to rewrite the rules of their economic engagement to ensure that growth feels fair and inclusive for everyone involved. One of the most exciting shifts in recent times is how the two nations are thinking about security. It is a reality that the Indo-Pacific region is becoming a focal point of global tension. Rather than acting as bystanders, India and South Korea are stepping up to coordinate their efforts. They are aligning India's Act East Policy with South

Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy, creating a shared vision for a region that is free and open. This is a significant move because it shows a transition from being passive observers to being active architects of their own destiny. They are talking more frequently about maritime safety, keeping trade routes open, and ensuring that no single power can dictate the rules of the ocean.

Technology is another area where the two are finding a common language. We often think of South Korea as a hardware giant and India as a software powerhouse. In the past, these were parallel tracks that rarely met. Today, they are merging. The launch of the India-Korea Digital Bridge is a perfect example of this new energy. It represents a real effort to combine Korean manufacturing precision with Indian digital ingenuity. They are looking at things like semiconductors, where India wants to build its own chips and South Korea has the world-class expertise to help make that happen. This collaboration is born out of a realization that relying on a single source for critical technology is a risk neither can afford to take.

This cooperation extends to the very stars above us. The partnership between the Indian Space Research Organisation and the newly formed Korea Aerospace Administration is a testament to how high their ambitions have grown. By sharing knowledge and resources in space exploration, they are proving that the sky is not a limit but a new frontier for their friendship. Whether it is monitoring the climate from above or developing new satellite technologies, this work is about solving modern problems using the best minds from both cultures. It is a reminder that when two nations decide to trust each other, they can reach heights that seemed impossible just a decade ago.

In the defense sector, the relationship is moving from a buyer-seller dynamic to one of genuine partnership. The success of the K9 Vajra howitzers, built in India through a collaboration with South Korean firms, showed everyone what was possible. Now, they are looking to replicate that success in other areas like shipbuilding and advanced defense systems. India's push for self-reliance in defense fits perfectly with South Korea's desire to find reliable partners for joint production. This isn't just about making weapons; it is about building a secure supply chain that can withstand global shocks. It is about knowing that your partner has your back when the world becomes uncertain.

While the big deals and high-level summits get the headlines, the heartbeat of the relationship remains the

people. For a long time, there was a gap in how well the two societies actually knew each other. South Korean culture, through music and films, has seen a massive surge in popularity across India. At the same time, more Indian professionals are finding homes in Seoul and Busan. There is still work to do in making these two cultures truly understand each other on a human level. Addressing concerns about social integration and making it easier for students and professionals to move between the two countries is essential. A partnership built only on steel and silicon is brittle; one built on friendships and shared experiences is resilient.

The road ahead is not without its bumps. There are still bureaucratic hurdles to clear and trade imbalances to iron out. Negotiating an upgrade to their trade agreement is a slow process that requires patience and a willingness to see things from the other person's perspective. India wants better market access for its medicines and agricultural products, while South Korea seeks a more predictable regulatory environment in India. These are the kinds of honest conversations that friends must have. The fact that they are having these discussions openly is a sign of a maturing relationship. They are no longer avoiding the tough topics; they are leaning into them.

As we look at the geopolitical storms gathering on the horizon, the coordination between New Delhi and Seoul offers a glimmer of hope. They are showing that middle powers can play a decisive role in maintaining global peace. By choosing to collaborate on everything from green energy to artificial intelligence, they are setting an example of how modern nations should interact. They are moving away from the old ways of thinking where one side wins and the other loses. They are building a future where both can thrive together. This is a journey of two nations that have found in each other a reliable companion for the long walk ahead.

The bond between India and South Korea is becoming a story of shared resilience. It is about two vibrant democracies that refuse to be defined by the pressures of others. They are choosing to chart their own course, driven by the needs of their people and a shared vision of a stable world. As they continue to bridge the distance between them, they are proving that distance is just a number when there is a common purpose. The Special Strategic Partnership is finally starting to live up to its name, transforming from a formal title into a living, breathing reality that impacts the lives of millions in both countries.

Reframing Tradition: The visual culture of Srimanta Sankaradeva in the New Media Age

In the contemporary period, the fusion of new media technology and old art methods has created revolutionary opportunities for cultural reinterpretation. A powerful foundation for analyzing this intersection is provided by the visual culture of Srimanta Sankaradeva, a key figure in Assamese cultural and spiritual history. Sankaradeva's artistic contributions go beyond religious instruction to include ecological awareness, ethical living, and socio-cultural cohesiveness. All are rooted in devotional aesthetics and community-oriented expressiveness. The article examines how postmodern digital platforms can recontextualize his visual idioms as they appear in manuscript painting, performative practices and symbolic motifs. The evolving role of traditional painting as a dynamic medium fosters sustainability, ecological consciousness and cross-cultural dialogue by situating Assam's cultural heritage within a global media framework.

AUTHOR

By: Dr Aditi Deka Pathak

Scholarly discussion has long focused on the link between tradition

and modernity, especially in relation to visual culture. The emergence of digital technologies in recent decades has made this relationship even more complex, presenting traditional art forms with both opportunities and constraints. Cultural narratives can be expanded and reinterpreted in addition to being preserved when modern media is incorporated with indigenous customs.

A key figure in this discussion is Sankaradeva (1449 CE–1568 CE), an Assam's saint, scholar, artist, and reformer. From manuscript illustrations to theatrical productions, his contributions to visual culture represent a blend of spirituality, aesthetics, and social transformation. The creative manifestations are alive customs that still shape identity today of Assam, not just historical relics. The goal of the study is to investigate how postmodern artistic practices and new media might be used to redefine Sankaradeva's visual culture. It contends that this kind of interaction not only revitalizes classic aesthetics but also brings them into line with modern issues like global communication and ecological sustainability.

The Neo-Vaishnavite Bhakti movement in Assam is a socio-religious movement that is closely linked to Sankaradeva's creative heritage. His visual culture, which aims to convey spiritual principles to a wide audience, is distinguished by simplicity, symbolic richness, and accessibility. The tradition of illustrated manuscripts, especially the Bhagavata Purana, is one of the most important facets of Sankaradeva's visual culture. The manuscripts include elaborate illustrations that illustrate devotional themes, moral lessons and mythological stories. A distinctive, didactic and emo-

tive aesthetic language is shown in the use of natural pigments, stylized figures and rhythmic compositions (Neog, 1980).

Ankiya Naat and Sattriya dance are two examples of the performative arts that Sankaradeva has influenced. In order to provide a comprehensive creative experience, these forms incorporate visual components such as stage design, mask-making and costumes. For example, the masks (mukha) used in performances are visual representations of philosophical ideas rather than just theatrical props (Barua, 1969).

Sankaradeva founded the Satras, or Vaishnavite monasteries, which serve as hubs for the creation of art and the dissemination of culture. The visual arts are practiced collectively here, with a focus on community involvement and continuity. Sankaradeva's visual culture differs from individualistic artistic traditions due to its community perspective. The questioning of great narratives, hybridity and fragmentation are characteristics of the postmodern era. Traditional art forms are now seen as dynamic, reinterpretible beings rather than as unchanging or sacrosanct.

The merging of many styles, media and cultural allusions is encouraged by postmodern aesthetics. This framework highlights the versatility of Sankaradeva's visual idioms. For example, digital storytelling genres like animation and interactive media can adopt the narrative structure of manuscript paintings. Postmodern approaches aim to dissect and reinterpret heritage rather than preserve it in its original form. This enables artists to interact creatively with Sankaradeva's visual culture, challenging and deepening its interpretations.

There are previously unheard-of possibilities for cultural innovation and transmission when traditional painting is combined with contemporary media technology. Static photographs can be transformed into dynamic narratives thanks to digital platforms. The stories of Sankaradeva, which were first told in manuscripts, can be made into animated movies so that people all around the world can see them. This enhances the visual impact of the narratives while simultaneously ensuring their preservation.

Multimedia installations are being used more and more by contemporary artists to rework classic subjects. Sankaradeva's visual patterns can be explored in immersive settings through the use of interactive elements, sound and video. The spread of traditional art forms is greatly aided by social media platforms. Artists and academics can interact with a worldwide audience by disseminating digital representations of Sankaradeva's visual culture, promoting intercultural communication.

Sankaradeva's emphasis on ecological

balance is among its most captivating features. His visual stories frequently show a harmonious coexistence of nature, the divine and humanity. Sankaradeva's visual culture frequently features natural elements like rivers, trees and animals. These components are more than just ornamental; they represent sustainability and connectivity (Bordoloi, 1995).

The teachings of Sankaradeva place a strong emphasis on humility, compassion and respect for all living things. His artwork promotes an ethical approach to environmental care by artistically representing these ideals. Sankaradeva's ecological vision provides important insights in the context of worldwide environmental challenges. Artists may produce powerful messages that connect with modern audiences by incorporating these ideals into new media.

Sankaradeva's visual culture is still relevant despite being localized in Assam. Conversely, it offers a distinct viewpoint that advances international cultural dialogue. Sankaradeva's artistic creations are based on the rich cultural legacy of Assam. Artists help to strengthen regional identity by conserving and publicizing this legacy.

Beyond Assam, Sankaradeva has shaped Indian spiritual and cultural traditions. His visual culture is a fusion of national and regional identities. Traditional art forms are interacting with audiences around the world more and more in the era of globalization. When exhibited through new media, Sankaradeva's visual culture serves as a platform for intercultural communication and comprehension.

Sankaradeva's visual culture has been reframed in the context of new media, highlighting the transformational power of tradition. Artists and academics may maintain cultural legacy while tackling modern issues by fusing traditional painting with digital tools. In the modern world, Sankaradeva's emphasis on ecological balance, moral behavior and community involvement is still very pertinent (Borghain, 2003).

The classical art forms are dynamic, changing mediums that can interact with contemporary discourse rather than static relics. The significance of cultural creativity and adaptability is shown by the convergence of Assam's cultural legacy with international media environments. In the end, Sankaradeva's visual culture acts as a link between tradition and modernity, local and global and the past and present.

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The war in Iran has triggered a helium crisis globally

By: Freddy Brewster

A crucial resource is being choked off from the world amid the ongoing conflict between the United States and Iran — and it's not oil. It's helium.

The rare, non-renewable gas is a key ingredient for more than just party balloons. It's needed for life-saving medical procedures, groundbreaking research, and the current tech boom underpinning much of the U.S. economy. The gas was also vital in the recent Artemis II mission that sent four astronauts around the moon and back.

But the war in Iran has cut off a significant portion of global helium resources, leading to a 50 percent price increase and warnings of a debilitating supply shortage. And although the United States and Iran are working to open key shipping routes in the region, the arrangement is far from certain, and the month-long closure that has already transpired will still lead to supply shocks.

The crisis could have been avoided — if the United States had kept its Federal Helium Reserve, a national stockpile that accounted for nearly 40 percent of the world's supply in 2013 and helped stabilize supply and prices.

For nearly thirty years, scientists, medical experts, and researchers urged lawmakers to preserve the national stockpile. Lawmakers instead spent that time selling it off bit by bit.

The privatization effort started in 1996 with the backing of President Bill Clinton, House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA), and the archconservative group that would go on to write Project 2025.

As the plan moved forward over the subsequent decades, federal agencies and congressional analysts failed to accurately forecast future helium demand, repeatedly promising that the private sector could meet industry needs — despite four global helium shortages that limited lifesaving procedures and forced universities to lay off researchers between 2006 and 2023.

The country sold off the last of its helium stockpile in 2024. Now, less than two years later, the world is entering another shortage, at a time when helium is in higher demand than ever, thanks in part to the rise of artificial intelligence.

This was exactly the sort of problem the Federal Helium Reserve was designed to prevent.

"A federal reserve would have done a very similar thing as our oil reserves, it could have stabilized this price spike or at least protected the domestic industry to some extent," said Vidya Mani, a University of Virginia professor who specializes in supply chains.

Helium is a rare, non-renewable gas formed through millions of years of radioactive decay, often accumulating in natural gas reservoirs. It is extracted through a re-

fining process in which natural gas is cooled to a liquid form and left-over helium is siphoned off.

"Unlike ordinary goods and services that can be produced virtually forever, every unit of helium that is produced and consumed today will eventually escape Earth's atmosphere and become one less unit available for use tomorrow," experts warned in a 2000 congressional report.

In the early 1900s, the gas was considered to be a much safer alternative to hydrogen, an extremely flammable gas, to float blimps and other dirigibles, which were considered state-of-the-art weaponry at the time. Recognizing its military potential, Congress signed the Helium Act in 1925, which made the federal government the country's only domestic helium producer and established a stockpile of the gas in an underground reservoir near Amarillo, Texas.

In 1960, Congress relaxed production restrictions and allowed certain companies to begin extracting helium from natural gas and selling it to the government. In the mid-1960s, government officials recognized that a radioactive isotope used in nuclear warheads decays into a rare form of helium named helium-3 and began stockpiling that as well.

The gas has proved to be a crucial resource. Without helium, doctors would not be able to conduct MRI scans; computer chip manufacturers would be unable to make semiconductors fueling much of the current tech innovation; infrared detectors on the James Webb Space Telescope, a NASA telescope orbiting the sun, wouldn't work; and the Large Hadron Collider, a particle accelerator for groundbreaking physics research, would be inoperable.

"Today, helium fuels the development of national priority technologies in quantum computing, next-generation energy materials, and space applications," wrote the American Physical Society, the premier advocacy group for physicists, in 2023. "Put simply, there is no replacement for helium, and America's research enterprise relies on access to a steady, reliable supply."

But in the 1990s, Congress and the Clinton administration viewed the helium program as an outdated federal project used to fill balloons. Gutting the helium reserve was a part of Gingrich's and '90s-era Republicans' "Contract with America."

The pro-business, government austerity blueprint was influenced by the Heritage Foundation, the conservative group that would go on to help create the Supreme Court's current conservative supermajority and write Project 2025, the radical — and now largely successful — plan to dismantle the federal government under a second Trump presidency. In fact, the Her-



itage Foundation called for the helium program to be cut in 1990, 1992, and 1995.

The Federal Helium Reserve had landed in the political crosshairs because it had accumulated more than \$1 billion in debt. In 1992, the Government Accountability Office, a nonpartisan congressional research office, recommended that Congress cancel the debt "since doing so would not adversely affect the federal budget."

But lawmakers had other plans. "Let's pop the bubble on some of the most blimped-out government waste. Let's put an end to all the hot air coming out of Washington," former Rep. Chris Cox (R-CA) said in 1993, later calling the program "the poster child of government waste."

Politicians of all stripes agreed. In 1996, the Helium Privatization Act, a long-term plan to sell off the government's helium assets by 2015 to settle the reserve's debt, passed the House with a simple voice vote and passed the Senate with unanimous consent, meaning no formal vote count was recorded.

Bill Clinton, who had embraced neoliberalists' deregulatory zeal, welcomed the development.

"Today, over 90 percent of U.S. helium needs are met by private producers and suppliers," Clinton wrote in a 1996 signing statement. "A government-operated program is no longer needed. The private sector can . . . supply the needs of all users."

While the great helium sell-off commenced, the Helium Privatization Act built in a fail-safe. The law required the government to study "whether such disposal of helium reserves will have a substantial adverse effect on United States scientific, technical, biomedical, or national security interests."

In 2000, as a result of those studies, the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, the Institute of Medicine, and the National Research Council found that the bill would "have only a modest impact on producers and users," that prices "will probably remain stable through at least 2010," and that selling off the national stockpile "will not have a substantial impact on helium users."

But those findings conflicted with a 1995 statement from the American Physical Society that found that "the overall demand for helium has been steadily increasing, and there is every reason to believe that this trend will continue." Sure enough, the government's forecasts did not hold true.

In 2006, a global helium shortage disrupted industries relying on the gas. Soon, the same institutions that conducted the 2000 report were criticizing not only the privatization effort but also the 2000 government report, stating in 2010 that price and supply changes "have caused concerns about the availability of helium . . . and raised questions about the previous report's conclusion that the sale of the helium reserve would not significantly affect helium availability."

In that 2010 follow-up report, government researchers found "that selling off the helium reserve . . . has adversely affected critical users of helium and is not in the best interest of U.S. taxpayers or the country."

The scientists cautioned that continuing to sell off the helium reserve could leave domestic interests relying on helium imported from Russia and the Middle East, two volatile regions, "at a time when demand for helium by critical and noncritical users has been significantly increasing."

Another problem: the 1996 pri-

vatization law created a system that allowed a handful of helium refiners to purchase the federal helium below market-rate prices, effectively creating a taxpayer-backed handout available to just four companies.

These issues, plus another global helium shortage in 2013, left lawmakers scrambling to delay the helium reserve's 2015 closing date. Otherwise, experts warned, US industries would have no choice but to rely on foreign helium imports.

"The failure to enact reforms of the helium program, such as those contained in this legislation, could mean an increased reliance on insecure and irregular helium supplies from Russia, Algeria, Qatar, and other foreign sources," said former Rep. Rush Holt (D-NJ), a former physicist.

In response, lawmakers passed the Responsible Helium Administration and Stewardship Act, which allowed the interior secretary to hold annual helium auctions, open to all companies, until the reserve was depleted. The law also required the regulators to establish a twenty-year strategy for "securing access to crude helium" for clients who were previously dependent on the stockpile.

The resulting twenty-year strategy, released in 2015, supported the government's ongoing efforts to sell off the helium reserves. While scientific and industry groups continued to warn that helium demand was likely to rise, government researchers once again concluded that "federal helium demand is expected to remain relatively flat during the period from 2015 through 2021," adding that the twenty-year demand for helium is "also flat." Still, scientific and industry groups warned that helium demand was likely to rise.

The government's twenty-year strategy failed to forecast short-

ages caused by trade blockades, such as Saudi Arabia blockading Qatari shipments in 2017. It also didn't factor in maintenance shutdowns, which led to another shortage in 2019. A fire at a Russian helium processing facility in October 2021 led to another shortage.

More recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has choked off supplies of Russian helium, due to US and European sanctions on the country.

By 2022, the dangers of relying on foreign helium sources were abundantly clear, warned the US International Trade Commission.

