

Google removes Telegram app from Play Store on govt order, Apple may follow suit

NEW DELHI, June 16: Google has removed messaging app Telegram from its Play Store, and Apple is likely to follow suit in compliance with a government order, sources aware of the development said on Tuesday.

The government has ordered Google and Apple to delist the Telegram app from their app stores till June 22 to check paper leaks during the re-examination of the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET-UG) on June 21.

The nationwide examination is conducted by the National Testing Agency (NTA) for admission to undergraduate medical institutes. The agency cancelled the previous exam held on May 3 amid allegations of paper leak.

NTA Director General Abhishek Singh said the restriction on Telegram till June 22 was part of efforts to ensure that the June 21 re-test is conducted without malpractice.

"We will not let anything go wrong. We will take all possible actions to ensure that the examination is conducted without any malpractice," Singh told PTI.

Android phone users, while trying to download the Telegram app from the Google Play Store, see the message "this app is not available". Those who have already downloaded the app may face restrictions while using it.

Existing Telegram accounts continued to remain operational. While Apple's App Store was showing the app, the new account could not be activated on iPhones.

Sources told PTI that the government is in discussion with Telegram to temporarily disable the message editing feature till June 30, which allows existing users to edit their old messages as well as add any new content.

"The government has asked Google and Apple to delist the



app temporarily. Google has done it. Apple will also be doing it," a source said on condition of anonymity.

Sources said that any individual could search for a group on Telegram and join it without requiring permission from the group administrator.

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), acting on recommendations made by the NTA, has issued a direction under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, restricting access to the Telegram platform in India for a defined and limited period ending June 22, 2026, covering the day of the NEET (UG) 2026 re-examination and its immediate aftermath.

A separate direction requires Telegram to disable in India the message-editing feature for already-posted messages till June 30, addressing the specific structural feature through which the platform has been used to fabricate after-the-event "paper leak" evidence in respect of national examinations, NTA said in a statement.

It said the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C), under

the Ministry of Home Affairs, has served as the principal nodal agency, coordinating the operational response to the Telegram-based fraud and misinformation targeting NEET candidates.

According to the agency, acting on inputs from the NTA, state law enforcement agencies, including the police forces of Bihar, Gujarat and Rajasthan, and its own monitoring efforts, I4C secured the prompt takedown of a "substantial number" of Telegram channels, groups and bots that openly advertised fraudulent and misleading purposes.

The decision of the government to single out Telegram has earned criticism from digital advocacy and public policy entities.

Public policy firm IGAP said that for an examination of the NEET scale and consequence, the state has a legitimate interest in acting against fake paper-leak claims, organised cheating networks and fraud that can create panic among students and families.

"Restricting access to Telegram affects many ordinary users who may have nothing to do with the misconduct. Students, coaching

groups, teachers, professionals, journalists, small businesses and communities also use Telegram for legitimate purposes. So the issue is not whether the government can act to protect NEET. It clearly can. The harder question is whether a platform-level restriction is the least intrusive way to address a particular pattern of misuse," IGAP Partner Dhruv Garg said.

He further said that paper leak rumours and exam fraud do not travel only through Telegram. They can move across other platforms and closed groups as well.

"So if Telegram is being singled out, the justification should be Telegram-specific. It should rest on particular channels or bots, repeat offenders, platform design features, or a pattern of non-compliance that made narrower action inadequate," Garg said.

Digital advocacy group The Internet Freedom Foundation criticised the government's curbs on Telegram and disabling its message-editing feature ahead of the NEET-UG 2026 re-exam, calling the move a band-aid solution and a "disproportionate" response to exam fraud.

In a statement on X, the digital rights advocacy outfit expressed its objection to the directions announced today in the National Testing Agency's press release.

"Shutting down Telegram is a band-aid solution and is a disproportionate answer to exam fraud. On the NTA's recommendation, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has, under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, restricted access to the whole of Telegram in India until 22 June 2026, and has separately ordered the platform to switch off message-editing for every Indian user until 30 June 2026," it said. (PTI)

Infinix SMART 20 goes on sale with 120Hz display and AI-powered features

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, June 16: Smartphone manufacturer Infinix has announced the commencement of sales of its newly launched SMART 20, offering a range of premium features aimed at budget-conscious consumers.

The device is available through Flipkart and select retail outlets at an introductory effective price starting from ₹11,999, inclusive of launch offers.

The SMART 20 features a 7.7 mm slim design and a 6.78-inch punch-hole display with a 120Hz refresh rate and brightness of up to 700 nits.

The smartphone is powered by the MediaTek Helio G81 Ultimate processor and comes with up to 8GB RAM, including 4GB of extended virtual RAM, along with 128GB of internal storage.

According to the company, the handset has received a 48-month fluency certification aimed at ensuring smooth long-term performance.

The smartphone also incorporates durability-focused features, including IP64-rated dust and water resistance, protection against drops from heights of up to 1.5 metres and testing for more than 25,000 drops.

One of the notable additions is the Ultra Link feature, which enables offline calling and messaging over a distance of up to one kilometre under supported conditions. The device also includes Voiceprint Noise Reduction technology with multiple noise-cancellation modes to improve call quality. Running on XOS 16 based on Android 16, the SMART 20 comes equipped with AI-powered features through the company's Folax assistant.

These include document scanning, song recognition, scheduling assistance and voice-based controls.

LG unveils vision for AI-driven 'Zero Labor Home' ecosystem

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, June 16: LG Electronics has unveiled its roadmap for the future of connected living, outlining an AI-powered home ecosystem designed to reduce household effort through intelligent automation, personalised experiences and seamless device coordination.

The company said its vision centres on creating a "Zero Labor Home", where appliances and smart technologies go beyond connectivity to understand user habits, anticipate needs and perform tasks proactively.

At the core of the ecosystem are three key components—AI-powered

appliances, ThinQ AI orchestration and autonomous home robots—which together form what LG describes as the "ThinQ AI Universe", a hyper-connected platform designed to simplify everyday life.

According to the company, its next-generation appliances are equipped with artificial intelligence capabilities that enable them to learn usage patterns, optimise performance and provide personalised experiences.

For instance, refrigerators can adjust cooling cycles based on household routines to preserve food freshness while improving energy efficiency.

The second pillar, ThinQ AI Orchestration, serves as the central intelligence layer, enabling different devices and services within the home to communicate and coordinate with one another.

Powered by generative AI, the platform is designed to understand context, anticipate user requirements and deliver more intuitive interactions. The third component involves autonomous home robots, which extend AI capabilities into physical spaces. LG highlighted its CLOiD home robot, unveiled earlier this year, as a step towards integrating physical AI into daily household activities.

El Niño to hit 12 states severely

Chouhan calls for district-level contingency plans for Kharif

NEW DELHI, June 16: The impact of El Niño weather phenomenon, linked with a weaker monsoon in India, is likely to be "relatively severe" in 12 states, including Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, in the Kharif season, according to the agriculture ministry, which on Tuesday directed coordinated action through district-level machinery in the most vulnerable regions.

Other states likely to be impacted by El Niño include Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Odisha, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Maharashtra.

"In 9-10 states where the impact of El Niño may be relatively higher, coordinated meetings should be organised with District Magistrates, Agriculture Departments, Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) and other extension systems of the identified districts," Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, who chaired the weekly review meeting on Kharif 2026 preparations, said.

The minister also stressed the need for advance contingency planning in rain-deficient districts, while also pushing for increased acreage under cotton and pulses, an official statement said.

However, after the meeting, a senior ministry official told PTI that a total of 12 states have been identified that may be severely impacted due to El Niño this year and contingency plans for 326 districts in these states are being prepared.

El Niño is a climate phenomenon historically linked to weaker monsoons and heightened rainfall uncertainties - a concern that looms large this year.

As per the India Meteorological Department (IMD), El Niño conditions are currently present over the equatorial Pacific Ocean and are expected to strengthen further during the southwest monsoon season (June-September).

IMD has forecast the southwest monsoon at around 90 per cent of the long-period average, signalling a below-normal season.

Chouhan directed state governments to clearly identify vulnerable districts and prepare crop-wise contingency plans in advance, so that farmers can be promptly provided with options, advice, and assistance in the event of any weather challenge, the ministry said in a statement.

"A separate and practical strategy should be developed for each vulnerable district, with special attention to water conservation, moisture management, intercropping, and alternative crop patterns," he said.

The minister underscored that the government's priority is to ensure farmers receive "calm, reliable, and solution-oriented messages based on scientific analysis" rather than alarmist communication.

The meeting reviewed crop-wise targets, sowing progress, and state-wise Kharif 2026 preparations, with particular emphasis on

boosting cotton output.

Chouhan called for wider adoption of scientific methods, right variety selection, intercropping, mulching, and moisture conservation to improve both productivity and farm incomes.

The Pulses Self-Sufficiency Mission also figured prominently in the discussions.

Chouhan said the government is working closely with states to expand cultivation of pigeon pea, black gram, and green gram through crop rotation, area expansion, improved seed availability, and technical guidance, with the aim of reducing import dependence.

The review covered fertiliser availability, market prices, reservoir levels, and water storage status across states.

Chouhan assured that fertiliser supply is adequate at the national level and will be further streamlined to states and districts as the monsoon progresses. He directed officials to ensure advance supply in areas facing potential micro-level shortages.

Chouhan stressed the need for tighter coordination among agricultural universities, ICAR institutes, KVKs, and state agriculture departments, noting that technical knowledge is "meaningful only when it reaches the fields in a timely manner. He called for continuous dialogue, regular reviews, and on-ground feedback to ensure a successful and secure Kharif 2026. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Iran: Deal requires

He added, "I mean, who wouldn't approve of it?"

Republicans on Capitol Hill say they want Trump to provide more information about the agreement, with some expressing scepticism that the deal can deter Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapon.

Israel and the Lebanese government have entered into their own US-mediated direct negotiations, of which Hezbollah was not a part. Those talks have yielded several announced ceasefires that were never implemented on the ground.

Lebanese officials initially tried to keep Lebanon separate from the US-Iran negotiations, not wanting to be seen as beholden to Iran, but they have since welcomed the announcement that the deal to end the US-Iran war would include a ceasefire in Lebanon.

Aragchi's comments on Tuesday appear to match the understanding of two regional officials with direct knowledge of the interim deal.

The officials, speaking to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss the closed-door negotiations, said it would require Israel to leave nearly all the territory it occupies in Lebanon, minus a few hilltop points along the border seized earlier.

The officials say Iran insisted the accord include Lebanon in the last days of the negotiations.

Lebanon is only one of several major questions hanging over the ceasefire ahead of a planned ceremonial signing on Friday in Geneva.

The agreement is meant to provide a meaningful truce in a month-long war that has killed thousands across the Middle East, including the top leaders of Iran's theocracy, and raised the prices of fuel, food and other basic goods far beyond the region.

The unpublished agreement provides for the "immediate" opening of the Strait of Hormuz and lifting of the blockade, according to a senior US official who spoke to reporters on condition of anonymity to discuss outlines of the agreement on Monday.

It starts with the simultaneous lifting of Iran's closure of the strait and the US blockade of Iran's ports, according to Pakistani officials who helped broker the agreement.

The United States and Iran will then begin 60 days of negotiations over Iran's nuclear program and the potential lifting of sanctions, Pakistani officials who helped broker the interim deal said, speaking on condition of anonymity about the unpublished text.

It also includes the possibility of releasing Iran's frozen funds and a USD 300 billion fund to help rebuild Iran if Tehran meets certain benchmarks, senior US officials told reporters Monday.

Trump later said the United States would not "invest" funds in Iran.

Regarding the timeline, regional officials who spoke to AP about the deal said the release of frozen Iranian assets would be tied to Tehran implementing the deal. Gulf Arab states have also pledged to inject billions of dollars into Iran's economy, they added, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss the negotiations.

Iran's nuclear program, specifically the fate of its stockpile of highly enriched uranium, would be subject to the 60-day clock. Iran has agreed to discuss ways to possibly "dilute or remove" it, the officials said. However, it remains unclear whether Tehran would agree to that, particularly with hard-liners opposed to giving it up.

US officials have not yet explained how they see the agreement addressing Iran's nuclear program, including who will be in charge of verifying that Iran is in compliance and who will destroy or remove highly enriched uranium believed to be buried under nuclear sites that were badly damaged by US strikes last summer.