"As the future of international relations remains uncertain, current geopolitical affairs will likely stress the global helium market beyond all that has occurred to date," the commission wrote in an executive briefing. "Ultimately, a prolonged shortage could have wide-ranging effects across multiple sectors."

In 2023, as the total sell-off of the Federal Helium Reserve neared completion, the Bureau of Land Management, a subset of the Interior Department that oversaw the helium reserve, released a public request for information on if there was an "increasing risk of helium-supply disruption" and if that risk was coming from countries that "may be unwilling or unable to continue to supply the United States." The public request noted that foreign helium production was "concentrated primarily in Qatar and Algeria."

The Brookhaven National Laboratory, a federally owned nuclear research facility, responded in a letter that since the federal government stopped supplying the lab with subsidized helium in 2022, prices for the gas had "spiked tremendously," a "clear sign of the instability of the market."

Premier, Inc., a major health care logistics company, noted in another letter that helium supply had been unstable for fifteen years, at times causing hospitals to make due with less helium than they planned for.

"Given the instability of the helium supply chain for almost two decades, it is unlikely that the volatility will be fixed on its own, especially if the U.S. proceeds with sale of the Federal Helium System which would further exacerbate shortages and tighten available supply globally," the company wrote.

These warnings and pleas failed to stop the government from selling off the remainder of its helium in 2024. In fact, the company that bought the remainder of the helium, Messer North America, Inc., wrote in a 2023 comment letter that the government should reconsider selling it.

"We continue to believe that Congress should consider delaying or canceling the sale of the Federal Helium Reserve, which has been a tremendous source of stability for

the U.S. marketplace for decades," the company wrote. "The federal government would be wise to maintain control of this invaluable asset until new global sources of helium have demonstrated their reliability."

Today the risks outlined by scientists and industries that rely on helium are no longer theoretical.

While the United States remains a major helium supplier due to private sector production, in the globalized economy, many industries rely on helium exported from Qatar, a small, oil-rich country located in the Persian Gulf that provides roughly 30 percent of the global supply.

But thanks to back-and-forth Iran and US blockades in the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial shipping route in the region, that supply has been intermittently cut off. Additionally, the global helium supply relies on roughly 2,000 containers to store liquid helium, many of which are also reportedly stuck in the Strait.

The shortage is coming at a precarious time for helium demand. Artificial intelligence has dramatically increased the need for helium, since the gas is essential for making semiconductor computer chips.

"With the AI boom and the data center boom that we just witnessed, the demand for chips and integrated circuits just skyrocketed, and you need helium gas to produce all of this," said Mani, the supply chain expert from the University of Virginia.

The AI industry is underpinning much of the American stock market's recent gains, and experts are warning that a helium shortage could result in defective computer chips. A prolonged shortage would also force hospitals and medical facilities to compete with trillion-dollar tech companies for access to the gas.

The current situation is already prompting foreign medical associations to issue warnings on the ramifications of a shortage. On April 14, Russia announced new restrictions on foreign sales of its helium to maintain domestic price stability, which could exacerbate the problem.

As demand for helium continues to grow, a federal stockpile could have eased industry needs. Instead, the federal government now relies on a private sector that has increasingly become concentrated in conflict zones.

"No one expected the semiconductor data center boom to happen a year or two after we removed the Federal [Helium] Reserve," Mani said. "It's almost like [industries] are getting it on two sides: One, we don't have a reserve, which we could have. And two, the demand side just spiked and even though we produce helium, we sell it to an industrial market or exchange . . . where it goes to whoever is the highest bidder." (IPA Service)

Oil's relief movement due to ceasefire masks Deeper market risks

By: K Raveendran

Oil markets have responded to the Iran ceasefire in the way they often react to any pause in conflict near a critical supply artery: with visible relief, but not full conviction. Prices have pulled back sharply from their war-risk peaks as traders moved to price in a temporary easing of immediate geopolitical danger. That retreat, however, should not be mistaken for a return to calm. The ceasefire has lowered the temperature, but it has not removed the heat source. What the market is now grappling with is the difference between a short-term de-escalation and a durable restoration of security in one of the world's most sensitive energy corridors.

That distinction matters because crude does not trade only on barrels produced and barrels consumed. It also trades on the perceived reliability of moving those barrels from producer to customer. The Strait of Hormuz remains central to that calculation. Even when open, it is a narrow and exposed transit point through which a large share of global seaborne oil and liquefied natural gas flows. Any hint of disruption there, whether through direct military action, threats to shipping, naval stand-offs, or higher insurance and freight costs, immediately feeds into the price of oil. A ceasefire may reduce the probability of an imminent incident, but it does not erase the vulnerability that has already been exposed to the market.

This is why many analysts treat the pullback in crude with caution rather than confidence. The decline reflects the unwinding of the most acute fear premium, not the disappearance of the broader geopolitical premium. Traders may have marked down the likelihood of a near-term supply shock, but they

have not re-rated the region as risk-free. Once a market has been reminded that a chokepoint can become a flashpoint overnight, that memory does not fade quickly. Pricing behaviour changes. Positioning becomes more defensive. Hedging demand increases. Buyers, refiners and shipping firms begin to assign a higher cost to uncertainty, even during periods of nominal calm.

That embedded premium is important because it alters the base from which future prices move. Oil may not need a fresh escalation to remain elevated relative to its pre-crisis range. It only needs enough unresolved tension to keep participants wary. In that sense, the ceasefire acts less as a reset button and more as a pressure valve. It releases some of the extreme upward force but leaves the system structurally tense. The market can breathe more easily, yet it continues to breathe shallowly.

Underlying supply risks also extend beyond the immediate Iran-related confrontation. Global oil balances have for some time been shaped by a mix of fragile spare capacity, producer discipline, sanctions, shipping constraints and uneven investment in new supply. That backdrop makes the system more sensitive to geopolitical shocks than it appears at first glance. When inventories are not abundant and spare production is concentrated in a small number of countries, the margin for error shrinks. Even a theoretical disruption acquires pricing power because the market knows there are limits to how fast replacement barrels can be mobilised and delivered.

This is one reason oil is unlikely to return quickly to earlier lows. A market that has absorbed a geopolitical shock begins to price not only the event itself but also the possibility of recurrence. Traders understand that ceasefires in the

region can be fragile, reversible and vulnerable to miscalculation. A single incident involving tankers, offshore infrastructure, militias or military patrols could revive the risk premium almost instantly. The ceiling may have moved lower in the short term, but the floor has also moved higher. That is what an embedded premium looks like in practice. There is also a logistical dimension that is often underestimated in broader commentary. Reopening Hormuz, even temporarily, is not the same as normalising energy flows. Shipping companies, insurers, commodity merchants and importers do not revert to pre-crisis behaviour the moment a ceasefire is announced. Risk committees remain active. Insurance premia may stay elevated. Tanker availability can remain constrained if operators continue to avoid exposure or demand higher compensation. Delivery schedules may take time to stabilise. Some buyers may continue to diversify routes and supply sources, even at higher cost, because resilience becomes a commercial priority after a shock. The physical market therefore tends to heal more slowly than the headline market.

For large importers in Asia and Europe, that persistence of risk carries wider economic implications. A fall in crude prices after a ceasefire offers immediate relief to inflation expectations, refinery margins and fiscal calculations in energy-importing countries. Yet policymakers know that a renewed spike could come with little warning. That uncertainty complicates monetary policy, budget planning and subsidy management. Central banks may welcome softer energy prices, but they cannot fully trust them. Governments may enjoy a temporary reduction in import bills, but they still face the prospect of another surge if the ceasefire breaks down or if mar-

itime threats re-emerge.

The same tension applies to financial markets. Equity investors often greet lower oil prices as a positive for risk assets, consumer spending and transport-intensive sectors. But when the decline is driven by a ceasefire that the market itself doubts will last, the optimism can prove selective. Energy equities may surrender some gains, airlines and logistics firms may recover ground, and broader indices may stabilise, yet the underlying message from oil remains one of caution. The market is not signalling abundance. It is signalling reduced panic. Those are not the same thing. If the ceasefire holds and shipping flows remain uninterrupted, crude may continue to shed some of its extreme risk-driven gains. But any further downside is likely to be moderated by the market's awareness that the structural issues remain unresolved. On the other hand, if tensions flare again, prices may rebound faster than they fell because the infrastructure of fear is already in place. Traders now know where the fault lines are, and they know how quickly they can crack. That leaves oil in a zone of uneasy repricing rather than durable correction.

The market has stepped back from worst-case assumptions, but it has not stepped back into complacency. The ceasefire has eased the immediate strain, yet the broader architecture of risk remains intact. As a result, crude may trade lower than it did at the height of confrontation, but it is unlikely to behave as though the crisis never happened. The geopolitical premium has not vanished; it has simply changed form, becoming less explosive but more deeply rooted. That is why the retreat in prices looks like relief, while the underlying message from the market still reads as warning. (IPA Service)

The silent struggle: Rising infertility among young couples

By: Mowsam Hazarika

In recent years, a concerning trend has been quietly emerging across societies—an increasing number of young couples are facing difficulties in conceiving. Once considered a relatively rare medical concern, infertility is now becoming a common challenge, cutting across urban and rural divides, socio-economic classes, and educational backgrounds. This shift calls for urgent attention, deeper understanding, and a compassionate societal response.

Infertility, medically defined as the inability to conceive after one year of regular, unprotected intercourse, is no longer limited to a specific group. Fertility specialists and healthcare providers are reporting a steady rise in cases among couples in their late twenties and early thirties—an age group traditionally considered to be in the prime of reproductive health. The reasons behind this trend are complex and multifaceted.

One of the primary contributors is the changing lifestyle pattern. Rapid urbanisation, sedentary work culture, irregular sleep cycles, and unhealthy dietary habits have significantly impacted overall health, including reproductive health. The increasing consumption of processed foods, exposure to environmental pollutants, and rising stress levels are all known to affect hormonal balance in both men and women.

Delayed marriages and postponed parenthood also play a crucial role. With greater emphasis on education, career building, and financial stability, many individuals are choosing to marry later and delay having children. While this reflects positive social progress, it also coincides with the natural decline in fertility that occurs with age, particularly among women. Biological limitations, often over-



looked in planning modern lifestyles, thus become a critical factor.

Equally important is the growing prevalence of medical conditions such as polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), endometriosis, thyroid disorders, and diabetes, which can directly impact fertility. In men, declining sperm quality, often linked to lifestyle factors like smoking, alcohol consumption, and stress, is emerging as a significant concern. Infertility is no longer seen as a "women's issue" alone; male factors contribute to nearly half of all cases.

Despite these realities, social stigma continues to surround infertility, particularly in traditional societies. Couples, especially women, often face undue pressure, emotional distress, and even social isolation. The reluctance to openly discuss reproductive health issues leads to delays in seeking medical help, worsening the situation. Infertility, in many cases, is treatable—but timely intervention is crucial.

Another dimension that deserves attention is the psychological impact. The inability to conceive can lead to anxiety, depression, and strain in marital relationships. The emotional burden is often intensified by societal expectations and insensitive remarks from family and community. Mental health support, therefore, should be an integral part of infertility care.

At the same time, advancements

in medical science offer hope. Assisted reproductive technologies (ART), including in vitro fertilisation (IVF), intrauterine insemination (IUI), and other interventions, have enabled many couples to achieve parenthood. However, these treatments are often expensive and not easily accessible to all, highlighting the need for more inclusive healthcare policies.

Addressing this growing challenge requires a multi-pronged approach. First, there must be greater public awareness about reproductive health. Education on fertility, lifestyle management, and early medical consultation should be integrated into public health campaigns. Second, healthcare systems need to strengthen infertility services, especially at the primary care level, ensuring affordability and accessibility. Third, there must be a concerted effort to break the stigma surrounding infertility through open dialogue and community engagement.

Workplaces, too, have a role to play by promoting healthier work-life balance and reducing stress levels. Policies supporting maternal and paternal health, including flexible working arrangements, can contribute positively. Importantly, society must adopt a more empathetic and supportive attitude, recognising infertility as a medical condition rather than a personal failing.

The rising incidence of infertility among young couples is not merely a medical issue—it is a social concern that reflects the broader changes in our way of life. As we navigate the demands of modern living, it is essential to remain mindful of our health, including reproductive well-being.

Parenthood is a deeply personal journey, and for many, a cherished aspiration. Ensuring that this journey is supported by awareness, healthcare, and compassion is a responsibility that society must collectively uphold.

Ex-Philippine president Duterte to face trial on crimes against humanity charges



THE HAGUE (NETHERLANDS), April 23: Judges at the International Criminal Court on Thursday confirmed crimes against humanity charges against former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte for deadly anti-drugs crackdowns he allegedly oversaw while in office.

A three-judge panel found unanimously there were "substantial grounds" to believe the ex-leader was responsible for dozens of murders, first as mayor of the southern Philippine city of Davao and later when he was president from 2016 to 2022.

Duterte, 80, was arrested in the Philippines last year. He denies the charges against him.

In their 50-page decision, judges found that the evidence shows that Duterte "developed, disseminated and implemented" a policy "to neutralise alleged criminals".

According to prosecutors, police and hit squad members carried out dozens of murders at Duterte's behest starting in 2011, motivated by the promise of money or to avoid becoming targets themselves.

"For some, killing reached the level of a perverse form of competition," deputy prosecutor Mame Mandiaye Niang told the court in pretrial hearings in February.

Estimates of the death toll during Duterte's presidential term vary, from the more than 6,000 that the national police have reported to up to 30,000 claimed by human rights groups.

Duterte's lead defense lawyer Nick Kaufman told The Associated Press he was disappointed in the decision, saying it "is based on the uncorroborated statements of vicious self-confessed murderers acting as cooperating witnesses".

A date for the start of the trial has not yet been set.

Duterte has not been present in the courtroom for any hearings, having waived his right to appear. Last month judges found he was fit to stand trial, after postponing an earlier hearing over concerns about his health.

Human rights groups praised the decision.

"Duterte's trial will send a powerful message that no one responsible for grave crimes is above the law, whether in the Philippines or elsewhere, and that justice will eventually catch up with them," Maria Elena Vignoli, senior international justice counsel at Human Rights Watch, said.

ICC prosecutors said in 2018 that they would open a preliminary investigation into the violent drug crackdowns. In a move that human rights activists say was aimed at avoiding accountability, Duterte, who was president at the time, announced a month later that the Philippines would leave the court.

On Tuesday, appeals judges rejected a request from Duterte's legal team to throw out the case on the grounds that the court did not have jurisdiction because of the Philippine withdrawal. (AP)

Lebanon, Israel to resume rare direct talks in Washington

BEIRUT, April 23: Lebanon and Israel were set to begin a second session of direct talks in Washington on Thursday to discuss the possibility of extending a truce between Israel and the Hezbollah militant group and plans for future negotiations between the two neighbours with a long history of hostile relations.

The meeting between Lebanese Ambassador to the US Nada Hamadeh Moawad and her Israeli counterpart Yechiel Leiter is the second between the two diplomats, days after they held the first such direct talks between the two countries in three decades.

Lebanon President Joseph Aoun said Wednesday that contacts are ongoing to extend the 10-day ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah that went into effect Friday.

Hamadeh will put forward an extension of the ceasefire during the meeting and ask for an end to ongoing Israeli home demolitions in villages and towns occupied by Israel after the latest war broke out on March 2, Aoun said in comments released by his office.



Preparations are ongoing for wider-reaching negotiations between Lebanon and Israel. The aim of the future talks is to "fully" stop Israeli attacks, withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon, release of Lebanese prisoners held in Israel, deployment of Lebanese troops along the border and beginning the reconstruction process, Aoun said.

Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar called on Lebanon to work with

Israel to disarm the Iranian-backed militant group Hezbollah ahead of negotiations in Washington.

"We don't have any serious disagreements with Lebanon. There are a few minor border disputes that can be solved," Saar said during Independence Day remarks to Israel's ambassadors and diplomatic corps in which he also described the neighbouring country as a "failed state".

"The obstacle to peace and normalisation between the countries is one: Hezbollah," he said, adding that Lebanon could have "a future of sovereignty, independence and freedom from the Iranian occupation."

The latest war started after Hezbollah fired rockets into northern Israel, two days after Israel and the US launched attacks on Iran. Israel responded with widespread bombardment of Lebanon and a ground invasion in which it captured dozens of towns and villages along the border.

Israel's military currently occupies a buffer zone stretching as much as 10 km into southern Lebanon. Israel says it aims to remove the threat of short-range rockets and anti-tank missiles towards northern Israel.

Despite Hezbollah's outright rejection, the talks are a major step for two countries with no diplomatic relations that officially have been at war since Israel's inception in 1948.

The Lebanese government hopes the talks will pave the way to a permanent end to the war. While Iran has set ending the wars in Lebanon and the region as a condition for talks

with the US, Lebanon insists on representing itself.

Wafiq Safa, a high-ranking member of the militant group's political council, told The Associated Press that the group will not abide by any agreements made during the direct talks, which it opposes.

Since the ceasefire went into effect last week, there have been multiple violations by both sides.

The latest Israel-Hezbollah war killed around 2,300 people in Lebanon, including hundreds of women and children, and displaced over 1 million people.

Last week's talks were the first between Israel and Lebanon since 1993. Both countries have relied on indirect communication, often brokered by the US or UNIFIL, the United Nations peacekeeping mission in southern Lebanon.

Lebanon's top political authorities, critical of Hezbollah's decision to fire rockets toward Israel on March 2 in solidarity with Iran, quickly proposed direct talks in a bid to stop the escalation, hoping Israel would not launch its ground invasion. (AP)

Chemical leak at a West Virginia plant kills 2 people, sends 19 more to hospital: Officials

INSTITUTE (US), April 23: A chemical leak at a West Virginia silver recovery business killed two people and sent 19 others to the hospital, including one in critical condition, authorities said.

The leak occurred at the Catalyst Refiners plant in Institute as workers were preparing to shut down at least part of the facility, Kanawha County Commission Emergency Management Director C.W. Sigman said.

A chemical gas reaction occurred at the plant involving nitric acid and another substance, Sigman said, speaking at a news briefing. He added that there was "a violent reaction of the chemicals and it instantaneously overreacted."

"Starting or ending a chemical reaction are the most dangerous times," Sigman said.

Among the injured were seven ambulance workers responding to the leak, officials said.