Still, world leaders gathering in France for the first full day of the G7 summit insisted the agreement needed to succeed, even as key questions remained unanswered.

Some had clashed with Trump over not consulting them before going to war. But the leaders of France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom issued a joint statement congratulating the United States, the Iranian government and the mediators on what they called a "diplomatic breakthrough" before the summit kicked off, saying it was vital for the deal to be quickly implemented.

French President Emmanuel Macron said France and other Western nations were "ready to take action very quickly" to help reopen the Strait of Hormuz peacefully. (AP)

Northeast to become

cover, old buildings, and the sprawling Shillong Golf Course built in the late 19th century.

The entire Northeast, comprising eight states, is dotted with historic locations, cultural and natural heritage sites, including the Living Root Bridges of Meghalaya.

A replica of a living root bridge has been displayed at the 'Meghalaya Eco-Pavillion' put up by the Meghalaya Tourism at the summit.

The inaugural ceremony on Monday was attended by Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways, Nitin Gadkari, Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio, and several other dignitaries.

At a thematic session on Tuesday, Civil Aviation Minister K Ram Mohan Naidu's recorded address was played on a screen.

After the roundtable, Shekhawat was given a tour of the exhibition area at the summit venue.

"Given the kind of interest we are seeing among the industry members at the summit, I reckon that in the coming time, the Northeast will become a hub of Indian tourism," he told reporters.

Union Minister of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Sarbananda Sonowal, who attended the summit on Monday, also said that the Northeast has truly become the "fulcrum of India", asserting that the "Ashlakhshmi story" was unfolding at an accelerated pace, driving an inclusive, sustainable and globally competitive future. (PTI)

Nagaland joins Census

process and cooperate fully with census officials to ensure that every household and every individual is counted.

Body of unidentified

drug paraphernalia, including used syringes and containers commonly used for storing chewing tobacco, were recovered from the vicinity of the body.

The body was examined in the presence of the Executive Magistrate of Bokajan before being sent to Diphu Civil Hospital for post-mortem examination to ascertain the exact cause of death.

As the identity of the deceased remains unknown, the body has been kept in the hospital morgue for the mandatory 72-hour period to facilitate identification.

Police have appealed to the public to contact Khatkhati Police Station if they have any information that could help identify the deceased.

M'laya committed to

influences, I believe that itself is a major achievement," he said.

The chief minister said interacting with Meghalaya's sportspersons and some of the country's leading sports icons at the conclave was energising, adding that their stories of "struggles, discipline, resilience and success" would inspire young athletes to dream bigger and push harder.

Sangma also said 15 outstanding sportspersons across six disciplines -- archery, athletics, swimming, weightlifting, wrestling and football-- were honoured with cash awards ranging from Rs 25,000 to Rs 87,500.

"Recognising and celebrating our sporting talent is important not only to encourage these young achievers to continue striving for excellence, but also to inspire our youth to dream bigger, work harder and pursue greatness through sports," he said.

Describing grassroots initiatives as the foundation of Meghalaya's sporting ambitions, Sangma said the government's focus extends beyond producing elite athletes.

"The story is not just about the sportspersons sitting here today. It is about every child and every young person in our state," he said, adding that the promotion of sports is central to the vision of building a stronger and healthier Meghalaya.

"Our youth are immensely talented. With the right guidance, opportunities and support, there is no limit to what they can achieve," he added. (PTI)

3 minors detained

police and the body was recovered from the field by a police team later in the night. "The three boys have been detained after initial investigation," the ASP said.

"Further investigation is on, and more details will be shared later," Baishya added. (PTI)

Two BSF jawans

identified the two accused during a Test Identification Parade conducted before a Judicial Magistrate on September 5, 2017, the court said.

During the trial, the prosecution examined 18 witnesses, including medical experts, investigating officers and locals.

The court relied heavily on the survivor's testimony, which it described as consistent and trustworthy.

However, the court acquitted both jawans of the charge of murder in connection with the death of Rangobi, whose body was recovered from a forest area on July 27, 2017.

The judge ruled that the prosecution had failed to establish beyond a reasonable doubt that the two accused were responsible for her death, noting the absence of a complete chain of circumstantial evidence linking them to the homicide. (PTI)

NFR gears up

volunteers from the NFR Bharat Scouts and Guides will also be stationed at strategic locations to help pilgrims with information and support services.

"With these comprehensive arrangements in place, Northeast Frontier Railway is geared up to facilitate a safe, convenient and seamless pilgrimage experience for devotees attending the Ambubachi Mela and ensure smooth passenger movement throughout the festival period," the statement concluded.

ENGINEERING WORKS AT LUMDING DIVISION

E-Tender Notice No. SCL-Engg-48-2026; Dated: 12-06-2026. E-tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following work: **SN. 1. Brief Description of Item:** Proposed updating reconciling & certification of Land Plan with Mutation of Railway Land (duly separating Patta) along with ROR, Chitha & Jammabandi duly observing the "Digital India Land Records Modernization Programme (DLRMP)" of Lumding Division under the jurisdiction of Sr. DEN/III/Lumding & Sr. DEN/VI/Lumding. **Tender Value:** ₹2,30,43,285.46/-; **Earnest Money:** ₹4,60,900.00/-; E-tenders will be closed at 15:00 hrs. on 07-07-2026 and opened at 15:00 hrs. on 08-07-2026. The complete information with tender documents of above e-tender will be available upto 15:00 hrs. of 07-07-2026 in website <http://www.ireps.gov.in>.

DRM (Works), Lumding

NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY

"Serving Customers with a smile"

ENGINEERING WORKS IN LUMDING DIVISION

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DRM(W)/Lumding, Silchar

NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY

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NAME CORRECTION

I Mohammad Zakaria Ahmed, S/O-

Abdul Noor, Vill- Sabajpur, P.O-

Murajhar, P.S-Murajhar, Dist- Hojai

(Assam) That, my father actual and

correct name is Abdul Noor, mother

name Komola Bibi and wife name

Tahera Begum. That, in the Passport,

my father name has been recorded

as Mohammed Abdul Noor instead

of Abdul Noor, my mother name

recorded Komola Khatun instead of

Komola Bibi and my wife name

Tahera Begum Choudhury instead

of Tahera Begum.