Other people were taken to the hospitals in private cars or even in one case a garbage truck, Sigman said.

One person was in critical condition, Kanawha County Commission President Ben Salango said.

Vandalia Health Charleston Area Medical



Center, one of several hospitals in the area, was treating multiple patients, some brought by ambulance, while members of the community were arriving Wednesday afternoon asking to be checked, hospital spokesman Dale Witte said.

Witte said patients were experiencing respiratory symptoms including cough, shortness of breath, sore throat and itchy eyes. They were being evaluated in the emergency room.

A shelter in place order was issued for the surrounding area and lifted more than five hours later. Officials said all the deaths and injuries

occurred on the plant site.

"You had to get really close to the facility to smell it," Sigman said.

The leak required a large scale decontamination operation in which people had to remove all their clothes and be sprayed down, authorities said.

Catalyst Refiners works to remove silver from what remains of chemical processes and can find thousands of dollars of the precious metal just by vacuuming the floors in a plant's offices, Sigman said.

Ames Goldsmith Corp., the owner of Catalyst Refiners, said it is saddened by the deaths and its thoughts were with all those impacted and their families.

"This is an unfathomably difficult time," said the company statement released at the news briefing. "Our thoughts and prayers are with our colleagues and their families."

Ames Goldsmith promised to work with local, state and federal officials as they investigate what happened.

The plant is located near Institute, a community about 10 miles (16 kilometers) west of Charleston, the state capital. (AP)

Iran's exiled crown prince criticises ceasefire

TEHRAN, April 23: Reza Pahlavi, Iran's exiled crown prince, criticised the ceasefire between the United States and Iran.

He argued Thursday that the agreement assumes the Iranian government's behaviour will change and "you're going to deal with people who all of a sudden have become pragmatists."

"I don't see that happening," he said during a news conference in Berlin. "I'm not saying that diplomacy should not be given a chance, but I think diplomacy has been given enough chance."

Pahlavi has tried to position himself for a return to power should the Shiite theocracy fall and has supported the US-Israeli military intervention in the Middle East.

Pahlavi called on Europeans to do more to support Iranian people fighting for democracy.

He claimed 19 political prisoners were executed by Iranian authorities in the past two weeks and another 20 people have been sentenced to death.

"Will the free world do something or watch the slaughter in silence," Pahlavi wondered. (AP)

EU approves massive loan package to help Ukraine

BRUSSELS, April 23: The European Union on Thursday approved a massive loan package to help Ukraine meet its economic and military needs for the next two years, the bloc's Cypriot presidency said, after Hungary lifted its veto.

The EU also approved a new raft of sanctions against Russia over its war on Ukraine. The measures were prepared early this year and set to be announced in February to mark the fourth anniversary of the conflict, but Hungary and Slovakia opposed the move. Hungary and Slovakia have been locked in a feud with Ukraine since Russian oil deliveries to the two EU countries were halted in January after a pipeline was damaged. Ukrainian officials blamed the damage on Russian drone attacks.

Ukraine desperately needs the 90-billion-euro (USD 106 billion) loan package to prop up its war-ravaged economy and help keep Russian forces at bay. Hungary angered its EU partners by reneging on a December deal to provide the funds.

"Today the Council approved the final element needed to allow for the disbursement of the 90-billion-euro loan for Ukraine," Cypriot Finance Minister Makis Keravanos said. "Loan disbursements will start flowing as soon as possible, providing vital support for Ukraine's most pressing budgetary needs." (AP)

Trump orders US military to 'shoot and kill' Iranian small boats choking Strait of Hormuz

DUBAI, April 23: President Donald Trump said Thursday he has ordered the US military to "shoot and kill" small Iranian boats that deploy mines to choke traffic through the Strait of Hormuz. Trump's post on social media came shortly after the US military seized another tanker associated with the smuggling of Iranian oil, ratcheting up a standoff with Tehran over the strait through which 20 per cent of all crude oil and natural gas traded passes.

"I have ordered the United States Navy to shoot and kill any boat, small boats though they may be...that is putting mines in the waters of the Strait of Hormuz," Trump posted. "There is to be no hesitation. Additionally, our mine sweepers are clearing the Strait right now." "I am hereby ordering that activity to continue, but at a tripled up level!" Trump added.

He also said the military is intensifying mine clearing operations in the critical waterway.

The move comes a day after Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guards attacked three cargo ships in the strait, capturing two of them.

The Defence Department released video footage earlier on Thursday of US forces on the deck of the Guinea-flagged oil tanker Majestic X, which was seized in the Indian Ocean.

"We will continue global maritime

enforcement to disrupt illicit networks and interdict vessels providing material support to Iran, wherever they operate," a Pentagon statement said.

Ship-tracking data showed the Majestic X in the Indian Ocean between Sri Lanka and Indonesia, roughly the same location as the oil tanker Tifani, earlier seized by American forces. It had been bound for Zhoushan, China.

The vessel previously had been named Phnix and had been sanctioned by the US Treasury Department in 2024 for smuggling Iranian crude oil in contravention of US sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

There was no immediate response from Iran on the news of the seizure. On Tuesday, Trump extended a ceasefire while maintaining an American blockade of Iranian ports. There was no immediate sign whether peace talks, previously hosted by Pakistan, would resume anytime soon.

The standoff between the US and Iran has effectively choked off nearly all exports through the strait with no end in sight.

On Thursday, Iran's exiled Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi was splattered with red liquid as he left a building after a news conference in Berlin. The alleged perpetrator was immediately detained by police.

During the event, Pahlavi criticised

the ceasefire between the US and Iran, arguing that the agreement assumes the Iranian government's behaviour will change and "you're going to deal with people who all of a sudden have become pragmatists."

Pahlavi, 65, has been in exile for nearly 50 years. His father, Iran's shah, was so widely hated that millions took to the streets in 1979, forcing him from power. Nevertheless, Pahlavi is trying to position himself as a player in his country's future.

Since the Feb. 28 start of the war between Iran, Israel and the United States, over 30 ships have come under attack in the waters of the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman.

The threat of attack, rising insurance premiums and other fears have stopped traffic from moving through the strait. Iran's ability to restrict traffic through the strait, which leads from the Persian Gulf to the open ocean, has proved a major strategic advantage.

The ceasefire has been strained by duelling US attacks on Iranian ships and those by Iran on commercial vessels. It also remains unclear when, or if, the two sides will meet again in the Pakistani capital Islamabad, where officials say they are still trying to bring the countries together to reach a diplomatic deal. (AP)

A look at China's behind-the-scenes role in Iran war diplomacy

BANGKOK, April 23: China's role as an unofficial mediator in the latest war in the Middle East is drawing attention across the world as it seeks to project the image of being a responsible global power while US actions are straining its long-standing alliances.

China's profile in international diplomacy has risen in recent years, thanks to active efforts from its diplomats. Long reluctant to get involved in conflicts far from its borders, it has nevertheless emerged as a major player with attempts to mediate conflicts from Southeast Asia to Europe. With the Iran war, Beijing is not an official mediator, but all parties — including Washington and Tehran — say it has played an important role in trying to de-escalate the conflict.

Experts say Beijing's strategies for diplomacy in multiple conflicts have looked similar and have had mixed success in influencing negotiations, but the efforts come at an opportune time, as US actions under President Donald Trump have increased tensions with traditional diplomatic allies.

In the Iran war, experts say, China's close economic and political ties to Tehran put it in a unique position of influence as the conflict hurts the global energy supply, especially in Asia.

Trump has said he believes China helped encourage Iran to negotiate the fragile ceasefire that he has now extended.

Diplomats told The Associated Press that Beijing, the biggest purchaser of sanctioned Iranian oil, used its leverage to urge the Iranians back to the negotiating table for historic

face-to-face talks in Pakistan earlier this month.

Beijing has not confirmed that account, likely because it does not want to be seen as part of a US-led security framework, said Yaqi Li, a researcher at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Still, some saw it as a major moment for Beijing, which has criticised the US and Israel's war against Iran.

After the war began with US-Israeli strikes on Feb 28, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke with counterparts including Israel, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

As of mid-April, he had 30 phone calls with various parties about the war, according to a tally of his calls from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Wang also hosted his counterpart from close ally Pakistan, which has been acting as the main mediator in the latest talks, to present a five-point proposal calling for an end to hostilities and the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz.

Chinese President Xi Jinping in recent days has been uncharacteristically outspoken, warning last week against "the world's retrogression to the law of the jungle". This week, he called for the Strait of Hormuz to reopen.

George Chen, a partner at The Asia Group consultancy, said China's role in the Iran situation is irreplaceable. As Tehran's biggest oil buyer, its advice carries weight.

China is also one of the few countries that has showed sympathy for Iran's situation at the United Nations, he said. (AP)

Russian oil to Slovakia resumes flowing through pipeline that crosses Ukraine

BRATISLAVA (SLOVAKIA), April 23: The flow of Russian oil to Slovakia through the Druzhba pipeline that crosses Ukraine has resumed, Slovak Economy Minister Denisa Saková said Thursday, a breakthrough in an issue that has caused a major diplomatic spat in Europe.

The development is expected to unblock a large financial assistance package for war-ravaged Ukraine.

Populist Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico welcomed the development, calling it "good news."

"Let's hope a serious relation between Ukraine and the European Union has been established," Fico said. He thanked all those involved in solving the issue, including the European Commission and Hungary.

Hungary and Slovakia were locked in a feud with Ukraine since Russian oil deliveries to Hungary and Slovakia through the pipeline were halted in January after the pipeline was damaged.

Ukrainian officials blamed the damage on Russian drone attacks.

Hungary's nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who was recently defeated in an election, accused Ukraine of deliberately delaying re-



pairs — an allegation that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy denied. Fico said Thursday he still didn't believe the pipeline was damaged at all and alleged that the pipeline and oil "were used in the current geopolitical battle."

Ukraine and most of its European backers oppose imports of Russian oil which have helped to fund Russian President Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine, now in its fifth year. But unlike the rest of the European Union, Hungary and Slovakia still depend on Russia for their energy

needs.

For two months, the two countries have accused Ukraine of failing to repair the damaged pipeline. Citing the issue, Hungary blocked a massive EU loan to Ukraine while Slovakia refused to endorse new sanctions against Russia until the supplies resumed.

The flow resumed after three months at 2 a.m. Thursday, the Slovak economy ministry said, lifting a major obstacle to approving the EU funds for Ukraine later Thursday, just as EU leaders gather for a summit in

Cyprus.

Ukraine desperately needs the 90 billion euro (\$106 billion) loan package, originally agreed in December, to prop up its war-ravaged economy and help keep Russian forces at bay for the next two years.

Delayed deals

The 27-nation EU had originally intended to use frozen Russian assets as collateral for the loan. But that option was blocked by Belgium, where the bulk of the frozen assets are held.

In December, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia agreed not to stop their EU partners from borrowing the money on international markets as long as the three countries did not have to take part in the scheme.

But Orbán, who has repeatedly blocked EU aid to Ukraine, angered the other 24 countries by later reneging on that deal over the pipeline dispute and as campaigning heated up ahead of the April 12 election that he lost in a landslide.

The EU has also been trying since February to push through a new raft of sanctions against Russia, which Hungary and Slovakia have blocked due to the oil feud.

Fico said he expected both issues to be solved on Thursday. (AP)

9 killed in attack at copper and gold mine in Pakistan's Balochistan



KARACHI, April 23: Nine workers were killed when militants attacked a copper and gold mine site in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province, police said on Thursday.

The attack took place at the copper and gold project operated by National Resources Limited (NRL) in the Chagai district's Darigawan site on Wednesday evening, when

the workers were finishing their shift, a senior police official said.

"It was a targeted attack and carried out at a time when workers were winding up their shift," the official said.

He said that the bodies were taken to Prince Fahad Hospital in Dalbandin.

The mining company confirmed

the attack in a statement but did not mention casualties.

It said security forces, including the Frontier Corps, responded promptly, secured the area, and launched a clearance operation.

The statement said the NRL remained "fully committed to the development and empowerment of local communities in Balochistan, with a strong focus on improving livelihoods and contributing to Balochistan's economy".

It said 90 per cent of its workforce at the Darigawan site comprised individuals from Balochistan.

The mining company recently reported discoveries of copper, gold, lead and zinc deposits.

This is not the first time that militants have attacked construction sites in the province, where workers mostly from other provinces were targeted. (PTI)

Leaders pay tribute to martyrs of Anglo-Manipur War, stress unity and rule of law Manipur Gov calls for communal harmony on Khongjom Day

IMPHAL, April 23: Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla on Thursday called upon people to uphold values such as integrity in public life, communal harmony, respect for the rule of law and commitment to the welfare of all citizens as true tributes to the martyrs.

Bhalla was speaking at the annual Khongjom Day celebrations at the Khongjom War Memorial in Thoubal district.

Observed on April 23, the day commemorates the valour of Manipuri heroes during the 1891 Anglo-Manipur War.

Earlier, Bhalla and Chief Minister Khemchand Singh led dignitaries in laying floral wreaths at the memorial.

Wreaths were also laid at the statue of Manipuri military leader Paona Brajabashi, followed by a gun salute in his honour.

Addressing the gathering, Bhalla said Khongjom Day remains a significant and emotional



135th YEARS OF REMEMBERING KHONGJOM DAY 23rd APRIL, 2026
Register at: <https://manipur.mygov.in>

occasion, marking the bravery and sacrifice of the sons of Manipur who fought valiantly against the British Empire.

"Khongjom Day is not only a day of remembrance but also of reflection," he said, stressing the

importance of unity, self-respect and resilience in the face of challenges.

He stressed that true patriotism lies in building an inclusive and progressive society, empowering youth, and preserving the rich

cultural heritage of Manipur.

Bhalla also urged the people to work collectively for peace, development, and a stronger Manipur.

Chief Minister Singh, in his address, said people of the state feel proud to be Manipuri because of the bravery shown by their forefathers during the 1891 war.

Recalling the April 7 Tronglaobi incident in which two children were killed in a bomb attack, he expressed grief and sorrow.

The chief minister said the government has held talks with the Joint Action Committee and the victims' families on multiple occasions and assured all possible assistance.

Noting that protests are being held in different places following the incident, Singh appealed to people not to resort to activities that could hinder development work or create hardship and discord among citizens. (PTI)

Sikkim CM reviews preparedness for PM's visit

Focus on security, coordination and smooth conduct of events



GANGTOK, April 23: Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang on Thursday reviewed the preparations for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's two-day visit

to the Himalayan state from April 27.

Accompanied by ministers, MLAs, Chief Secretary Ravindra Telang, DGP Akshay Sachdeva,

secretaries of various departments and political secretaries, Tamang inspected the places that the PM may visit during his tour of the state.

He directed officers to ensure that all necessary arrangements are completed in a timely and efficient manner.

He stressed maintaining the highest standards of security, coordination and logistical readiness, while ensuring the smooth conduct of all scheduled events.

Modi is scheduled to land at Liding Helipad at 3 pm on April 27 and undertake a roadshow to Lok Bhawan in the state capital, covering a distance of around 3 km, officials said.

On April 28, the PM will attend a grand function at Paljor Stadium to mark the conclusion of the year-long celebrations of 50 years of Sikkim's statehood, they said. (PTI)

Mizoram board declares class 10 results, pass percentage improves

AIZAWL, April 23: The pass percentage in the Mizoram board's class 10 final examinations rose to 80.31 this year, officials said on Thursday, announcing the results.

Last year, 76.68 per cent of students had cleared the High School Leaving Certificate (HSLC) examination, conducted by the Mizoram Board of School Education (MBSE), they said.

This year, a total of 18,257 students appeared in the examinations held in February and March. Of the 8,448 boys who sat for the exam, 81.16 per cent passed. In comparison, 79.59 per cent of 9,809 girls passed the exam, they added.

From this year, the MBSE stopped publishing lists of rankings, distinctions, or divisions.

Officials said the decision was aimed at discouraging competition among students and shifting the focus towards quality and competency-based education.

State-aided schools remained top performers with a 96.92 per cent success rate. Private schools recorded a success rate of 89.38 per cent, while state-run schools recorded a 72.02 pass percentage.

A total of 146 schools achieved a perfect 100 per cent success rate, while no students passed in 13 schools, officials said.

Ten of these underperforming schools are under the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) programme, they said.

Among the state's 11 districts, south Mizoram's Siahak ranked first with a pass percentage of 89.71, followed closely by Serchhip at 89.49 per cent and Hnahthial at 89.11 per cent. (PTI)

GHADC extension tied to rule amendments: Tynsong

SHILLONG, April 23: Meghalaya Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong on Wednesday said there are limits to what an administrator can do and the extension of the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council's term is linked to the need to amend AD rules following violent protests against non-tribal participation in the council polls.

Responding to demands to bring the GHADC under administrator's rule, Tynsong said, "See, let me explain it very clearly. If you say you don't have to extend the administration of the district council in the form of public representatives, let me tell you that if the government takes over, we call it administrator's rule. If an administrator is appointed, there is a limit for the administrator to pass the bill as this is linked to the amendment of the rules and the Act."

"So therefore, they cannot just talk in that way because this is purely the issue of regulation, the issue of amendment of rules and regulation. There is nobody who can do that except the House inside the district council," he stated.

Citing these challenges, Tynsong said the government was compelled to extend the House.

"Therefore, taking into consideration these challenges we have, we are bound. That is why the government has to extend the House for six months so that within this period they will be able to take it inside the House, decide and make the amendment," he said.

The extension comes after violent protests erupted over the issue of non-tribal participation in the council's elections, prompting calls for postponement of the GHADC polls, which were earlier fixed to be held on April 10, to pave the way for bringing changes to the AD rules. (NNN)

Arunachal plans world-class tourism hub at Subansiri Lower pondage

ITANAGAR, April 23: The Arunachal Pradesh government has unveiled an ambitious plan to develop the Subansiri Lower pondage into a world-class mountain-cum-river tourism hub, aiming to integrate ecotourism, adventure, culture and sustainable livelihoods while leveraging the state's hydropower infrastructure.

The proposed hub will come up around the 2,000 MW Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Project, India's largest hydroelectric project, which is slated for full commissioning by December this year, with four units already operational.

The pondage created by the project is being viewed as a unique opportunity to build a high-value tourism ecosystem in one of the country's most biodiverse river corridors, an official communique informed here on Thursday.



Pondage is the storage of water in a small, regulated reservoir or pond located immediately at a hydropower plant.

Chief Minister Pema Khandu has written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking support for the initiative.

He has also sought technical collaboration from key ministries, including tourism, power, jal shakti, ports, shipping and waterways and Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER), advocating a whole-government approach.

According to the proposal, the tourism plan will integrate multiple components such as eco and nature-based experiences, adventure tourism and water sports, cultural and heritage tourism, inland fisheries and livelihood generation, as well as luxury river cruises and marine-based activities.

The initiative draws inspiration from globally renowned destinations like Pheewa Lake in Nepal, Kaeng Krachan in Thailand, Lake Como and the Dolomite lake circuit in Italy, and Milford Sound in New Zealand.

Khandu emphasised that local and tribal communities will be at the core of the project, acting as primary stakeholders, beneficiaries and custodians of the region's cultural and ecological heritage.

The project is expected to generate over 2,500 jobs in its steady state, particularly benefiting local youth, while targeting more than 1.5 lakh tourists annually in the medium term.

In the first phase, the government will engage leading design and planning agencies to prepare a detailed project report (DPR), including financial estimates and implementation frameworks in consultation with local communities.

On March 28, Khandu, along with officials, undertook a high-speed river journey of around 45 km along the Subansiri river, from the project site at Dollungmukh to the Kamle-Subansiri confluence, as part of efforts to explore tourism potential linked to hydropower development. (PTI)

ITANAGAR, April 23: The Arunachal Pradesh government on Thursday signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts (EPCH) to promote the state's textile and handicraft sector.

The MoU was signed by Department of Textiles and Handicrafts commissioner Mimam Tayeng and EPCH executive director Rajesh Rawat in the presence of state minister Nyato Dukuma and others.

According to an official statement, the agreement envisages collaboration in skill development through structured capacity-building programmes, product diversification in line with global trends and strengthening branding and packaging of traditional crafts.

It also aims to facilitate the participation of artisans and entrepreneurs in national and international trade fairs and create sustainable livelihood opportunities by improving market linkages.

Dukuma expressed confidence that the partnership would help empower artisans and promote



Arunachal Pradesh's handicrafts and market access.

Rawat reiterated EPCH's commitment to supporting the state in developing a sustainable, export-oriented handicrafts ecosystem, with a focus on product development, quality improvement and

GNF raises concerns over SoO stipends, condemns Ukhrul killings

KOHIMA, April 23: The Global Naga Forum (GNF) has alleged that "there is increasing apprehension that the monthly stipend of Rs 6,000 provided to each cadre under the Suspension of Operation (SoO) arrangement is being misused by certain Kuki militant groups for the procurement of arms and ammunition". "Reports indicating that the State Home Commissioner has proposed the release of over Rs 30 crore towards stipend expenditure for Kuki SoO cadres to the Ministry of Home Affairs have only deepened these concerns", the Global Naga Forum further said.

In light of these developments, the GNF "strongly" urged both the Central and State Governments to ensure strict enforcement of the SoO ground rules. Any violations must be dealt with firmly and without delay, it also said. "If it is established that these groups are exploiting the SoO arrangement to target innocent Naga civilians, it becomes both necessary and justified to consider the abrogation of the SoO agreement with the concerned Kuki groups, particularly the KNO", the GNF added.

The GNF then expressed its strong and unequivocal condemnation of the heinous ambush and killing of two innocent Tangkhul Naga civilians along NH-202 near TM Kasom, Ukhrul district, "widely acknowledged as the handiwork of Kuki terrorists".

In addition, the GNF said that, based on multiple ground reports and eyewitness accounts, there is growing concern regarding the free movement and activities of Kuki SoO militant cadres in close proximity to Naga villages such as Sinakethei, Thoyee, Sharkaphung and TM Kasom. "It has been observed that nearby Kuki villages—including Mongkot-Chepu, Shangkhai, Zalenbung, Songphel and Mollen

are allegedly being used as operational bases by these armed groups, who are reportedly in possession of sophisticated weapons despite the presence of substantial central security forces in the region", said the GNF.

The GNF also extended its "deepest condolences" to the bereaved families of the victims and expressed its "unwavering solidarity" with the Tangkhul Naga Long (TNL) and the people of Ukhrul district during this time of immense sorrow. "This premeditated and targeted attack on unarmed civilians is a grave crime against



humanity and is a direct attempt to instill fear among Nagas and to destroy the fabric of peace in the Naga homeland", it added.

The GNF then said it noted with deep concern a troubling narrative emerging in the wake of this and other recent incidents and therefore categorically stated that these clashes in the Tangkhul-majority areas are not a localised or isolated dispute confined solely between the Kukis and the Tangkhuls. "On the contrary, it is a stark manifestation of a broader conflict of interest between the Nagas and the Kukis at large, which, if left unresolved, will lead to tragic consequences".

The GNF then said there are concerted attempts by certain Kuki elements to politically and geographically isolate the Tangkhul community, seeking to portray this as a peripheral, two-party issue rather than a symptom of the

larger, unresolved political and territorial friction that exists between the Naga and Kuki communities across multiple states. "We reject this isolation strategy. An attack on the Tangkhul Nagas is an attack on the Naga people. The blood of the Tangkhul people binds them inextricably to the collective struggle and identity of all Nagas", the GNF said. The Global Naga Forum then said it "stands shoulder-to-shoulder with them, recognizing that the challenges faced in Ukhrul today are a microcosm of the challenges faced by Nagas across the historical Naga areas".

While the GNF said it "reserves the right of our communities to safeguard our ancestral lands and lives by whatever means necessary", the Global Naga Forum steadfastly believes that the path to lasting peace and justice does not lie in the barrel of a gun. The GNF made a fervent appeal for the immediate cessation of hostilities and a return to dialogue.

The GNF then called upon the leadership of the Kuki civil society organisations to rein in their extremist elements and to engage in honest, transparent conversations aimed at resolving differences through political means rather than through violence. The cycle of retaliation will only serve to scar the land and orphan future generations, it added.

The GNF also said it "believes" that peaceful coexistence is achievable if based on mutual respect and a clear understanding of historical boundaries. The State and Central governments must also intervene meaningfully, not simply with armed security forces, whose neutrality has become highly suspect, but through impartial mediation that addresses the root causes of this unrest, the GNF further added. (NNN)

Nagaland Board results declared, Class 10 pass percentage 72.07, Class 12 of 85.46

KOHIMA, April 23: The Nagaland Board of School Education (NBSE) on Thursday declared the results of the class 10 and 12 examinations, which recorded a pass percentage of 72.07 and 85.46, respectively.

In the class 10 examination or High School Leaving Certificate (HSLC), a total of 22,765 candidates appeared, out of which 16,406 students passed the examination with a pass percentage of 72.07.

Aman Kumar of MGM Higher Secondary School, Dimapur, topped the HSLC examination with 590 marks (98.33%), securing both the NBSE Topper Award and the Governor's Gold Medal. He was followed by Sudhanshu Kumar of Olympic Higher Secondary School, Zunheboto with 98.00%, while the third position was jointly held by Shreya Singh of Holy Child School, Dimapur and Benchumo Tongoo of Isaiiah Ability Higher Secondary School, Wokha, both scoring 97.67%.

In the class 12 examination or Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate (HSSLC), the overall pass percentage was at 85.46 per cent, improving by 3.02 percentage points from 82.44% in 2025.

In the Arts stream 11,594 students had appeared in the examination and 9,945 had passed with 85.78 pass percentage, while in the Science stream 2,749 candidates had appeared and 2,355 students had passed the examination with 85.67 pass percentage.

In the Commerce stream, the pass percentage was 81.69, as 919 out of the 1,125 candidates had cleared the examination.

Menguhaankum Chang of St John Higher Secondary Residential School, Dimapur was the topper in the Science stream with 95.60%.

Keleno Thorie of Northfield Higher Secondary School, Khikha, Kohima, topped the Arts stream with 96.80 per cent, while in Commerce, Shreya Debnath of Pranab Vidyapith Higher Secondary School, Dimapur, topped with 96 per cent. (PTI)

Pact with EPCH aims at skill development, global exposure and market linkages

Arunachal govt signs MoU to boost handicrafts sector

Ruling ZPM senior vice president W Chhuanawma steps down on health grounds

AIZAWL, April 23: Ruling Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) senior vice president and MLA W Chhuanawma has submitted a request for leave from his position in the party, citing persistent health concerns.

The development came at the same time when the party leadership assigned the charge of president to Chief Minister Lalduhoma, during the absence of standing party president Lalliansawta, who went on leave for an indefinite period due to health issues.

In a letter addressed to the ZPM president on Wednesday (April 22), Chhuanawma, who is also the deputy chief whip in the present ZPM administration, said that he had contemplated stepping back as early as last year, but deferred the decision at the behest of the party leadership, who advised him to do so after the Aizawl Municipal Corporation (AMC) polls held on Monday (April 21).

"I have been unable to fully fulfil my responsibilities as senior vice president due to my health condition. As the AMC elections are over, I am now submitting my request for leave from my post," the letter said.

Chhuanawma, a legislator from Tuichang assembly constituency, was elected as senior vice president of ZPM in the party's first internal election held in February, 2024. Apart from him, the ruling party now has two vice presidents, who were nominated.

On Wednesday, Lalduhoma took charge as ZPM president to replace Lalliansawta, who went on leave for an unspecified period due to health concerns.

Meanwhile, ZPM's General Administration department general secretary Eddy Zosangliana Colney told PTI that the party executive committee will meet on April 28 to deliberate on Chhuanawma's leave application and take a decision on whether or not to fill his post.

The ZPM was formed in 2017 as an electoral alliance by several minor parties, including Zoram Nationalist Party (ZNP), floated by Lalduhoma. The party contested 35 seats in 2018 assembly polls and won 8 seats, with Lalduhoma winning two - Serchhip and Aizawl West-I seats.

In the subsequent by-elections, the party lost Aizawl West-I and Tuirial seats to Mizo National Front (MNF).

The ZPM was floated into a single political party and got party registration from the Election Commission in July 2019.

The party contested 40 seats in the last assembly polls held in November 2023 and won 27 seats, unseating the incumbent MNF headed by Zoramthanga, which bagged 10 seats. (PTI)

Voter turnout figures in Bengal so far make me certain that BJP set for landslide victory: Modi

KRISHNAGAR, April 23: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday congratulated the people of West Bengal for their massive turnout in the ongoing first phase of assembly elections, and called the vote figures so far indicative of an "overwhelming mandate for change".

Addressing a poll rally in Krishnanagar in Nadia district, Modi also congratulated the Election Commission for keeping "violence during the assembly polls in the state at a minimum".

"This is the first time in the last 50 years of poll history in Bengal that incidents of violence were kept at a minimum. The information I have received so far about the record-breaking turnout makes me certain that this is going to be an overwhelming mandate in favour of a change which Bengal's voters have already decided to bring about," the PM said.

Referring to the voter turnout figures elsewhere in the country, the PM claimed the BJP achieved decisive victories whenever people turned up to vote in massive numbers.

Bengal has recorded an average voter turnout of nearly 90 per cent till 5 pm.

Reports of sporadic violence were received from some pockets of the state during the first half of polls taking place across 152 assembly seats amid unprecedented

security arrangements, where over 2400 companies of central paramilitary troops have been deployed.

Modi said that the BJP's Bengal unit would hold victory celebrations on May 4 after the counting of votes gets over where the party would distribute among people not just sweets, but also 'jhalhuri', the popular street snack which the PM savoured at an unscheduled stop during his visit to Jhargram last week.

Referring to that incident, Modi took a dig at TMC leaders after Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee termed the PM's extended stay as "drama" and claimed that "the entire episode was scripted".

"I have heard that even jhalhuri has given certain individuals a thunderous jolt," the PM said, "I had 'jhalhuri', but it seems that the TMC leaders are feeling heat of the chillies."

Referring to "people's disgust with TMC's syndicate, criminal and Mafia nexus", Modi claimed that the party will not win even a single seat in certain districts of the state.

Speaking in an area which has a significant concentration of the Hindu Namasudra Matua community members and where SIR deletions have led to perceptible angst, the Prime Minister said that post elections, the process of awarding citizenship to persecuted refugees



from Bangladesh would be expedited.

"The TMC mantra is Ghuspetiyo ke saath, ghuspetiyo ka vikaas (stay with infiltrators to promote their development. We must stop this conspiracy of granting citizenship to outsiders with false documents which endangers our land. A new guarantee of security will begin in Bengal after May 4," the PM said.

Invoking Matua religious leaders Hari Chand and Guru Chand Thakur, Modi said no Matua family needs to fear persecution from the TMC.

"Modi stands with all those who have sought refuge in India following religious persecution. The process of granting citizen-

"The BJP wants to reserve 33 per cent seats in the Parliament and at the state assemblies from the next Lok Sabha polls, but the TMC doesn't want more seats to be reserved for the women of this state. Women of Bengal will surely punish the TMC for this sin," he said.

As an extension to his earlier promises of 'six poll guarantees' for the state, the PM pledged a fresh set of 10 'Modi-ki-guarantees' aimed at the uplift and welfare of women and children of Bengal.

"We will ensure strictest punishment for those perpetrating torture and violence on the women of Bengal, will set up special police stations for women in every block of the state and build special security kiosks on the streets. The state's women would be inducted in police force in greater numbers," Modi said.

The PM promised an annual grant of ₹ 36,000 to the bank accounts of all women through the Bengal BJP's newly launched Matri Shakti Bharosa card and pledged ₹ 50,000 assistance to female students of the state for their graduation studies.

He also said that financial assistance of up to ₹21,000 will be provided to all pregnant women of the state, while the BJP government of Bengal will provide an additional ₹ 36,000 for nutrition requirements of infants and children. (PTI)

No one will be able to infiltrate Bengal after BJP wins polls: Shah



BALAGARH (WB), April 23: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday said "not a single intruder" would be allowed to enter West Bengal if the BJP comes to power in the state, and the illegal immigrants already here would be "selectively rooted out".

Addressing a public rally at Balagarh in Hooghly district on a day when voting for the first phase was underway, he said the BJP was poised to form a government in the state with a full majority.

"Today, the voting for the first phase is almost over, and this is my 30th programme across Bengal. On May 5, Didi's game will be up. The BJP will form a government in Bengal with a full majority," he said.

The result of the West Bengal Assembly polls will be declared on May 4.

Asserting that infiltration was hurting the state's economy and national security, Shah said, "Intruders are eating away the jobs of Bengal's youth, the rations of the poor, and working to undermine the country's security."

Stepping up his attack on the TMC government, the senior BJP leader accused it of fostering "syndicate raj" and burdening people with what he described as "Bhaipo tax", in a jibe at Mamata Banerjee's nephew and the TMC's national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee.

"Bengalis have to pay 'Bhaipo' tax to the TMC's syndicate. Even to purchase cement, people are forced to pay. Say 'ta ta-bye-bye' to the Mamata government, and we will straighten up the syndicate operators," he said.

Shah also flagged the alleged decline of Balagarh's traditional boat-making industry, claiming that it had suffered under the present dispensation.

"Balagarh's boat industry once provided employment to the entire region. But due to Mamata's syndicate raj, it has shut down. Around 41 factories have been closed. I assure you that once the BJP forms the government, we will restart these units," he said.

Invoking Bengal's legacy, Shah paid tribute to educationist Ashutosh Mukherjee and Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the BJP's ideological predecessor.

"This is the land of Ashutosh Mukherjee, who had earned the moniker 'Tiger of Bengal'. His son, Syama Prasad Mookerjee, founded our party and sacrificed his life for the nation. I pay my respects to both leaders," he said.

In a sharp political pitch ahead of the next phase of polling, Shah urged voters to back the BJP, framing the contest as one linked to identity and security.

"In the elections on April 29, you have to press the button beside the lotus symbol on EVMs. You are not pressing it just to make someone an MLA or to form a government. You are pressing it to free Bengal from infiltrators," the former BJP chief said.

He also accused Banerjee of promoting dynastic politics, alleging that she wanted to make her nephew chief minister.

"The time of Mamata Banerjee is over. The next chief minister will be a son of Bengal's soil, educated in Bengali medium, who speaks Bengali, and most importantly, a BJP worker," he said.

"Earlier, Mamata Banerjee's goons used to say that you can campaign as much as you want, but they would not let anyone cast their vote. I want to tell Didi's goons that if you touch any voter, you will find yourself in the Bay of Bengal," he said. (PTI)

'We let BJP have CM's post to reciprocate its past support to us'

PATNA, April 23: The JD(U) on Thursday said that after its president Nitish Kumar stepped down as chief minister, the party let the BJP have the top post to reciprocate the "support" received from the alliance partner in the past.

The statement was made by senior JD(U) leader and Deputy Chief Minister Vijay Kumar Chaudhary at a press conference here.

"Tomorrow, the new government headed by Samrat Choudhary will seek a vote of confidence. A single-day session of the assembly has been called for this very purpose. The ruling NDA enjoys a thumping majority, so winning the trust vote is a foregone conclusion," Chaudhary said.

He said that it must be kept in mind that the new government is also blessed by Nitish Kumar, who gave up the post as he took the decision to move to the Rajya Sabha. "But the people of the state have repeatedly reposed their trust in him. So all should rest assured that the new government shall follow in the footsteps of Nitish Kumar," said Chaudhary.

Earlier, state JD(U) president Umesh Kushwaha said in the press conference that Chaudhary intended to answer any questions related to the power transition in the state, which began with Nitish Kumar announcing his decision to contest Rajya Sabha polls a month ago. Upon his election, Samrat Choudhary took over as the first Bihar chief minister from the BJP.

When Chaudhary was asked why the JD(U) did not press to keep with itself the chief minister's post after Kumar relinquished it, he replied: "The BJP has been an old ally. It supported us in 2020 when our tally had crashed in the assembly polls. So, it was decided that we reciprocate the gesture by extending our support to a government headed by them".