Mohammad Zakaria Ahmed

District administration reviews implementation of key schemes, infrastructure projects and welfare initiatives across Kokrajhar

Kokrajhar admin reviews progress of govt schemes and development projects

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, June 16: A comprehensive review meeting on the implementation of government schemes and ongoing development projects in Kokrajhar district was held at the conference hall of the Deputy Commissioner's office on Tuesday.

The meeting was chaired by Deputy Commissioner Dr P Uday Praveen and attended by Gossaigaon MLA Sobharam Basumatary, Baukhungri MLA Rupam Chandra Roy, Parbatjhora MLA Md Ashraf Islam Sheikh, senior district administration officials and heads of various government departments.

During the meeting, Additional Deputy Commissioners presented reports on the activities and initiatives undertaken by the district administration, while departmental heads made presentations on the status of various government schemes and programmes under their respective jurisdictions.



The review focused on the progress of key development initiatives, including projects implemented under the MLA Local Area Development (MLALAD) Fund, Member of Parliament Local Area

Development (MPLAD) Fund, Untied Funds and other ongoing infrastructure and welfare programmes across the district.

Discussions centred on accelerating development works, improving public ser-

vice delivery, strengthening welfare measures and ensuring the effective implementation of government schemes for the benefit of the people.

Participants also deliberated on challenges affecting project execution and stressed the need for greater coordination among departments to facilitate timely completion of developmental works.

Speaking after the meeting, Dr Praveen described the discussions as constructive and meaningful for advancing the district's development agenda.

He noted that the elected representatives shared their views and suggestions regarding developmental initiatives being undertaken through MLALAD and MPLAD funds in different parts of the district.

The meeting concluded with a renewed emphasis on coordinated efforts to ensure efficient implementation of development programmes and improved delivery of public services across Kokrajhar district.

Makeshift bamboo bridge washed away, leaving border village cut off



HT Correspondent

MARGHERITA, June 16: A makeshift bamboo bridge serving as the primary link to Mungkam village on the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border was washed away by the strong current of the Tirap River on Monday afternoon, leaving residents dependent on boats for transportation.

Mungkam, a predominantly Tangsa-inhabited village under the 83rd Margherita Legislative Assembly Constituency in Tinsukia district, is home to more than 50 families who have been residing in the area for generations.

According to local residents, the bamboo bridge, constructed by villagers themselves, had long served as the only reliable means of crossing the river and connecting the village with nearby areas.

Baitu Yongkuk, a resident of the village, alleged that despite repeated appeals over the years, government development initiatives have not adequately reached the remote border settlement.

He expressed disappointment that even decades after Independence, no permanent bridge has been constructed over the Tirap River to provide safe and all-weather connectivity to the village.

Yongkuk said villagers had repeatedly submitted memoranda to both the State and Central governments seeking the construction of a concrete bridge and improved infrastructure for the area.

However, he claimed that the community had received only assurances without any tangible progress.

With the bridge now washed away, villagers will have to depend on small boats for the next several months until river conditions improve.

Residents said the situation has created serious difficulties for students, patients, farmers and daily commuters, who must now cross the river under challenging and often risky conditions.

Local residents warned that if their long-pending demands for a permanent bridge and better connectivity continue to be ignored, they may launch an agitation to press for government intervention.

The incident has once again highlighted the infrastructural challenges faced by remote border villages in the region, particularly during the monsoon season when rivers swell and transportation links become vulnerable.

Three arrested after police raid on alleged prostitution racket in Jorhat

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, June 16: Three persons, including two women and a man, have been arrested in connection with an alleged prostitution racket operating from a hotel along National Highway 715 in Jorhat district.

According to police sources, the arrests were made following a late-night raid conducted on Monday based on specific information about illegal activities allegedly being carried out at the hotel.

During the operation, police reportedly detained six to seven women and a similar number of men from the premises for questioning.

Sources said the two women and one man were subsequently arrested in connection with the case.

However, police declined to disclose the specific legal provisions under which they have been booked, citing the ongoing investigation.

Officials stated that further details would emerge as the investigation progresses.

Police sources indicated that the women brought in during the raid are currently being treated as victims in the alleged racket.

Videos circulating on social media showed women, covered with white bedsheets, being escorted into a police vehicle following the operation.

Among the men detained during the raid, one individual reportedly claimed that he was a hotel guest from Kolkata who had come to Jorhat for business purposes.

Police have not yet released an official statement regarding the outcome of the raid or the nature of the evidence recovered from the hotel.

Nagaon administration seals Aditya Sweets over alleged pollution violations

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, June 16: The Nagaon district administration on Tuesday sealed Aditya Sweets and Restaurant, a prominent commercial establishment in the town, following allegations of environmental pollution and repeated violations of waste disposal norms.

Located near Joysree Cinema Hall Chariali, the establishment had reportedly been under scrutiny for allegedly discharging waste water, food waste and garbage into public drains and adjoining roads, causing inconvenience to residents, commuters and devotees using the

nearby Jagannath Mandir road.

According to local sources, traders and residents had repeatedly raised concerns with the district administration regarding the unhygienic conditions created by the alleged improper disposal of waste from the establishment.

Officials said the management had earlier been directed on several occasions to adopt proper waste management practices.

However, the alleged violations reportedly continued despite repeated instructions.

The matter gained further attention after a team from the Pollution

Control Department conducted an inspection of the premises on Monday.

Based on the findings of the inspection, the district administration initiated action against the establishment.

On Tuesday morning, officials, accompanied by a magistrate and police personnel, sealed the restaurant and sweet shop.

The move was welcomed by several local residents and business owners, who said the action would help address long-standing concerns relating to sanitation and environmental pollution in the

area. The establishment stands on the site of the former Joysree Cinema Hall, a landmark named after the daughter of renowned cultural icon Jyoti Prasad Agarwala.

The demolition of the cinema hall in the past had sparked public debate, with several organisations and citizens calling for the preservation of the historic structure.

Officials have not yet indicated when the establishment may be allowed to resume operations, stating that further action would depend on compliance with environmental and sanitation requirements.

Boat ambulance service launched in Parbatjhora

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, June 16: The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) on Tuesday launched a boat ambulance service at Khutabagha under the Rupshi sector in Parbatjhora subdivision of Kokrajhar district to strengthen healthcare delivery in remote riverine areas.