Notably, besides Vijay Kumar Chaudhary, another senior JD(U) leader Bijendra Prasad Yadav had been sworn in as the deputy CM last week. It appeared to be a flipping of power equations in the previous dispensation when Nitish Kumar was heading the government and BJP leaders Samrat Choudhary and Vijay Kumar Sinha were his deputies.

In the press meet, Chaudhary was also asked about a social media post by the leader of the opposition Tejashwi Yadav, who had alleged that populism and corruption under the NDA rule were bleeding the coffers dry in Bihar where Samrat Choudhary has been saddled with a "debt-ridden government".

The deputy CM replied: "It is normal for all governments to borrow money for development work. There is no reason to cause alarm about debt.

Moreover, our opponents should remember that while they were in power, the state's financial position had grown so precarious that even paying salaries to government employees had become a challenge. Thankfully, that is not the case now". The allusion was to the RJD, of which Tejashwi Yadav is the national working president, which ruled Bihar until 2005 when Nitish Kumar took over. (PTI)

Andhra CM lays foundation for ₹ 5,400 cr solar manufacturing facility in Anakapalli

ANAKAPALLI (ANDHRA PRADESH), April 23: Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu on Thursday laid the foundation for a ₹ 5,400-crore ReNew solar manufacturing facility here.

The 6 GW solar ingot and wafer manufacturing unit at Rambilli in Anakapalli district is expected to emerge as a key step to build a resilient domestic solar supply chain, an official press release had earlier said.

Addressing a public meeting, he said, "Anakapalli district is attracting development through big ticket investments. It will reach the top position in investments in India. ReNew is setting up a 6.5 GW ingot solar wafer plant at an investment of ₹ 5,400 crore."

According to the CM, the solar manufacturing unit is being established by the son of former union minister Yashwanth Sinha and Sumanth Sinha.

By manufacturing critical upstream components such as ingots and wafers, the facility is expected to significantly reduce reliance on imports and strengthen India's energy security.

The facility is expected to be commissioned

within 24 months and generate over 2,100 direct and indirect jobs, further boosting industrial growth and employment in the region.

Emphasising the importance of electricity usage, Naidu said it is one of key yardsticks to evaluate development, indicating that higher the use more the development.

Further, he said the southern state is attracting investments pertaining to power generating plants on a large-scale.

During the CII Partnership summit, the CM said ReNew came forward to invest thousands of crores of rupees in the state, and Sinha came forward to invest ₹ 82,000 crore.

The company will soon start renewable energy works worth ₹10,370 crore in Anantapur and Kurmool districts, and it is also poised to set up a 777 MW wind and solar facility in Anantapur, he added.

Noting that the Centre has set a target of producing 500 GW of renewable energy by 2030, he said the state will contribute 160 GW, attracting investments of up to ₹10 lakh crore and creating 7.5 lakh jobs.

Already, the state has sanctioned and inked

deals for 90 GW.

Naidu urged every house to become a power generating centre through solar power units, saying the government is targeting setting up solar power units on 40 lakh houses.

By utilising power at the place of generation itself, he said transmission losses can be averted. Stressing on the need to introduce electric vehicles to curb pollution, he said all Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation (APSRTC) buses will be electric vehicles in the future.

In three years' time, Naidu said 5,000 charging stations will be installed across the state.

Further, he said Bhogapuram Airport will be inaugurated in the first week of July, which could be opened by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

With the onset of monsoon season in 2026, Naidu said Godavari River water will be channelled to Anakapalli region through Sujala Sravanthi project.

In the past 22 months, he said 802 deals were inked, which will generate 24 lakh jobs, said the CM. (PTI)

2,500 govt posts to be filled in Goa soon; private sector creating thousands of jobs: CM Sawant



PANAJI, April 23: Nearly 2,500 government posts across Goa will be filled soon through the Staff Selection Commission (SSC), Chief Minister Pramod Sawant said on Thursday, stressing that thousands of jobs are also being created in the private sector.

Addressing a job fair organised by the Goa Human Resources Development Corporation Limited near Panaji, Sawant said over 6,000 candidates have applied, with 25 leading private companies from the Verna Industrial Estate participating in the event.

He said the companies have already begun interviewing candidates, and all appointment letters are expected to be issued by May 1.

Highlighting future employment prospects in

the state, the CM said his government has initiated a transparent process to fill vacancies through the SSC, and examinations for the remaining 2,500 posts will be conducted soon.

"The entire process is transparent as candidates get to know their results before leaving the examination hall," he said. Encouraging youth to remain committed, Sawant shared his own journey, saying he began his career as a resident medical officer at Shiroda Ayurvedic College with a monthly salary of ₹ 4,000.

"If you are ready to work hard, your luck can shine," he told the gathering.

Sawant also highlighted the government's push for self-employment, saying that the Economic Development Corporation is providing loans at an interest rate of 4 per cent. Entrepreneurs can return the loan within two years without interest if the business is found to be unviable, he said.

He said that under the startup scheme of the IT department, financial assistance of up to ₹ 10 lakh is being provided to entrepreneurs.

The chief minister also pointed to growing opportunities in the events industry and urged local youth to tap into the sector. Agencies from outside Goa often take advantage of such opportunities, he said. "We want local youth to benefit from these opportunities," Sawant added. (PTI)

Sena MLA threatens to cut publisher's tongue over 38-year-old book on Shivaji Maharaj

MUMBAI, April 23: A book publisher on Thursday said Sanjay Gaikwad, an MLA of the Shiv Sena led by Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, threatened him for 'disrespecting' Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, through a book published 38 years ago.

An audio clip in which Gaikwad abuses Kolhapur-based publisher Prashant Ambi has gone viral on social media. Gaikwad told reporters that it was his voice in the clip. The book, Shivaji Kon Hota, written by late CPI leader and rationalist Govind Pansare was first published in 1988. Published by Lokvangmay Griha, it is a landmark, widely-read Marathi book highlighting Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj as a secular, people's king rather than just a Hindu king. It has sold over millions of copies and has over 75 editions.

Ambi said Gaikwad called him shortly after midnight and spoke for nine minutes, objecting to the book's title, and used abusive language.

He said Gaikwad threatened to chop off his tongue and enter his house and assault him, adding, "You will also meet Pansare."

Pansare was shot dead while he was on a morning walk in Kolhapur in 2015.

The Congress said the MLA's threat was "open hooliganism" and appealed to Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis to order an inquiry into the matter.

Gaikwad, MLA from Buldhana district, claimed Ambi was arrogant and badmouthed him. "His tongue needs to be ripped off. We cannot read such books that insult Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. This book should be destroyed," he said.

Gaikwad said his wife got the book on Tuesday, after which he read it. He said he had called the publisher, adding the viral clip had been "edited and distorted".

He said he had objected to "disrespectful" reference to Shivaji Maharaj. Maharashtra minister and BJP leader Radhakrishna Vikhe Patil said Gaikwad shouldn't dig into past controversies.

Gaikwad is no stranger to controversies. In 2024, he flaunted a tiger tooth worn around his neck and claimed that he had hunted the big cat in 1987.

Last year, Gaikwad slapped a canteen staff member allegedly for offering stale food at the MLA hostel.

Last month, Gaikwad claimed he gave up "₹35 crore in commission" for the welfare of his party workers and supporters, due to which many of them have moved from riding bicycles to driving Toyota Fortuners.

In 2024, Gaikwad had declared a ₹ 11 lakh reward to anyone who "slashed Rahul Gandhi's tongue and presented it to him" following the Congress leader's statements about reservations. He later apologised.

Gaikwad also made news last year over the tiger claws he wore within a locket around his neck. It was alleged that Gaikwad had participated in a tiger hunt in 1987. Gaikwad had also said that the police department is so corrupt that if they seize 'booty' worth ₹ 50 lakh, only ₹ 50,000 is brought on record. He had called the Maharashtra Police the "most incompetent department." (PTI)

Bengal polls: Scattered clashes, assault on candidates mar phase-I voting; EC seeks reports

KOLKATA, April 23: Sporadic incidents of violence and assaults on candidates marred polling in parts of West Bengal on Thursday as the first phase of the Assembly elections progressed across 152 constituencies, prompting the Election Commission to seek reports from trouble-hit pockets.

The state recorded a brisk voter turnout of over 41 per cent till 11 am on Thursday, reflecting a strong early participation.

In Murshidabad's Naoda, clashes broke out between supporters of the Aam Janata Unnayan Party (AJUP) and the ruling TMC, prompting police and central forces to resort to baton charge to disperse mobs, officials said.

The violence in Shibnagar village followed a tense morning

after AJUP founder Humayun Kabir visited a polling booth, triggering protests by TMC supporters who raised slogans and surrounded his vehicle, branding him a "BJP agent". As the situation escalated, rival groups allegedly hurled stones and bricks, leading to a law and order situation. Several vehicles were vandalised in the clashes. Kabir accused the ruling party of voter intimidation and electoral malpractice, alleging that TMC workers, "along with police", had been influencing voters through threats and inducements since the previous night.

"The election should be conducted peacefully, but outside the booths, people are being intimidated. The Election Commission should take strict action," he said.



The TMC rejected the allegations, with its candidate Shahina Mumtaz Khan condemning the violence and calling it a "really bad incident". Elsewhere, violence was reported from Birbhumi's Labhpur,

where a BJP polling agent of candidate Debashis Ojha was allegedly assaulted, sustaining head injuries. The ruling TMC denied the charge.

In Dakshin Dinajpur's Kumar-

ganj, the BJP alleged that its candidate Suwendu Sarkar was assaulted by TMC supporters while on his way to a polling booth following reports of disturbances.

He was later taken for medical treatment, party leaders said, claiming the assault took place in the presence of police.

Authorities said action would be taken against those identified through video footage.

These incidents added a sharp edge to what has otherwise been described by officials as largely peaceful polling across the state, though tension simmered in several pockets.

Security forces, including central armed police personnel, have been deployed in large numbers across sensitive booths, with quick

response teams moving in to contain flare-ups. Officials said the Election Commission has sought detailed reports from district authorities on incidents in Murshidabad and other affected areas.

Thursday's polling, covering key constituencies across north Bengal and parts of the south, is being closely watched for early signals in a high-stakes contest between the TMC and the BJP, with smaller players like the AJUP attempting to carve out local influence. While voter turnout remained steady through the day, scattered clashes underlined the persistent volatility that has come to define Bengal's electoral landscape, where political rivalry often spills onto the streets despite heavy security presence. (PTI)

UP: 11 killed in multi-vehicle crash in Mirzapur; brake failure in truck suspected to be trigger

MIRZAPUR (UP), April 23: Eleven people, including children, were killed in a multi-vehicle collision triggered by a suspected brake failure in a truck in Uttar Pradesh's Mirzapur district, police said on Thursday.

The accident was reported around 8.30 pm on Wednesday, following which police and fire brigade teams rushed to the spot and launched a rescue operation with the help of locals, Mirzapur SP Aparna Rajat Kaushik said.

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has consoled the loss of lives in what he termed an "extremely tragic and heart-rending" incident.

Police said the collision occurred on a stretch of National Highway-135 descending from the Dramandganj valley towards Lasoda, about 50 km from the district headquarters.

According to preliminary findings, a truck travelling downhill is suspected to have suffered a brake failure, triggering the accident.

Officials said the truck coming from Madhya Pradesh, which was loaded with chickpeas, lost control on a steep slope and hit a Bolero car and a truck moving ahead of it.

In the chain collision that followed, two cars, including the Bolero, caught fire. The blaze was so intense that it took more than two hours to douse the flames, officials said.



"Police, along with locals, pulled out the victims trapped in the mangled vehicles. So far, 11 deaths have been reported," the SP said.

Officials said nine occupants of the Bolero, including four children, three women and two men, were charred to death. They were returning after visiting the Maihar temple in Madhya Pradesh.

The drivers of another car and the truck also died, with the latter succumbing on the way to the hospital, they said.

District Magistrate Pawan Gangwar told PTI that seven of those killed were from Mirzapur district, three from Madhya Pradesh, while one was from neighbouring Sonbhadra district.

The deceased from Mirzapur's Jigna area included Shiva Singh (8), Sonam Singh (9), Piyush Singh (14), Pankaj Singh (40), Vandana Singh (43), Vishnu Singh (45) and Veena Singh (47).

The others who died in the accident included Kartikeya Singh (18) and Priyanka Singh (42) from Satna in Madhya Pradesh, Vikas Sharma (32) from Sagar in Madhya Pradesh, and Jai Prakash (27) from Sonbhadra, the officials said.

Police said the bodies were charred beyond recognition, which made the identification process difficult.

Lalganj Circle Officer Amar Bahadur Singh said it took considerable time to ascertain the identities of the victims and inform their

families, who were traced using the registration details of the vehicles.

The vehicles involved in the crash included a truck bearing a Bihar registration number and another registered in Madhya Pradesh. Among the cars, one was from Sonbhadra district and the other from Mirzapur.

In a post on X on Thursday morning, Adityanath said, "The loss of lives in the road accident in Mirzapur is extremely tragic and heart-rending. My condolences are with the bereaved families."

"Instructions have been issued to the officials concerned to ensure proper treatment for the injured," he said.

"I pray to Lord Ram that the departed souls attain eternal peace, the grief-stricken families are granted the strength to bear this immense sorrow, and the injured recover swiftly," the chief minister added.

Uttar Pradesh minister Nand Gopal Gupta, who is in charge of Mirzapur, also mourned the loss of lives and conveyed his condolences to the bereaved families.

"The government stands firmly with the affected families in this hour of grief. Directions have been issued to ensure all possible help to the affected families," Gupta said.

A detailed probe has been initiated to ascertain the exact cause of the accident, police said. (PTI)

Thrissur firework blast: Forensic probe on to find chemicals used for crackers

THRISSUR (KERALA), April 23: Two days after the blast at a fireworks manufacturing unit at Mundathiccode here that claimed 14 lives, a police forensic team is examining what chemicals were being used to make the crackers and whether any of them were prohibited.

A forensic official on Thursday said samples were being collected from the blast site and following laboratory testing of the materials it can be determined what chemicals were being used at the unit and if any of them were restricted.

The test report would be handed over to the jurisdictional court and the investigation officer to carry out further probe, he said. The tests will also reveal whether the blast occurred due to any mixing of the chemicals present at the site, he added.

The official further said that in view of the seriousness of the matter, the entire forensic team, of around 14 members, has been deputed for taking samples and testing them. Therefore, the results would be available quickly, he said. "The results will indicate what actually happened," he told a TV channel.

As of Wednesday evening, 14 persons died due to the blast even as the district authorities said the number was likely to increase following the DNA tests of the over 32 body parts found from the blast site.

Authorities had also said that four persons were missing in the incident. Taking note of the extent of the tragedy, the Kerala government declared the blast a 'state-specific disaster' -- which allows the administration to provide immediate relief and aid -- and announced a financial assistance of Rs 14 lakh to the dependents of those who died in the incident.

The government also decided to appoint a single-member judicial commission, comprising former Kerala High Court judge Justice C N Ramachandran Nair, to carry out a probe into the incident.

The explosion took place around 3.30 pm on Tuesday at the fireworks unit engaged in cracker preparation for the Thiruvambady devaswom ahead of the



upcoming Thrissur Poomam on April 26.

Firecrackers were being manufactured in multiple temporary sheds located in an isolated area amid paddy fields, and around 40 people were suspected to have been present there.

Meanwhile, the police on Thursday carried out the final phase of search operations at the explosion site. Speaking to reporters, Thrissur City Police Commissioner Nakul Rajendra Deshmukh said the search operation is expected to be completed by Thursday evening. "We have been searching the area with the help of cadaver dogs since morning. Some body parts have been recovered and will be sent for DNA analysis. To ensure that no explosives or body parts remain undetected, we are continuing the search with dog squads and police personnel," he said.

"We have identified 34 among those who were killed and injured, while four remain missing. We estimate that there were 38 persons at the site," he said.

He said two teams led by Assistant Police Commissioners have been deployed for the search operation. "The basic checks at the site will be completed by evening. The remaining explosives will be shifted to another magazine. Around 200-300 kg of explosives is still at the site and will be disposed of later with court permission," he said. (PTI)

Delhi HC pulls up police over allegations of illegal detention, torture of activists



NEW DELHI, April 23: The Delhi High Court on Thursday pulled up the Delhi Police over alleged torture and illegal detention of certain activists last month, asserting that legal procedure must be followed even in cases involving grave allegations.

A bench of Justices Navin Chawla and Ravinder Dubeja asked the investigating agency to either take consequent action or it would refer the matter to the CBI.

"When someone makes an allegation against someone, you will just pick her up? We are not going to allow this. If you had some material to suspect them, you have a procedure prescribed in law ... If you did not, we will ask the commissioner to order an inquiry. We are not concerned with how grave an allegation is, and we are concerned with procedure. The Constitution says procedure prescribed by law," the court said during the hearing.

"Tell us that action has been taken, or else we will... We are not going to express any opinion but we will say that the allegations are very serious and this has to be referred to the CBI," the court remarked.

The court observed that there were serious allegations of torture, which could not be a means of interrogation.

"You may be investigating a terrorist angle but if you pick up someone, you have to follow the

procedure," it said.

The Delhi Police, which denied all allegations, tendered a report to the court in a sealed cover.

The court, however, opined that it was not satisfied with the report and directed that the entire case file be placed before it on May 19.

The court was hearing a batch of petitions concerning the alleged illegal detention of several activists by the police after they were "picked up" from outside Dayal Singh College and Vijay Nagar in March.

A senior counsel representing one of the petitioners submitted that the manner in which the police picked up the petitioners and detained them should be "frowned upon".

In their response to the writ petition filed by the younger sister of Lakshita Rajoura, who alleged that she and other students were abducted and taken to an unmarked building in New Friends Colony, the police earlier said allegations of custodial torture and illegal detention were concocted and motivated to derail an ongoing investigation into their Maoist-linked activities.

In a counter-affidavit filed before the high court, the Special Cell of the Delhi Police asserted that the protesters were only called for "lawful questioning" in connection with an FIR registered in July 2025.

The police claimed that the ac-

tivists are associated with outfits like Bhagat Singh Chattri Ekta Manch (BSCEM), which they alleged are platforms for "anti-national" and "Naxalite" content.

"No illegal detention, abduction, coercion, or torture, as alleged, has ever taken place. The allegations are highly exaggerated, contradictory, and devoid of any material proof, and appear to be an afterthought to exert pressure upon the investigating agency," the police's reply read.

The police maintained that the interrogation was conducted in a professional manner in the presence of female staff.

"No custodial torture or threats, as alleged, were ever inflicted upon any male person. The interrogation was conducted in a lawful and professional manner in the presence of female staff," the affidavit read.

According to the police, the investigation pertains to a case involving the disappearance of a woman who had been brainwashed and indoctrinated by individuals associated with Maoist ideologies.

Responding to the petitioner's demand for the preservation of CCTV footage, the police said that the footage from the Special Cell office in New Friends Colony has been preserved but the footage from specific locations in Vijay Nagar and Maurice Nagar was not available.

The police also argued that the activists failed to produce any medical documents or medico-legal cases (MLC) to substantiate their claims of physical assault and termed the allegations an "afterthought".

According to the petition, 10 people, including six students from different colleges of the national capital, two labour rights activists and anti-displacement activists each were illegally detained by the Delhi Police between March 12 and 14.

Some of these students were previously booked in a case related to raising pro-Maoist slogans at the India Gate during their agitation against the soaring air pollution last year. (PTI)

Ladakh LG approves major tourism reforms to ease business, cut compliance burden

LEH/JAMMU, April 23: Lieutenant Governor V K Saxena on Thursday approved a series of reforms aimed at improving the ease of doing business in the Union Territory's tourism sector by deregulating the hospitality industry and reducing compliance requirements.

As part of the reforms, several documentation requirements, such as character certificates, proof of requisite bank balance and educational qualifications for tour operators, have been removed, easing entry barriers and improving transparency.

Under the new framework, the validity of travel agent registration has been increased from one year to five years, while the number of documents required has been reduced from seven to four. Separate registrations for adventure and mountaineering activities have been merged into a single unified registration for all activities.

Announcing the decision on X, Saxena said, "To give a major boost to the tourism sector in Ladakh, I have approved major reforms related to 'Ease of Doing Business', aimed at deregulating the hospitality sector, reducing compliance burden on stakeholders and creating a unified, streamlined, and citizen-friendly registration mechanism for tourism units."

Hotel registration norms have also been rationalised. While earlier registrations were valid for five years, the new

system introduces a provisional registration valid for 18 months, followed by a permanent registration valid for five years," as per the information shared by the LG on X. The number of documents required has also been streamlined, with only two documents needed for provisional registration and seven for permanent registration, as against nine earlier, the X post said.

The administration has also introduced a single uniform category for hotel classification, replacing the earlier system of Category I and II (Standard, Deluxe, Luxury).

In addition, the number of documents required for transfer of registration has been reduced from seven to three, further easing procedural requirements, it added. For the first time, provisions have been introduced for homestay registrations. These will now be valid for five years. Applicants can obtain provisional registration with two documents, while permanent registration will be granted after the mandatory training prescribed by the UT administration.

The reforms also allow cancellation and name changes, which were previously not permitted, with a requirement of four documents, it said.

Another key feature of the reforms is the introduction of an online auto-renewal mechanism, replacing the earlier unspecified and manual renewal process. (PTI)

BJP scored double 'F' in ensuring fuel, fertilizer security for nation: Kharge

NEW DELHI, April 23: Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Thursday alleged that the Modi government has scored a "double" failure grade in ensuring fuel and fertilizer security for India, and tried to deflect its failures through "delimitation theatrics".

Kharge also took a swipe at Prime Minister Narendra Modi, saying he should head to his own "Mardarshak Mandal" member Murlu Manohar Joshi, who recently stated that "we should not use the rhetoric of Vishwaguru anymore".

Kharge's swipe came days after Joshi said India is not a 'vishwaguru' (global teacher) anymore and this term should not be used.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of an event here, Joshi had made a strong pitch for making Sanskrit India's official language, saying many people, including B R Ambedkar, made efforts for it in the past, but the proposals were not cleared.

In a post on X, Kharge said, "Modi government tried to deflect its failures and serious Epstein file allegations, through delimitation theatrics, but India saw through the charade. The BJP has scored a DOUBLE 'F' (Fail) in ensuring Fuel & Fertilizer security for the nation."

On fuel, Kharge said production is down, import diversification fails, our ships in the Strait of Hormuz are unable to secure safe passage.

"14 Indian-flagged vessels remain stranded there since 54 days. India's crude oil production has been falling for the 11th consecutive year in 2025-26, all thanks to Modi Govt. Overall crude production has collapsed by nearly 22% since 2014-15," he said.

Gas output has suffered an even more shocking decline of around 40%, falling from 47,555 MMSCM in 2011-12 to just 28,672 MMSCM in 2020-21, Kharge said.

"Now, the Modi Govt has stopped ANY new LPG connection. After long queues, 45-day wait for Rural India to book a cylinder, to black-marketing, the people bore the brunt of 'Sab Changa Si' (All is well) denials!" he said. (PTI)

BJP will sweep Bengal polls; DMK to pay for anti-Sanatan mindset in TN: Nitin Nabin

NEW DELHI, April 23: BJP president Nitin Nabin on Thursday claimed that the saffron party will win the Assembly polls in West Bengal with an "absolute majority" and form its government to end the 15-year rule of Trinamool Congress under Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

In an interview with News18 Network, Nabin also expressed confidence that the BJP-led coalition will return to power for another term in Assam and Puducherry.

"The situation in all five states where elections are being held is different. However, I believe that this time the conditions are better for the BJP in all the states."

"In Assam and Puducherry, we will certainly repeat our government. There is absolutely no doubt about it," Nabin said when asked about the BJP's prospects in four bell-bound states -- Kerala, Assam, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal --

and the Union territory of Puducherry.

As for the remaining states, Nabin said West Bengal is going to come up with a "surprise mandate" in favour of the BJP, rejecting all the "games" of the Trinamool Congress and the Congress.

Asked if the BJP will form its government in Bengal for the first time, Nabin said, "Hundred per cent. Given the mood of the people in the state, the BJP will form the government with an absolute majority."

On the number of seats the party expects to win in Bengal, Nabin said, "We are not putting out the final numbers right now. Voting is still underway, and more clarity will emerge as the process continues."

"But based on the current indications, I believe we are going to form our government there with an absolute majority."

The first phase of polling for 152 seats in

Bengal is presently underway, while the second and final phase for the remaining 142 seats will be held on April 29.

Tamil Nadu is also voting on Thursday, while elections in Kerala, Assam and Puducherry were conducted on April 9. All results will be out on May 4.

Exuding confidence that the NDA will clinch victory in Tamil Nadu, Nabin said, "There is growing public sentiment against the corruption, anarchy, and anti-Sanatan mindset of the ruling DMK."

"As part of the NDA, our role is supportive in Tamil Nadu, where our alliance partner AIADMK is leading the contest. From what we are observing on the ground, there is a visible public response against the DMK."

"From my experience of campaigning in Tamil Nadu, I believe the DMK could face a significant electoral setback," Nabin said. (PTI)

Experts seek urgent action on dengue treatment gaps before monsoon

NEW DELHI, April 23: Experts, policymakers, scientists and global health organisations on Thursday called for urgent action to strengthen diagnostics to address gaps in dengue treatment. They warned that the absence of specific therapeutics continues to leave millions vulnerable as South Asia and South-East Asia brace for another monsoon-linked surge in infections.

The call was made during a day-long dialogue hosted here by the Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (DNDi) in collaboration with the Translational Health Science and Technology Institute (THSTI), WHO South-East Asia Region and partners of the Dengue Alliance.

The convening assumes significance ahead of the monsoon season, which historically sees a rise in Aedes aegypti mosquito populations and dengue transmission

across the region. India alone reported over 2.89 lakh dengue cases in 2023, though experts said the actual burden could be significantly higher due to underreporting and surveillance gaps.

"Dengue is unequivocally a national health priority for India, and our response has been deliberate, step-by-step, and increasingly comprehensive. Today, India is advancing on multiple fronts from strengthening public health systems to enabling public-private partnerships, including phase III trials of an indigenous tetravalent dengue vaccine with over 10,000 participants, and regulatory progress on global vaccines," Taruna Madan Gupta, Scientist G and Head, Development Research Division, ICMR, said.

However, a critical gap remains: The absence of an effective therapeutic for dengue, he said.



"Through collaborations with global and national partners, we are actively working to bridge this gap and remain committed to delivering impactful solutions in the near future," Gupta said.

Dr G Karthikeyan, Executive Director, THSTI, said, "THSTI is proud to work closely with DNDi

in-charge, WHO South-East Asia Regional Office, said the WHO South-East Asia Region alone accounts for more than half of the global dengue burden, with 1.3 billion people living at risk across 10 endemic countries.

"And dengue carries costs beyond health system costs. These costs are often indirect: Lost productivity, lost wages and lost futures. And they fall hardest on the households least equipped to absorb them. This is both an economic crisis, and a social crisis. To change this trajectory, we must close the gap on diagnostics, on vaccines, on therapeutics, and on health system resilience," he said.

Dr Nor Fariza Ngah, co-chair of the Dengue Alliance, stressed the need for an integrated approach to dengue care.

"For a climate-sensitive disease of this scale, it is essential that we

approach it from all angles. While we do have vaccines and vector controls, addressing the treatment gap is crucial in ensuring care for the disease is accessible and effective," Ngah said. Dr Sanjay Sarin, Continental Lead Asia and Director South Asia, DNDi, said despite improvements in surveillance and scientific understanding, patients still lacked access to specific treatment options.

"Addressing this gap requires sustained commitment from governments, funders, and partners. The Dengue Alliance is accelerating this effort by bringing together stakeholders to advance research, align priorities, and support the development of safe, accessible and affordable treatments," he said.

The gathering featured over 30 speakers across four panel discussions focusing on surveillance, vaccines, diagnostics, financing,

community impact and health system resilience. Particular attention was given to vulnerable groups such as pregnant women, children and low-income communities, who experts said face disproportionate risks from severe dengue and inadequate access to treatment. The meeting brought together representatives from governments, scientific institutions, regulatory agencies, multi-lateral organisations, industry, funders and civil society to discuss strengthening diagnostics, accelerating therapeutics and improving preparedness against dengue. The Dengue Alliance is a consortium of institutions, including the Ministry of Health, Malaysia, Siriraj Hospital and Mahidol University of Thailand, Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz), Brazil, and the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Brazil, among others. (PTI)

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'Heartstopper' movie to stream on Netflix: Makers unveil release date, plot details



The popular coming-of-age romance series "Heartstopper" will officially end with a feature-length movie. Netflix announced that the follow-up, which picks up directly from the finale of Season 3, will stream from July 17. The announcement was made on the fourth anniversary of the release of Season 1.

Kit Connor and Joe Locke return, with the latter also involved in the capacity of an executive producer this time around. Alice Oseman, graphic novelist and creator of the show, also wrote the film screenplay, aside from serving as one of the executive producers.

In an official interaction with Netflix, Oseman had this to say about the story's conclusion. "On a basic level, of course, I want the movie to be a beautiful and emotional send-off for the 'Heartstopper' story — celebrating what Heartstopper means to people, while offering a chance to say goodbye to our beloved characters, and many hints

of what's to come in the characters' future lives. On a slightly deeper level, I think this movie will explore what makes love survive, or what elevates it, or deepens it. At 18 and 17, Nick and Charlie are hurtling towards their adult lives. Many teenage relationships don't survive that pivotal moment of change. Are Nick and Charlie a forever love? If they are, why?"

She further explained that she wanted the movie to "capture this transitional moment for them as a couple — from teens to adults, from teen romance to forever love, from past to future. And in doing so, get to the heart of what teenage love can become as adolescence becomes a memory, and what teenage love can mean for people in the overall picture of their lives. An exploration of time, memory, love, pain, the changing of the seasons, endings and beginnings, and the core element of Heartstopper: the ordinary magic of our everyday lives." (PTI)

HARNAAZ SANDHU REVEALS THE ADDICTION THAT RUINED HER PHYSIQUE: 'AFTER THE GYM...'



After Harnaaz Sandhu was crowned Miss Universe in 2021, she was relentlessly trolled on social media for gaining weight. The constant body shaming got to a certain point that the model-turned-actor had to come out and share her battle with Celiac disease, an immune reaction to eating gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley, and rye.

However, before her Bollywood debut alongside Tiger Shroff in *Baaghi 4*, the beauty queen grabbed everyone's attention with her toned physique and insane transformation. Now, in an interview, she is revealing the one addiction that ruined her physique.

Harnaaz Sandhu appeared on the *Origin Story* podcast, where she discussed a bad habit that ruined her physique. According to the 2021 Miss Universe, during her time in New York, she became addicted to a sugary coffee drink she had after the gym, which ultimately led to her gaining weight.

"It's so funny. My building in New York had a Starbucks. I could smell the coffee, and I used to just go. I used to order a venti caramel frappuccino, extra drizzle, extra everything. I believe that's a dessert. After the gym, imagine," she confessed.

During the interaction, Harnaaz also reflected on her journey from being crowned as the third Miss Universe from India to the trolling on her weight, and 'using food as a crutch'. According to the beauty queen, she used to go to the gym regularly. However, when she came back home and didn't see any changes, she was disappointed. But discipline and consistency helped her on her weight-loss journey.

"I used to go to the gym, come back, and feel like I was looking the same. In the beginning, when you go to the gym, that first 1 month, you feel like you might be gaining more weight because you look more puffy or whatever," she shared.

The actor further added, "But it became my comfort because I was really upset not to see the change in my body. It took me some time to kind of tell myself that I had to be patient; it's a process. I'm not going to look at the weighing machine. I'm going to just go, close my eyes, blind myself, and keep doing it. After six months, I saw some results." (Agencies)

Lena Dunham Says She Has the 'Plot Line in My Brain' for a 'Girls' Movie: 'I Would Love to Do it'

Lena Dunham recently told SiriusXM's "Radio Andy" that she has an idea for a "Girls" movie. She also shared that she made a group chat with the original cast, in which they've discussed reuniting when the hit HBO drama is "appropriately missed."

"I would love to do it, and I have to say, I got a little plot line in my brain. I do," Dunham said. "It's impossible not to think about where they are now. I

will text with—I have a new chain with the girls and Andrew [Rannells] called 'Survivors of the Crackcident.' Jemima [Kirke] will pop in with the best take on like, 'Jess is really into RFK Jr.' and you're like, 'Of course she is. Of course she is.' She does not want anyone getting vaccines. She is pissed." She added, "I just see them, and also, those are my muses. So, I think it's an obvious thing. We don't want to come back to the party too early. We want to be appropriately missed."

"Girls" ran for 62 episodes across six seasons on HBO from 2012 to 2017. Dunham created the show and starred alongside Allison Williams, Jemima Kirke, Adam Driver, Zosia Mamet, Alex Karpovsky and Andrew Rannells. "Girls" was nominated for 19 Emmys and won two during its run.

"Well, there's a 'Girls' movie, HBO Max!" Dunham joked. "I would be delighted."

Dunham recently published her book "Famesick," which chronicles her life and struggles as she rose to fame in her early 20s. In the book, she wrote that her "Girls" co-star Driver was "verbally aggressive, condescending and physically imposing" while filming. (Agencies)

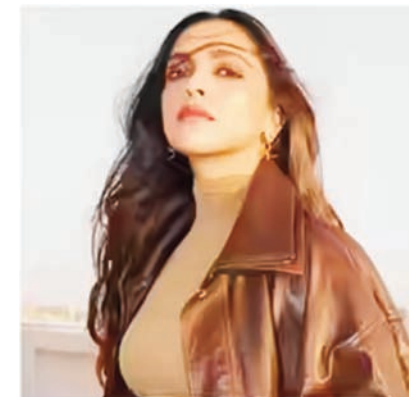


Michael B Jordan, Austin Butler confirmed as leads for 'Miami Vice' reboot

Universal Pictures has officially confirmed Hollywood stars Michael B Jordan and Austin Butler as the leads of "Miami Vice '85", the big-screen reboot of the iconic 1980s American TV series. The film, which will open in cinemas in the US on August 6, 2027, will be directed by Joseph Kosinski of "Top Gun: Maverick" and "F1" fame. The project will be filmed for IMAX, reported Variety.

Oscar winner Jordan will play Ricardo "Rico" Tubbs, while Butler steps into the role of James "Sonny" Crockett. The two characters were originally portrayed by Philip Michael Thomas and Don Johnson in the original NBC series, which ran from 1984 to 1990. In filmmaker Michael Mann's 2006 big-screen adaptation, Colin Farrell and Jamie Foxx played the duo. The new film will be set in the period, exploring the glamour and corruption of mid-1980s Miami, and is inspired by the pilot episode and first season of the landmark television series. The screenplay is by Dan Gilroy, based on earlier drafts by Eric Warren Singer, with original series co-creators Anthony Yerkovich and Michael Mann serving as executive producers. Jordan arrives at the project fresh off his Academy Award win for best actor for Ryan Coogler's "Sinners." He will next direct, star in, and produce a reimagining of "The Thomas Crown Affair" for Amazon MGM Studios. Butler, who received a best actor Oscar nomination for his turn as Elvis Presley in Baz Luhrmann's "Elvis", has since appeared in Denis Villeneuve's "Dune: Part Two", Jeff Nichols' "The Bikeriders" and Darren Aronofsky's "Caught Stealing". He will next star in the A24 crime thriller "Enemies" alongside Jeremy Allen White. (PTI)

Deepika Padukone not dropped from 'Raaka', rumours baseless: Insiders



Hollywood actor Janel Parrish, best known for her work in the drama series "Pretty Little Liars", will feature in a new indie film, titled "Bound For Glory". According to the entertainment news outlet The Hollywood Reporter, the film also stars Michael Naizu and marks the collaboration for both actors, who have previously worked in "Christmas Is Canceled". The film was released in 2021.

"Bound For Glory" is directed by Naizu, alongside his brother, John Wilcox. It is inspired by Naizu's background as a Chinese American navigating Hollywood, and follows "a mixed-race, working-class couple in crisis, interweaving themes of identity, codependency and generational expectation," according to the official synopsis.

The production of the film is slated to begin in the fall in Los Angeles and Pittsburgh.

Parrish said she is happy to collaborate with her "Christmas Is Canceled" co-star.