The service was inaugurated by BTC Executive Member for Health and Family Welfare, Derhasat Basumatary, in the presence of BTC Executive Member for Urban Development Moon Moon Brahma, local officials and residents.

According to officials, the boat ambulance has been introduced to improve emergency medical transportation and healthcare access for people living in areas that are often difficult to reach by road, particularly during the monsoon season.

The initiative is expected to facilitate the timely transfer of patients and ensure quicker access to medical services during emergencies. Speaking on the occasion, Basumatary said the service would help bridge healthcare gaps in remote and riverine regions and strengthen the delivery of essential medical services to vulnerable communities.

Local residents welcomed the initiative and expressed gratitude to the BTC government for introducing the service.

They said the boat ambulance would significantly improve healthcare access and provide much-needed support during medical emergencies. Residents described the initiative as a people-centric welfare measure that would benefit a large section of the population living in inaccessible areas of Parbatjhora.

District-level yoga competition to be held in Diphu on June 19

HT Bureau

DIPHU, June 16: A district-level yoga competition will be organised in Diphu on June 19 as part of the run-up to the 12th International Day of Yoga celebrations.

According to an official release issued by the Information and Public Relations Department (IPRD), Karbi Anglong, the competition will begin at 8 am at the Sarsing Teron Langkung Habe Multi-Purpose Sports Complex in Diphu. The event is aimed at promoting awareness about the physical, mental and holistic health benefits of yoga while encouraging greater public participation in wellness activities.

Officials said the competition forms part of a series of programmes being organised ahead of the International Day of Yoga, which will be observed at the same venue on June 21. The district administration and the IPRD have invited citizens, students, yoga practitioners and enthusiasts from across Karbi Anglong to take part in the programme and contribute to the success of the celebrations. The administration has also appealed to the public to extend their support and actively participate in the events to promote a culture of health, fitness and well-being in the district.

Two women, three minor girls rescued in Arunachal Pradesh

HT Correspondent

MORIGAOON, June 16: Two women and three minor girls who had gone missing from Kahibari in Charaibahi area of Morigaon district were rescued from Aalo in Arunachal Pradesh on Tuesday, police said.

The five family members—identified as Jina Patar, Kasturi Patar, Rudrani Patar, Mina Deuri Patar and Bristrina Patar—had reportedly been missing since Saturday, triggering concern among their relatives and local residents.

According to sources, Assam Police had been in constant touch with their counterparts in Arunachal Pradesh after receiving information about the disappearance of the family members.

A breakthrough came when Jina Patar reportedly contacted her family by phone on Monday

and informed them that they were stranded in an unfamiliar area in Aalo.

Based on the information and location details obtained through the call, police launched a coordinated effort to trace them.

Subsequently, the missing women and children were located and rescued with the assistance of Arunachal Pradesh Police. Officials said all five individuals were found safe.

However, the circumstances under which they travelled to Arunachal Pradesh and the reasons behind their disappearance remain unclear.

Police have launched an investigation to ascertain the facts surrounding the incident.

Further details are expected to emerge after the rescued individuals are questioned. The case remains under investigation.

Sikh Pratinidhi Board delegation meets Himanta

Delegation seeks continued government support for development of historic Dhubri Sahib Gurdwara as a major pilgrimage destination



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, June 16: A delegation of the Eastern Zone Sikh Pratinidhi Board met Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma at Lok Sewa Bhawan in Guwahati recently and discussed issues relating to the development and promotion of the historic Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib Gurdwara at Dhubri.

The delegation was led by Board president Daljit Singh Sethi, who facilitated the Chief Minister and congratulated him on his re-election.

Sethi lauded the mandate received by the Chief Minister and expressed confidence in his continued leadership and commitment to the state's development.

During the meeting, members of the delegation conveyed their appreciation for the Assam Government's support towards the development of the historic gurdwara and acknowledged the Chief Minister's role in facilitating infrastructure improvements at the shrine.

Delegation member Davinder Singh Kohli thanked the state government for its assistance in the beautification and development of the gurdwara complex and sought continued support for the completion of the remaining works.

He said further development would help transform the shrine into a major pilgrimage destination capable of attracting visitors from across the country and abroad.

Other members of the delegation, including Harcharan Singh Bawa and Parambir Singh Sandhu, appreciated the government's efforts to preserve and promote the cultural and religious heritage of different communities in Assam.

The delegation appealed to the Chief Minister to continue extending support for the development of the Dhubri Sahib Gurdwara, stating that the initiative would strengthen religious tourism while promoting communal harmony, peace and mutual respect among communities.

The Chief Minister assured the delegation of his continued attention to issues concerning the welfare of the Sikh community and the preservation of its historic and religious heritage in the state.

'Stop Diarrhoea Campaign-2026' launched in Sonitpur

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, June 16: The district-level launch of the "Stop Diarrhoea Campaign-2026" was held in Sonitpur on Tuesday with the objective of preventing diarrheal diseases among children and reducing child mortality through awareness and timely intervention.

The campaign, which is being observed across the country, will continue from June 16 to July 31.

This year's campaign is being conducted under the slogan, "Diarrhoea ki Roktham, Safai aur ORS se rakhen apna dhyaan" (Prevent diarrhoea through hygiene and proper use of ORS).

The district-level programme was organised at Nahorani Grant Ayushman Arogya Mandir in Rangapara and was attended by health officials, doctors, ASHA workers, Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs), Anganwadi workers, village representatives and local resi-



dents.

Speakers at the event highlighted the importance of preventing diarrheal diseases through awareness, improved hygiene practices and timely treatment.

Health workers explained the symptoms of diarrhoea and stressed the proper use of Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS) and zinc tablets for managing the illness.

Students attending the programme were encouraged to adopt regular handwashing habits and

maintain personal hygiene.

Officials noted that diarrhoeal diseases tend to increase during the monsoon and flood season, making preventive awareness particularly important.

As part of the campaign, the district health department has set a target of distributing ORS packets to 88,542 children in the 0-5 years age group across Sonitpur district.

ASHA workers, ANMs and Anganwadi workers will carry out door-to-door visits to distribute

ORS packets and spread awareness about diarrhoea prevention.

A separate awareness programme was also organised at Rupajuli Tea Garden LP School under Rangapara Primary Health Centre, where students, teachers and parents were sensitised on preventive measures such as proper handwashing, maintaining cleanliness, consuming safe drinking water, hygienic food storage and avoiding open defecation.