"So happy to be working with Michael Naizu again, this time to tell his beautiful and compelling story," the 36-year-old actor said in a statement.

"It means so much to collaborate with AI storytellers and help bring narratives to life that reflect who we are and why representation matters," she added.

Naizu said the story is deeply personal for him. "To have Bound For Glory backed by a trailblazing organization like Gold House is incredibly meaningful. I honestly can't wait to get cameras up and bring this story to life," he added. (PTI)

Anurag Kashyap, Vikramaditya Motwane, Nikkhil Advani, Vasanth Bala back festival favourite film Dug Dug's India release



Director Ritwik Pareek's festival favourite film *Dug Dug*, a satire about religious frenzy in a small town, is finally set for release next month with filmmakers Anurag Kashyap, Nikkhil Advani, Vikramaditya Motwane, and Vasanth Bala serving as executive producers.

Dug Dug gets India release

The comedy-mystery-satire is slated to hit Indian screens on May 8, the makers announced Thursday.

Inspired by true events, *Dug Dug* follows a bizarre phenomenon in a village where a deceased man's motorbike is believed to grant wishes, provided devotees pray to it and offer alcohol. As word spreads and prayers begin to be answered the belief snowballs into a full-blown, commercialised religion.

The film, which had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2021, was screened at several international platforms including the Santa Barbara International Film Festival, Indian Film Festival of Melbourne, Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles, MAMI Mumbai Film Festival and

the International Film Festival of Kerala.

In the past, Kashyap, Motwane and Advani have joined hands to back independent films like *Stolen* and *Sabar Bonda*.

Kashyap said he was "blown away" by the storytelling, cinematography and music of *Dug Dug*. "It was like a visual rave. I am stumped by the fact that this film hadn't released theatrically. That got the four of us together along with Ranjan to release it. Fingers crossed it will receive the same love," the filmmaker said in a statement.

Calling it "one of the best debut films" he has seen, Motwane said, "*Dug Dug* is a fantastic and genuine Indian story about our society and our belief systems. Ritwik has told it with the perfect amount of irreverence and humour. I hope that the film can reach a wider audience."

Advani described it as an authentic Indian film. "Ritwik's flair for taking a simple story and telling it with a pragmatic and yet humorous take, is what impressed me the most. I feel the audience will also love it as much as I did," he said.

Bala too praised the movie and said he was

"captivated" by its story and vision. "There is nothing absurd in Ritwik's *Dug Dug*, if anything it's the world as he sees it not what he assumes it could be. Hope to see more of his splendour being unleashed in cinema," he added.

All about *Dug Dug*

Dug Dug is produced by Bottle Rocket Pictures, led by Ritwik and his sister Prerna Pareek, and will be released in theatres in India in association with Ranjan Singh's Flip Films.

Ritwik, who has also written the film, expressed gratitude to Kashyap, Motwane, Advani and Bala for extending their support to *Dug Dug*.

"We've waited a long time for this, and finally it's happening. Not just happening, but happening with Anurag Kashyap, Vikramaditya Motwane, Nikkhil Advani and Vasanth Bala coming on board, filmmakers I have grown up watching and learning from, which makes it very special for me," he said.

Dug Dug stars Altaf Khan, Gaurav Soni, Yogendra Singh and Durga Lal Saini. (PTI)

Sunit Chowrasia climbs to second ahead of final round

Sheoran opens three-shot lead

NUH (HARYANA), April 23: Overnight co-leader Dhruv Sheoran fired a six-under 66 to open up a three-shot lead at 15-under 201 after round three of the Rs 1-crore DP World Players Championship, here on Thursday.

The 31-year-old from Gurugram, a winner on the DP World PGTI in 2024, delivered his second consecutive 66 to take firm control heading into the final day.

Sheoran will look to maintain his composure and convert his lead into a second title on the tour, while the chasing pack will aim to apply pressure early in the final round.

Sheoran's (69-66-66) error-free third round was built on a blistering start, as he reeled off four consecutive birdies from the second to the fifth to seize early momentum.

He maintained that control through the round, adding two more birdies on the 10th and 11th to stay ahead of the chasing pack. Kolkata's Sunit Chowrasia (70-



66-68), who returned from a long injury lay-off earlier this year, climbed into sole second at 12-under 204 after a steady four-under 68 that featured five birdies and a

lone bogey. Chowrasia moved up one place from his overnight tied-third position and kept himself within striking distance heading into the final

round. Overnight co-leader Akshay Sharma (70-65-70) of Chandigarh and Jamal Hossain (67-70-68), who had shared the first-round lead, were tied third at 11-under 205.

Akshay followed up his tournament-low 65 in round two with a composed two-under 70, while Hossain returned a 68 to remain in contention.

Karnal's Mani Ram (69-68-70) occupied fifth place at nine-under 207 after a round of 70 that included an eagle on the par-5 14th along with two birdies and two bogeys, keeping him within reach of the leaders.

Sheoran said, "I didn't realise at the time, but those four early birdies really gave me momentum and helped me build into the round."

He added, "I'm just trying to follow my process and improve each day rather than thinking about my position. That's been working well

for me." Chowrasia, who built his round with a steady run on the front nine, said, "I got into a good rhythm early with birdies on the fifth and sixth, which made me comfortable."

Sunit, a winner on the DP World PGTI NexGen last month, added, "There were a few ups and downs on the back nine, but overall, it was a solid round. I won't change anything for the final round -- just keep playing the way I have been and take my chances."

Opening round co-leader Harman Sachdeva of Gurugram slipped to tied sixth at eight-under 208 after a 71.

He was joined by Kolkata's Mohammad Sanju who made a strong move with a 67, and Om Prakash Chouhan (69), the 2023 DP World PGTI Order of Merit champion and a winner earlier this season.

The fourth player in tied sixth was Nepal's Sukra Bahadur Rai who struck a 72 on Thursday. (PTI)

Inter Milan routed and defeated in Europe yet remains a force at home in Italy



ROME, April 23: Best known in Europe for memorable defeats in recent seasons, Inter Milan remains a force at home in Italy.

In Cristian Chivu's first season coaching the club, Inter is closing in on the Serie A title and could still raise two trophies after also reaching the Italian Cup final.

If Inter wins at Torino and Napoli and AC Milan don't win this weekend, Inter can clinch the Italian league title with four rounds remaining.

The domestic success has come in sharp contrast to Inter's ouster from this season's Champions League by tiny Norwegian club Bodø/Glimt, and a 5-0 rout by Paris Saint-Germain in last season's final.

Not since José Mourinho led Inter to a treble in 2010 has Inter won the league and Cup in the same season.

Chivu played on the 2010 team and is quickly making a name for himself in the coaching ranks after helping Parma avoid relegation last season.

"I'm just Cristian. My only responsibility is to these players," Chivu said when asked about being compared to Mourinho. "I'm just trying to do my job in the best manner possible for those who believed in me, for these wonderful players, and I hope to achieve some of our objectives."

Chivu was asked about the possibility of winning both trophies after Inter came back from two goals down to beat Como 3-2 in the Italian Cup semifinals on Tuesday. Inter will face Lazio in the May 13 final.

Key matchups

A matchup between second-place Milan and fourth-place Juventus on Sunday isn't just about securing Champions League places. It's also a meeting between the two top United States internationals in Italy.

Milan forward Christian Pulisic has not scored since December for club or country, while McKennie has become an indispensable player for Juventus since Luciano Spalletti was named coach in October. After this meeting, Pulisic and McKennie won't see each other again until they unite for national team training camp at a home World Cup.

Players to watch

Inter goalkeeper Josep Martinez made several spectacular saves against Como in the Italian Cup using a butterfly position borrowed from hockey goaltenders.

By dropping to his knees and raising his arms to cover more space, Martinez was able to make reflex saves seem easy.

Still, Martinez remains Inter's second choice 'keeper after Yann Sommer, who is expected to start at Torino on Sunday.

Out of action

Inter captain and Serie A scoring leader Lautaro Martinez remains out with a muscle issue.

Off the field

Authorities in Milan are investigating an alleged prostitution ring that reportedly has involved more than 70 soccer players. Four people have been arrested for allegedly arranging the escort service, although no players have been placed under formal investigation. (AP)

Trailblazing coach Eta could influence Champions League battle

DUESSELDORF (GERMANY), April 23: Pioneering coach Marie-Louise Eta has a chance to influence the battle for Champions League spots in the Bundesliga as her Union Berlin team takes on third-place Leipzig on Friday.

After Bayern Munich wrapped up the title last week, the focus shifts to a host of teams behind in a vibrant and often surprising fight for the top four places. Runner-up Borussia Dortmund can seal a Champions League spot this weekend, while it could be a nervous few weeks for teams like Stuttgart, Hoffenheim, Bayer Leverkusen.

That's especially true because Germany could yet land an extra Champions League spot for the fifth-place team by overhauling Spain on UEFA's "European performance spot" ranking. That would depend on strong showings by Bayern in the Champions League and Freiburg in the Europa League.

Key matchups

Eta stayed upbeat after a 2-1 loss to Wolfsburg in her historic first game as head coach, and there were positives. Union created plenty of chances but just didn't convert them. Leipzig will be a tougher challenge Friday. Ole Werner's team is on a four-game winning run and looking to return to the Champions League after missing out this season.

The Rhine derby between Leverkusen and Cologne is always a standout game. This time it could play a big role in determining whether Leverkusen gets a Champions League spot, and potentially whether Kasper Hjulmand gets another season as Leverkusen coach.

A win for Dortmund against Freiburg on Sunday will make sure of a Champions League spot for next season, regardless of whether there are four or five places for German teams.

Players to watch

Harry Kane's charge for the single-season Bundesliga scoring record may be over, with Vincent Kompany increasingly minded to rest him for Champions League and German Cup runs. Nicolas Jackson has stepped up with goals in Bayern's last two Bundesliga games.

Out of action

Bayern and Germany forward Serge Gnabry ruled himself out of the rest of the season, World Cup included, in a social media post Wednesday after a muscle tear in training. (AP)

Starc cleared by CA to play IPL, likely to be available for DC's game on May 1

SYDNEY, April 23: Mitchell Starc has been cleared by Cricket Australia to feature in the Indian Premier League with the pacer expected to be available for Delhi Capitals' match against Rajasthan Royals on May 1.

The left-arm quick has been sidelined since January due to elbow and shoulder niggles. He played a key role across all five Ashes Tests, earning the Player of the Series honour, before featuring in five Big Bash League games for Sydney Sixers later that month.

"Starc is expected to build up his workloads on the ground in India and is on track to make his debut for the 2026 season in Delhi's May 1 match against Rajasthan Royals," Cricket.com.au reported.

The 36-year-old's absence from the early phase of the IPL had sparked debate over the commitment of overseas players, prompting Starc to address the issue on social media and clarify what he termed "heavily misinformed opinions."

"Despite the opinions and views of certain individuals with their platforms in and through the Indian media, I'm currently rehabbing and managing an injury in my shoulder and elbow of which I didn't know the extent of during the Australian summer," Starc had posted on Instagram. "These individuals have made some strong statements around involvement in the IPL and provided heavily misinformed opinions of players, preached them as facts, and claim to know my body better than me," the post read.

Starc was Delhi Capitals' leading pace bowler last season, claiming 14 wickets in 11 matches. DC currently sit fifth in the points table with three wins and as many losses from six games.

Meanwhile, Australia captain Pat Cummins is also set to make his first appearance of the season for Sunrisers Hyderabad, while Josh Hazlewood has already resumed playing for Royal Challengers Bengaluru after missing the initial matches. (PTI)

Chelsea's American project as beleaguered team heads into FA Cup semis

LONDON, April 23: Storm clouds are hovering over the American ownership project at Chelsea that has swung from being regarded as bold and exciting to now being considered reckless and damaging.

Reaching the FA Cup final on Sunday likely will do little to change that.

What should be an exciting weekend for Chelsea and its fans — another trip to Wembley Stadium, this time for a semifinal against Leeds — is backdropped by a growing crisis at a club that so often resembles a soap opera.

Anger is rising to the surface among fans and disillusionment among players after a humiliating exit from the Champions League — 8-2 on aggregate to Paris Saint-Germain — and a goalless streak amid five straight losses in the Premier League that marks the team's worst run of league results in 114 years.

Liam Rosenior, an inexperienced 41-year-old coach, bore the brunt of the ire and was duly fired on Wednesday, four months into a reign that veered badly off course over the last few weeks.

During the 3-0 loss at Brighton on Tuesday, match-going supporters chanted — in no uncertain terms — for Rosenior's departure and the coach himself called out his players in media interviews when he criticized their "lack of spirit" and "unacceptable" performance. He was always unlikely



to survive after such an outburst.

Bubbling under the surface, meanwhile, is growing tension about the direction the U.S. owners have taken Chelsea and the massive financial concerns that come with it.

Since the 2022 purchase of Chelsea by a consortium fronted by Los Angeles Dodgers partner-owner Todd Boehly and largely funded by private equity company Clearlake Capital, the club's leadership has spent around \$2.5 billion on new, mostly young and unproven players on long contracts and taken on a debt approaching \$2 billion, according to figures compiled by The Athletic. Chelsea's most recent financial results revealed the club made pre-tax losses of \$350 million, a record high in the Premier League era.

PSG leads Lens by just 4 points as race for French league title heats up

PARIS, April 23: The suspense remains intense in Ligue 1, where Paris Saint-Germain is not as dominant as on the European stage at this crucial final stretch.

The reigning French champions defeated Nantes 3-0 at the Parc des Princes midweek but they had suffered a fifth loss in the French league last weekend — compared to two all last season — with a 2-1 home defeat against Lyon.

With five Ligue 1 matches left to play, they have just a four-point lead over second-place Lens ahead of Saturday's trip to Angers.

Luis Enrique's team has to travel to Lens in May, after the league postponed their game on April 11 due to PSG's involvement in the Champions League. And with PSG's busy schedule due to the Champions League, the Ligue 1 title is far from being decided.

"You wanted a more open and competitive league? You've got it," Enrique said. "Lens is having a very good season, and it will be difficult all the way to the final match."

Lens travels to Brest on Friday.

Key matchups

Although the duel in the title race is taking the spotlight, the battle for the Champions League places is just as close.

Seven-time champion Lyon leads fourth-place Lille on goal difference with the top three gaining direct entry to the Champions League and the side in fourth entering qualifying. Lyon hosts struggling Auxerre on Saturday while Lille travels to Paris FC on Sunday.

Although its hopes of qualifying for the Champions League have been dented by a 10th loss this season, Marseille remains hopeful, lagging just two points behind Lyon ahead of hosting Nice at the Velodrome stadium on Sunday.

Fifth-place Rennes is also in the mix, one point above Marseille, and takes on Nantes.

Rennes has been transformed under coach Franck Haise — who was won six of eight games since taking charge.

Players to watch

Afonso Moreira: The 21-year-old Portugal forward had his best performance of the season against PSG, according to his coach Paulo Fonseca, and was outstanding either breaking from the left flank or holding up the ball. He also combined well with Brazil forward Endrick in what could be a crucial partnership in the remaining games.

Domink Greif: The imposing Slovakian has been brilliant in goal for Lyon this season and saved a penalty against PSG, following a standout performance in the previous game.

Esteban Lepaul: He was without a club a few years ago when Lyon released him and is now Ligue 1's top scorer with 17 goals for high-flying Rennes. Lepaul shoots with every precision and has a gift for finding space.

Ilan Kebbal: The Algeria midfielder is Paris FC's top scorer with nine goals and his outstanding recent form has been at the heart of the club's inspired turnaround under coach Antoine Kombouaré. (AP)

Thushara withdraws case against SLC

COLOMBO, April 23: Fast bowler Nuwan Thushara, who had dragged Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) to court for not issuing him a No Objection Certificate (NoC) for competing in the IPL, on Thursday withdrew the case against the governing body.

The player with 30 T20 international appearances since 2022, pleaded that the SLC had refused to issue him a NOC, saying that he had failed fitness tests.

His attorney told the district court that since most of the games in the IPL have already been completed, his client wished to withdraw the case which the court upheld.

He apologized to the SLC and indicated his willingness to withdraw the case.

Thushara was to appear for defending champions Royal Challengers Bangalore (RSB) this season having previously played in 2024 and 2025. (PTI)

Indo-Australian athlete attempts to be youngest to run length of India

NEW DELHI, April 23: Undertaking an extraordinary 5000km 'One India Run' from Kanyakumari to Kashmir, Indo-Australian athlete Om Satija is attempting to become the youngest to run the length of India.

Now on day 87 of the journey, the 23-year-old from Melbourne has already completed approximately 4000 kilometres and is approaching Delhi, averaging close to 50 km per day.

Satija aims to become the first person to run the east coast of India and youngest person to run the length of the country, marking an historic milestone in Indian endurance sport, a media release stated.

The run aims to raise ₹ 60 lakh in funds for Udayan Kolkata, a charity that works with children from marginalised and leprosy-affected communities.

"The money will help educate 1,000 children over the next five years; this impact equates to just ₹ 1,200 per kilometre of the run," the release said.

"The project has already raised close to ₹ 17 lakh, with momentum continuing to build through community events and grassroots support," it added.

The One India Run (oneindiarun.org) is designed to inspire Indians to believe that fitness, dreaming big, and taking initiative can be powerful tools for change.

By running the length of the country, the project aims to spark conversations around resilience, health, and social responsibility - all while mobilising tangible support for vulnerable communities. (PTI)

Knight Riders home base to host Olympic cricket: ICC CEO

LOS ANGELES, April 23: ICC CEO Sanjog Gupta on Thursday termed the "ground breaking" of the cricket venue for the 2028 Olympics as the fulfilment of a long awaited "promise", noting that the facility, which also serves as the home ground of the Los Angeles Knight Riders, will bring the sport to the global showpiece.

"This is a moment in history because what we are breaking ground on today is not simply a cricket field. We are breaking ground on a promise. A promise that took 128 years to keep," Gupta said.

Gupta was speaking at the ground breaking ceremony of the venue for the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics.

Gupta said cricket's return to the Olympics after more than a century marked recognition of the sport's global appeal, following the International Olympic Committee (IOC) approving its inclusion in the Los Angeles Games.