The District Health Department has appealed to parents, teachers, community leaders, panchayat representatives and health workers to actively participate in the campaign and help spread awareness.

Officials expressed hope that improved sanitation, access to safe drinking water, proper nutrition and timely use of ORS and zinc supplements would significantly reduce the incidence of diarrhoeal diseases among children.

National honour recognises artist's decades-long efforts to preserve, research and promote Assam's traditional Puthi Chitra art form

Sujit Das awarded CCRT Senior Fellowship for work on Assam's manuscript painting tradition

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, June 16: Noted manuscript artist, researcher and founder of Art Village, Nagaon, Sujit Das has been awarded the prestigious Senior Fellowship (2025-26) by the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT), Ministry of Culture, Government of India.

The fellowship has been conferred in recognition of his sustained contributions to the research, documentation, preservation and promotion of Assam's traditional manuscript painting art form, popularly known as Puthi Chitra. Das had earlier received the CCRT Junior Fellowship during 2014-15 for his work on the same subject.

Since then, he has continued his efforts to revive and preserve the centuries-old artistic

tradition through research, training programmes and creative practice.

Over the years, he has played a significant role in introducing Assam's Puthi Chitra to international audiences.

Through exhibitions, cultural exchanges and art programmes, he has showcased the traditional art form in 35 countries, including the United Kingdom, China and Russia.

His contribution to art education has also been widely acknowledged.

Recently, Das served as a mentor at the National Workshop on Indian Painting organised by Chanakya University in Bengaluru, where he trained students from various art colleges across the country in the history, aesthetics, materials and techniques of Assam's manuscript painting tradition.

In addition to his educational initiatives, Das has participated in numerous national and international exhibitions.

His works are also scheduled to be featured in an upcoming National Exhibition of the Lalit Kala Akademi, regarded as a major recognition for the traditional art form.

Members of Assam's artistic and cultural fraternity have welcomed the fellowship, describing it as a significant recognition not only for Das but also for Assam's rich artistic heritage.

The fellowship is expected to further strengthen efforts towards the research, preservation, training and global promotion of Puthi Chitra, while encouraging greater awareness among younger generations about one of Assam's valuable cultural traditions.



Many women with breast cancer could avoid chemotherapy

- what you need to know about the genetic test

By: Justin Stebbing

Breast cancer treatment has come a long way, but one of the hardest questions has always been: who really needs chemotherapy, and who can safely do without it?

Chemotherapy saves lives, but it also comes with serious side-effects and long term risks. A new study, presented at the American Society of Clinical Oncology's annual meeting in Chicago, shows that a DNA based test of the tumour can help two thirds of certain breast cancer patients safely avoid chemotherapy without significantly compromising their long-term outcomes. Here's what you need to know.

What is the new genetic test for breast cancer?

The new approach uses a genetic test to measure the activity of a set of cancer-related genes in the tumour. Instead of just looking at the cancer under a microscope, the test looks inside the cancer cells and measures how strongly certain genes are switched on or off. From this, it calculates a score that reflects how aggressive that particular tumour is and how likely it is to come back after standard treatment.

Doctors then use this score to guide treatment decisions. If the score is low, it suggests the cancer is less aggressive and that surgery, radiotherapy and hormone tablets are enough, so chemotherapy can be safely avoided.

If the score is high, it signals a higher risk of the cancer returning, and chemotherapy is recommended because it is more likely to make a real difference. In other words, the test helps separate patients into those for whom chemo will genuinely help and those for whom it would be all harm and no extra benefit.

How significant is this?

This is a big step because it is based on a large, rigorous, late-stage clinical trial. For this particular, very common type of early breast cancer, the study shows that more than two thirds of women who look high risk by traditional measures can safely skip chemotherapy if their gene test score is low, without losing protection against the cancer coming back.

That means fewer women being put through months of hair loss, nausea, fatigue, infection risk, early menopause, pos-

sible infertility and long term heart or nerve effects when it doesn't actually improve their outlook.

Who conducted this research and how large was the study?

The work comes from the Optima trial, led by researchers at University College London, involving multiple hospitals and cancer centres. It focused on people with the most common form of early breast cancer — one that is fuelled by hormones rather than by a protein called HER2 — who would traditionally be considered for chemotherapy based on factors, such as the size of the tumour or whether it had spread to nearby lymph nodes.

More than 4,400 patients aged 40 and over were enrolled, making it one of the largest studies of its kind. Participants were randomly assigned either to standard management, where chemotherapy decisions were based on the usual information doctors collect about cancer such as its size and appearance, or to a group where the Prosigna test result was used to guide whether chemotherapy was recommended. They were then followed for several years to see how often the cancer came back and how many remained cancer free.

When could this be available to patients?

The Prosigna test itself is not brand new. It is already approved and used in some centres. What has been missing until now is robust clinical trial evidence showing that using it to guide chemotherapy decisions is as safe as, or better than, current practice in a broad, real world population.

In the UK, the next steps will be a detailed review by bodies such as the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), the organisation that assesses which treatments the NHS should fund, followed by decisions about how widely the test will be offered. That process takes time — usually months rather than weeks — but the expectation is that this will accelerate and broaden the use of Prosigna or similar tests for eligible patients, rather than leaving them as niche or optional extras.

The study shows a small survival gap between those who had chemotherapy and those who didn't. Should patients be concerned about that?

The five-year survival rate was around one percentage point lower in the group



that skipped chemotherapy — 93.7 per cent compared with 94.9 per cent. Researchers considered this difference small enough to conclude that the gene-test approach worked just as well in practice, particularly given that the patients who avoided chemo were spared months of serious side-effects for no meaningful loss of protection.

For many people with a low risk gene score, accepting that tiny difference to avoid chemo will be an obvious choice. Others may feel differently. The key is that patients can now make that decision based on much better information about their own tumour.

What happens to the third of patients who still score high on the test and need chemotherapy?

Roughly one third of the patients in the study had high Prosigna scores, indicating that their cancers were more likely to recur if treated with hormone therapy alone. For them, the recommendation remains to have

chemotherapy as well as hormone treatment, because the potential benefit of chemo in reducing recurrence is significantly greater.

So this is not a story about getting rid of chemotherapy. It is about using it more wisely. The gene test helps protect those high risk patients by flagging that they really do need chemotherapy, and at the same time it protects low risk patients from being overtreated. In a sense, the test concentrates chemotherapy where it is most effective, which is better for both patients and health systems.

Does this apply to everyone with breast cancer?

No. The trial results apply to a specific, but very common, group: people aged 40 and over with early stage breast cancer that is driven by hormones such as oestrogen, and which does not overproduce a growth protein called HER2. Different subtypes of breast cancer behave very differently. For

example, triple negative breast cancer and HER2 positive breast cancer are often more aggressive and are treated with very different combinations of drugs, so this particular test and trial do not directly apply to them.

For younger patients under 40, and especially those in their 20s and early 30s, the biology and risk patterns can also differ. Genetic tests may still be useful, but treatment decisions are more complicated and must be tailored to each person. So while this study is a big advance, it is not a one size fits all solution, and it does not replace the need for careful discussion with a specialist team about each person's overall risk and best treatment plan.

Could a similar approach work for other types of cancer?

Yes, and in fact this is already happening. Gene based and molecular tests are used in several other cancers to guide treatment decisions. In lung cancer, for example, tests look for specific changes in a

tumour's DNA that can be targeted with tablets instead of standard chemotherapy. In bowel and prostate cancers, similar biological tests on tumour tissue can help doctors estimate how likely a cancer is to spread and decide how aggressive treatments need to be.

The principle is the same: understand the biology of each tumour in much more detail, then match the intensity and type of treatment to that biology rather than just to the tumour's size or stage. As these technologies become cheaper and more studies support their use, similar tests are likely to become more common across many cancer types, helping to avoid both undertreatment and overtreatment.

Why has it taken until now to change how doctors treat patients?

Doctors and health services are rightly cautious about changing standard treatments that we know save lives. Early on, most genetic tests were backed by small studies or by observational studies, which suggested they could reduce chemotherapy use but did not fully prove that outcomes would remain just as good in large, diverse populations.

What has changed now is the quality and scale of the evidence. The Optima trial is a large, randomised, real world study designed specifically to answer the question: "Can we safely reduce chemotherapy by using this gene test to guide decisions?" Its results give doctors, patients and health officials the confidence that the test is not just scientifically interesting but clinically safe and useful. That is the sort of evidence threshold many health systems look for before making major changes to routine care.

How widespread is overtreatment in cancer care?

Overtreatment in cancer care is rarely the result of bad decisions — it stems from uncertainty. Without reliable ways to identify who would truly benefit, doctors often defaulted to treating more people rather than risking undertreating someone. The consequences were that many patients endured chemotherapy that made little or no difference to their outcome.

Better tests are changing that. Prosigna is part of a broader shift away from "treat everyone just in case" and towards giving each patient enough treatment, but no more than they need. (Courtesy: Down To Earth)

BEYOND 'THE HOT INTELLECTUAL BADDIE': FETISHISATION OF BENGALI WOMEN

By: Antarika G.

Last week I found myself in a conversation, or rather, an argument — with a Bengali Brahmin man who believed Bengali women dating "non-Bengali" men give a bad name to the Bengali community. Why? Because, according to him, non-Bengali men see Bengali women as sexual objects to be conquered. His solution was straightforward: Bengali women should stop dating outside the community.

The conversation finally pushed me to write about something that has increasingly disturbed me in the last few years of living outside Bengal: being fetishized by non-Bengali men and then paternalized by Bengali ones.

Before I go any further, let us address the category of the "non-Bengali." Technically, it refers to anyone who is not Bengali. In practice, however, limited social imagination, caste prejudices, and Bengal's historical interactions with migrant communities mean that the term usually points toward North and Central Indians — particularly Marwaris and communities from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. It is difficult to separate this usage from the long history of caste and class prejudice embedded within Bengali bhadralok culture.

Perched comfortably on our high horse of cultural superiority while masking it as intellectual sophistication, we have granted somewhat more mercy to South Indians — largely because we consider Malayalis our intellectual equals. Ironically, in a delightful twist of history, "Bengali" is a slur in parts of Kerala in much the same way that "Bihari" is in Bengal. Karma works in mysterious ways.

Through this piece, I want to examine three things: the fetishization of Bengali women by non-Bengali men; the operation of caste endogamy through narratives of cultural preservation perpetuated by Bengali men; and the limits of a politics of individual sexual autonomy in a society that remains deeply patriarchal. I write as a woman who bears the costs of these assumptions and as a sociologist interested in the structures that produce them.

The Bengali woman occupies a peculiar position in the contemporary imagination. To some men outside the community, she is a fantasy — sexually liberated, intellectual, desirable. To some men within the community, she is a vessel of culture

whose choices must be monitored. In both cases, her body becomes a site upon which male anxieties are negotiated.

The Hot Intellectual Baddie From The East

Through media portrayals, social media narratives, dating app folklore, and countless Reddit threads, an image has emerged of the Bengali woman as the "hot intellectual baddie."

According to this fantasy, Bengali women are sexually liberated, radically independent, politically outspoken, and effortlessly attractive. We apparently all have the same complexion, the same large eyes, and an endless collection of backless blouses. Somewhere between reciting Tagore and performing kala jaadu, we are allegedly plotting the seduction of the next unsuspecting non-Bengali man.

Some versions of this story also insist that Bengali women date outside the community because Bengali men are "too feminine," "too emotional," or "not good in bed." Fascinating. Yet somehow, you do not see me accusing Bengali men of bringing shame upon the community.

Having spent the last few years working on gender-based violence in Central India, building friendships with women across North India, and participating in inter-community spaces, I have observed that Bengali women, particularly upper-caste Hindu Bengali women from urban and suburban contexts, often enjoy greater room to express opinions and exercise agency within families than many of our North Indian counterparts.

Several explanations have been offered for this phenomenon: Bengal's history of social reform, relatively greater access to women's education, and even correlations between agrarian structures of rice-eating states and gender outcomes. Of course, this representation is neither universal nor uncontested. It says little about caste, class, religion, or rural realities. Nor does it apply equally to all Bengali women.