"That's how long the world's second most popular sport, a game played and passionately followed by more than 2.5 billion people, has been missing from the Olympic stage."

"When the International Olympic Committee formally approved cricket's inclusion in the Los Angeles 2028 Games, it wasn't just a scheduling announcement. It was a



recognition that the Olympics should reflect the sports that billions of people love," he said.

"The International Cricket Council humbly accepted that recognition with our full commitment."

Referring to the venue at Pomona, Gupta said its community driven legacy made it an ideal choice for cricket's Olympic return.

"I can't imagine a better venue than Pomona for the coming together of this promise. The best things in sport happen when ambition meets community, and Pomona is both."

"This site has served the people of Los Angeles County as the home of the LA County Fair, as a gathering place for trade, culture, and celebration," he said.

"There is something fitting, almost poetic, about the fact that a venue built on the idea of community coming together will now host a sport that, at its very core, is all about community."

Gupta acknowledged the role of the Knight Riders group in developing the venue, highlighting its intent to grow cricket in the United States.

"I want to acknowledge the role the Los Angeles Knight Riders are playing in making this promise possible. The Knight Riders Group, owners of cricket franchises across India, Caribbean, the UAE, and the United States, has made a bold declaration by establishing their official home ground here, with a clear view to positioning this region as a future hub for cricket in America," he said.

"They want to build this as the nursery for the sport's future in this country and to bring together the massive cricket community from across the nation."

Gupta said the Olympic platform would provide cricket unprecedented global exposure, with billions expected to follow the Games.

"When the LA28 Games take place in July 2028, the eyes of four billion Olympic viewers will be on Los Angeles. Many of those eyes will fall on Fairplex and on cricket for the first time. (PTI)

RCB, GT eye batting revival in their IPL match

BENGALURU, April 23: Royal Challengers Bengaluru will be eyeing a batting resurgence against an equally stuttering Gujarat Titans in their Indian Premier League match here on Friday.

A slightly tacky Chinnaswamy pitch squeezed the usual firepower out of the RCB batting unit against Delhi Capitals in their previous match, which they lost by six wickets.

But more than the second defeat of the season, which was also a first at home in IPL 2026, squandering a chance to firm up their position inside the top four might disappoint RCB management.

Now, third on the table with eight points, they have Sunrisers Hyderabad (8 points), Delhi Capitals and the Titans (6 points each) close on their tail.

The reigning champions would very well know that another slip-up, this time against GT, would push them further into a tight spot, particularly because they are now bracing for a slew of away matches, including two at 'home away from home' Raipur.

Therefore, the Royal Challengers would like to give a fitting farewell to their adoring and loyal Chinnaswamy fans, producing a forceful effort against Gujarat.

But one pre-requisite for that is RCB batters' regaining their mojo and finding a way to put on board a challenging total even when conditions do not favour them.

The opposite of it has happened in two matches in a row. RCB won quite easily in the end against Lucknow Super Giants in the



16th over but gave away five wickets in return.

Against DC, the RCB batters could not get going from ball one despite opener Phil Salt making a well-crafted 63.

Even acclaimed six-hitters like Rajat Patidar and Tim David had to look for alternate ways to score runs, though without much success.

So, the RCB batters might do well to keep a Plan B in store, as, at times, their all-out attack approach might not work.

RCB bowlers under Bhuvneshwar Kumar,

who has aged like fine wine, dragged the contest against the Capitals to the penultimate over, but did not have enough runs on board to play with.

They would hope for a change in script on Friday.

Similarly, the Gujarat outfit too would envisage a changed script.

The former champions were bundled out for 100 by Mumbai Indians, pushing them to a 99-run defeat which also dealt a severe blow to their net run rate.

Skipper Shubman Gill and Jos Buttler

have shown some consistency but the likes of B Sai Sudharsan, Glenn Phillips and Rahul Tewatia are yet to support them with knocks of importance or at least some handy cameos.

It has resulted in GT's failure to come up with at least one signature batting effort this season, unlike their Friday's rival RCB have done so often in IPL 2026.

The Titans have a potent bowling line-up consisting of Prasadh Krishna, Kagiso Rabada, Mohammed Siraj and Rashid Khan but were often hampered by their batting colleagues' inconsistencies.

Teams:
Royal Challengers Bengaluru: Rajat Patidar (captain), Virat Kohli, Tim David, Jacob Bethell, Romario Shepherd, Josh Hazlewood, Nuwan Thushara, Devdutt Padikkal, Jitesh Sharma, Krunal Pandya, Rasikh Dar, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Jordan Cox, Suyash Sharma, Venkatesh Iyer, Swapnil Singh, Jacob Duffy, Kanishk Chouhan, Abhinandan Singh, Mangesh Yadav, Phil Salt, Satvik Deswal, Vicky Ostwal, Vihaan Malhotra.

Gujarat Titans: Sai Sudharsan, Shubman Gill (c), Shahrukh Khan, Anuj Rawat, Jos Buttler, Kumar Kushagra, Tom Banton, Glenn Phillips, Kush Holder, Nishant Sindhu, Rahul Tewatia, Washington Sundar, Sai Kishore, Jayant Yadav, Arshad Khan, Shahrukh Khan, Manav Suthar, Rashid Khan, Mohammed Siraj, Kagiso Rabada, Prasadh Krishna.

Match starts at 7.30pm. (PTI)

Indian men eye Thomas Cup encore, women face tough test in Uber Cup Final



HORSENS (DENMARK), April 23: Banking on a settled core and bolstered by the rise of Ayush Shetty, the Indian men's team will aim to reclaim the title, while the women's side looks to punch above its weight at the BWF Thomas & Uber Cup Finals beginning here on Friday.

India will open their campaign against Canada on Friday, followed by matches against Australia on Monday (April 27) and China on Wednesday (April 29).

Four years ago, India did something unprecedented, annexing the Thomas Cup crown, considered the world team championship of badminton, putting the sport firmly on the radar of the youth in this country.

A bunch of bravehearts, led by Kidambi Srikanth and HS Prannoy, defied all odds as they tamed Denmark, Malaysia and Indonesia en route to that epic moment in Indian badminton history.

That week witnessed Srikanth emerge as the invincible leader, Prannoy the decider specialist, and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty the gentle giants.

Two years later, India's title defence ended against China in the quarterfinals. Cut to 2026, there is renewed hope as the Indian men, with the same core and the exuberance of rising star Ayush, are eyeing a repeat.

Ayush is coming off a strong show at the Badminton Asia Championships, where he became the first Indian to reach the final after 61 years, while Lakshya Sen recorded a second runner-up finish at the All England Championships last month.

Both the Indians produced some stunning performances against top

players such as Li Shi Feng and Jonatan Christie.

After missing action due to a shoulder injury, Satwik and his partner Chirag will be back with fresh mind and body as India face Pan Am champions Canada, Oceania champions Australia, and 11-time winners and defending champions China in Group A.

"We will have a good chance to win the Thomas Cup again. With Ayush and Lakshya in singles and Satwik and Chirag in doubles, of course everything will have to click," former India coach Vimal Kumar said.

"India and China should pull through from the group."

The onus will mainly be on the young guns to take India through, as Srikanth and Prannoy are not in the best of form.

While Srikanth had two runner-up finishes last year, he has struggled in the BWF World Tour events. Prannoy too has been bogged down by niggles and endured a forgettable season since the 2024 Olympics, when he battled through chikungunya.

Tough road ahead for women
In the Uber Cup, the Indian women's team, led by double Olympic medalist PV Sindhu, will face Denmark on Friday (April 24), Ukraine on Saturday (April 25), and China on Monday (April 27).

India has won bronze medals in the 2014 and 2016 editions, but it will be an uphill battle this time, especially without the services of Gayatri Gopichand and Treasa Jolly, who is nursing an ankle injury.

The women's team is clubbed with European Team Championships runners-up Denmark, bronze medalists Ukraine, and 16-time champions China. (PTI)

Langer compares Ekana pitch to WACA, says LSG haven't adjusted to it



LUCKNOW, April 23: Lucknow Super Giants head coach Justin Langer compared the Ekana pitch to the famed Perth track of yesteryears, admitting that the home team has been unable to adapt to the pace and bounce on offer on it.

The LSG have struggled on their home surface, losing all three matches here. They have gone down by six and seven wickets to Delhi Capitals and Gujarat Titans respectively, before suffering a 40-run defeat to Rajasthan Royals on Wednesday.

The LSG lost six of their eight matches here last season, including five in a row. Overall, they have managed just nine wins from 25 games at the venue.

"The pitch here is very different than in most of India. It's a brilliant cricket pitch. You see pace and bounce, and we just haven't quite adjusted to it," Langer said at the post-match press conference.

"I thought we'd started off, we'd been bowling quite well in it. We bowled well in the first game, but we're just not adjusting to the extra pace and bounce. We saw that we've been out to the short ball a number of times, our batters.

"We see a lot of the wickets in India where the ball doesn't bounce very high. This is like playing at the WACA. There's real pace and bounce. You're seeing some really interesting cricket being played here," he added.

Despite boasting a formidable

batting line-up featuring skipper Rishabh Pant, Australia's Mitchell Marsh, South Africa T20 captain Aiden Markram and the flamboyant Nicholas Pooran, LSG have struggled to put up competitive totals at home, managing 141, 164 for 8 and 119 in three games.

"Our batting's just not quite clicking, and who would have thought at the start of the season our batting wouldn't click with the calibre of players we've got? We could never have read that, so we're working hard on it."

The former Australia coach, however, had words of praise for the bowling unit, predicting a bright future for young pacers Prince Yadav and Mohsin Khan.

"Last year our numbers were incredible and we were ruing the fact that a lot of our bowlers were injured or coming back from injury or not quite fit.

"This year our bowlers have been a real credit. I think Mohsin Khan, again outstanding. Prince Yadav, I think they're both two players who will play for India. No question in my mind they'll both play for India."

On whether the franchise had any say in pitch preparation, Langer dismissed the notion.

"No, no, no. Their groundsmen here: I've said for the last couple of years this is one of the best pitches in India."

"It's a big ground. It's a brilliant bat... it's a great cricket wicket actually and we just need to adapt to it better." (PTI)

Pallabi Bhagawati Baruah brings laurels to Naduar

H.T Correspondent

BISWANATH CHARIALI, April 23: Pallabi Bhagawati Baruah, wife of Ashok Baruah and a resident Nandikesar here brought laurels to the greater Jamugurihat as well as to the state and the nation by winning three gold medals in the recently concluded World Masters Sports Championships 2026 held in Thailand. The World Masters Sports was held from April 17 in Thailand and she managed to win three gold medals in the athletics category which included Javelin Through, Discus Throw and Shot Put respectively.

It is pertinent to mention here that Pallabi Bhagawati Baruah is an Anganwadi worker by profession who has attained the age of 55. A mother of a young boy, Pallabi was a district level best player during her youth. On her arrival, various organisations of the greater Jamugurihat and Nandikesar including Chilabandha regional Brahmin Samaj, Chilabandha regional Women Brahmin Samaj besides others accorded her a rousing welcome by a rally on Wednesday. On reaching her home, organisations accorded that masters champion a spectacular felicitation. Organisations and individuals of the greater Jamugurihat area congratulated Pallabi Bhagawati Baruah on her coveted achievement.

CSK draft in Akash Madhwal as replacement for Mhatre

CHENNAI, April 23: Chennai Super Kings on Thursday signed Akash Madhwal as a replacement for Ayush Mhatre, who was ruled out of the remainder of the IPL 2026 due to an injury.

Mhatre, India's U19 World Cup-winning captain, made an impactful start to the season for CSK, scoring two fifties in six matches before suffering a left hamstring injury in the match against Sunrisers Hyderabad.

Madhwal joins CSK for Rs 30 lakh.

A right-arm fast bowler, Madhwal has previously represented Mumbai Indians (2023, 2024) and Rajasthan Royals (2025).

The Uttarakhnad pacer, who had attended CSK trials earlier in the season, has featured in 17 IPL matches, picking up 23 wickets.

The 32-year-old also has a five-wicket haul to his name, having recorded sensational figures of 5/5 in his debut season for MI in the Eliminator against Lucknow Super Giants. (PTI)

India's mistakes exposed at right time before T20 World Cup: Harmanpreet Kaur

JOHANNESBURG, April 23: Indian women's team captain Harmanpreet Kaur believes her side's below-par performance against South Africa has come at the right time, allowing the management sufficient time to address their shortcomings and "come back strong" for the T20 World Cup in June.

The 'Women in Blue' slumped to their first T20I series defeat since their group-stage exit at the T20 World Cup in October 2024, conceding a five-match rubber 0-3 to South Africa on Wednesday, with two matches still to be played.

Since that early exit at the ICC showpiece, Harmanpreet's side had enjoyed a strong run, winning series against West Indies, England, Sri Lanka and Australia. "After the last T20 WC, we have won the maximum T20 series, this is the only one we didn't execute the way we were in the last series," Harmanpreet said at the press conference after the team's nine-wicket loss in the third WT20I here on Wednesday.

"I think it's good that whatever mistakes we are making are now and not in the World Cup. This is the right time where we can learn and come back strong."

"As a captain I take everything in a positive way. We still have two matches and we can still put up a decent show," she added.

With the T20 World Cup in England and Wales less than two months away, India's struggles, particularly with the ball, will be a concern. While South Africa have claimed 21 Indian wickets in three matches, India have managed just seven scalps, with the visitors failing to make early inroads throughout the series.

In the third T20I, that inability proved costly as South Africa chased down India's 192 for 4 with remarkable ease in just 16.3 overs, registering a nine-wicket win.



"The score was decent but unfortunately we were not able to get a breakthrough in the powerplay. No matter what match you are playing, taking wickets in powerplay always helps and we were not able to do that and it really cost us."

"On top of that we gave away too many runs. After that we didn't get anything with the help of which we could make a comeback in the game."

"We were eyeing a breakthrough in the powerplay, it could have turned the game for us. We weren't able to stick to our plans and execute well and they batted very well," Harmanpreet said.

After modest totals of 157 for 7 and 147 all out in the first two games, India's batting showed improvement in the third match, posting 192 for 4, courtesy half-centuries from Harmanpreet (66) and Shafali Verma (64). (PTI)

Kirsten targets next ODI World Cup for Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, April 23: Entrusted with the task of reviving Sri Lanka's fortunes in international cricket, new head coach Gary Kirsten is aiming to prepare a squad that will compete for the top prize in the 2027 ODI World Cup.

Former South Africa opener Kirsten was appointed as the new head coach of the Sri Lanka men's team on a two-year contract starting April 15, with a focus on preparing for the 2027 ODI World Cup.

"I think we would all like to see the team performing really well across all the formats. Obviously, there are some big tournaments just around the corner, the men's World Cup in 17 months time. We'd want to have a really good tournament there," Kirsten said here on Thursday.

The ODI World Cup is to take place in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia in October and November next year.

Sri Lanka have not featured in the semifinals of any ODI World Cup since 2011 when they were beaten by India in the final. Kirsten was in charge of India at the time.

He stated that he was trying to identify the most balanced team across formats and evaluate depth for each position. (PTI)

When I come to ground, I leave my personal ego in hotel room: Ravindra Jadeja



NEW DELHI, April 23: Representing Rajasthan Royals, Ravindra Jadeja has not always bowled his full quota of overs due to various factors this IPL season, but the veteran all-rounder has no qualms about it, saying he "leaves his ego in the hotel room before coming to the ground."

Jadeja delivered an all-round performance to help his side secure a convincing 40-run win over Lucknow Super Giants in their IPL clash on Wednesday.

On not being able to finish his quota of overs in a couple of games previously, Jadeja told JioHotstar, "When I come to the ground, I leave my personal ego in the hotel room. I just think about contributing in whatever way the team wants from me."

"When it comes to batting, I wanted to take it deep in this game, because if I had gotten out in the 17th or 18th over playing a wrong shot, we wouldn't have reached 159 and might have fallen 20-25 runs short."

Jadeja made 43 off 29 balls and then

picked up one wicket for 29 runs in four overs to play a big part in the victory.

"Chasing a smaller target might then have been easier for LSG. In T20 cricket, every surface, condition, and match situation is different, so you have to adapt accordingly."

"If, on a given day, the team feels that I have a negative match-up against a particular batter, I understand that. It might work, or it might not; that's part of the game."

Jadeja remained unbeaten after giving his team's total a semblance of respectability, having played the waiting game with the LSG pacers making good use of the surface at the Ekana Stadium.

Elaborating on his batting approach, Jadeja said, "When I was batting, it wasn't that easy. LSG have quality fast bowlers, who were bowling with pace and in good areas. It was a red-soil surface, so there was bounce, and they were getting the ball to seam."

"We kept losing wickets and couldn't build any partnerships. So, Donovan and I spoke about taking the innings deep. But in T20 cricket, you have to keep taking risks here and there to get to a good score. Unfortunately, he got out at the wrong time."

"I was just calculating the overs and was aware that Mayank Yadav might bowl the final over. I just wanted to use his pace, with a short leg-side boundary and mid-off and mid-on both up."

"Three of the deliveries were short, and he played a bluff by bowling one full, but luckily, I was able to score a boundary off that as well. We got those 20 runs, and as a team, you gain confidence when your bowlers have a few extra runs to play with."

This was LSG's fourth consecutive defeat as Rajasthan Royals returned to winning ways.

On bowling slow on that Lucknow surface, Jadeja said, "When I was batting against Digvesh Rathi, a few of his deliveries were stopping in the wicket. So,

I thought that if I bowled slow on this surface, I might get some purchase as well."

"I didn't want to give any pace to either Mitch Marsh or Pooran, because they are big hitters and are known to hit big. So, I bowled slower, but I also wanted to vary my pace, as I didn't want to be predictable."

Former India player and batting coach Sanjay Bangar expressed his disappointment with LSG skipper Rishabh Pant's approach while batting. Pant was dismissed by Nandre Burger for a duck.

Analysing Pant's form, Bangar said, "It just didn't feel right, the shots he attempted at the start of his innings. In his first three balls, he tried to swing across the line each time."

"As a top-order batter with a lot of international runs and experience, this is something he would be very disappointed with. His body language said it all; he knew he got it wrong. If he applies more clarity to his approach early on, he will get far better returns." (PTI)