The problem begins when these social characteristics are transformed into objects of male consumption. What may have originated as observations about women's relative autonomy soon becomes a catalogue of sexual desirability. Independence becomes "easy." Intelligence becomes "hot." Assertiveness becomes "exotic."

It gives me the ick that in reducing

women to objects of desire, men have developed elaborate narratives around communities as though they were cuisines on a menu waiting to be sampled. The Bengali woman. The Kashmiri woman. The Muslim woman. The Northeastern woman.

Different identities. Same gaze. Women cannot simply possess qualities, histories, cultures, or personalities independent of male desire. Instead, they are constantly interpreted through a framework of consumption. By that logic, there are only two kinds of women: women who are consumable and women who are not.

"My Community, My Women": The Paternal Custodians of Culture

One of the more revealing points my Bengali interlocutor raised was this: "It would be fine if Bengali men were also dating non-Bengali women as much."

Right. Because women are lad-does that must be distributed equally across communities.

Behind the absurdity lies a familiar patriarchal logic: women are resources through which communities reproduce themselves. Access to women's bodies means access to marriage, sexuality, kinship, and future generations.

As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar argued in his analysis of caste, maintaining caste boundaries requires controlling women's sexuality and marriage choices. Uma Chakravarti later expanded this understanding through her concept of Brahmanical patriarchy, demonstrating how caste purity depends upon regulating women's bodies and desires.

The anxiety expressed by this Brahmin man was not merely about culture. It was about access. His argument rested on a complaint that women from the communities whose men Bengali women date are more conservative and therefore less likely to date outside their own communities. Bengali women, meanwhile, are supposedly more "open-minded."

The result? Bengali men are losing out.

On what exactly? The answer is obvious enough. This logic echoes anxieties we encounter elsewhere. The panic around "Love Jihad," for instance, is built upon a similar premise: that women belonging to one community are being taken away by men from another.

Women's bodies become borders. Their choices become demographic

threats.

The deeper problem is that these narratives locate danger outside the community while refusing to confront violence within it. The assumption is that harm comes from Muslim men, North Indian men, non-Bengali men, Dalit men — always some external male figure. Missing from the story is a rather inconvenient truth: women are harmed by men within their own communities too.

By shifting attention from misogyny to community preservation, accountability is redirected away from men and toward women. The problem ceases to be violence against women and instead becomes a question of protecting culture, religion, caste, or community honour.

And somehow, the loudest custodians of Bengali culture are often men who cannot write in Bangla script, cannot complete a few sentences without switching to English, and routinely mock Bengali-medium students for their accents.

Their preservation of culture begins with "their" women's bodies and ends with their colonial hangover.

The Limits of Liberal Feminism: Individual Autonomy Without Collective Liberation

This is perhaps the most uncomfortable part of the argument for me. It is relatively easy to critique men who fetishize women. Easier still to

critique patriarchy and caste structures that seek to regulate women's choices.

What is harder is interrogating the politics that have enabled many women, including me — to claim greater autonomy in the first place. Yet if feminism demands critique of power, it must also be willing to critique its own assumptions.

The dominant liberal feminist promise was simple: educate women, make them economically independent, expand their choices, and freedom will follow, but freedom, it turns out, is not simply the removal of restrictions.

Women may gain autonomy while still inhabiting social worlds structured by caste, patriarchy, heterosexuality, and unequal power.

I have enough autonomy over my body to wear what I want, desire whom I want, and pursue intimacy outside marriage. Yet every date, every relationship, every sexual encounter still unfolds within a broader culture shaped by heteronormative Brahmanical patriarchy.

Here I am, taking off my clothes believing I am meeting another human being as an equal. The man on the other side is thinking about conquest, about collecting stories for his boys' club meets, about "vasooli."

Liberal feminism often assumed that as women gained power, men would simply adapt. That they



UK imposes new sanctions on Russian shadow fleet after Indian captain arrest

LONDON, June 16: The UK on Tuesday announced a new set of sanctions targeting Russia's shadow fleet oil tankers, a day after an Indian captain was charged with alleged Western sanctions breach aboard a vessel.

Ajay Pant, 38, was arrested by the National Crime Agency (NCA) during a joint operation with British armed forces to intercept a Russian shadow fleet oil tanker in the English Channel.

He will be deposed before a magistrate in Southampton, charged with "contravening Reg 46Z9B Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, and directly or indirectly supplying or delivering by ship prohibited oil/oil products from Russia to a third country during the period of June 2026".

"The Crown Prosecution Service has decided to prosecute Ajay Pant for breaching Russian sanctions following a National Crime Agency investigation and the seizure of the shadow oil tanker, MV Smyrtos, travelling through the English Channel over the last weekend," said Chief Crown Prosecutor Joanne Jakymec.

"Our prosecutors have worked to establish that there is sufficient evidence to bring the case to court and that it is in the public interest to pursue criminal proceedings. We have worked closely with the National Crime Agency as they carried out their investigation," she said.

It is understood that the High Commission of India in London has sought consular access and awaits a response from the UK side.



The process to ensure the welfare of the crew on board, which includes 24 Indian and Georgian nationals, is said to be ongoing while the vessel is docked off the coast of Dorset.

Meanwhile, the UK government said a latest set of sanctions will further crack down on Russia's "deceitful and ageing shadow fleet", targeting more than 20 oil tankers with new and enhanced powers introduced last month.

It said the action also tightens the net around those who are suspected of enabling Russian President Vladimir Putin's "illicit oil trade, further sanctioning ship insurers and other shipping services".

"These sanctions target the vessels, the money and the actors propping up Russia's war economy, and in turn, threatening European security," British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said in a statement.

"Working with our G7 allies, we will continue to increase the pressure on Putin and his circle of collaborators until Russia's war machine is brought to a halt and peace returns to our continent," he said.

The UK claims to be the first G7 country to sanction several Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) vessels recently acquired by Russia at great expense to service Russia's sanctioned Arctic LNG 2 project, responsible for exporting millions of tonnes of LNG "in an

attempt to source dirty revenue for the Kremlin".

"As the Kremlin resorts to ever more shady tactics to sustain its war, from its ageing shadow fleet to covert finance networks, the UK remains one step ahead in shutting them down," said UK Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper.

"These sanctions strike at the heart of these murky efforts, to starve Putin's war machine and defend Britain's security. Shoulder to shoulder with our G7 partners, the UK will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes," she said.

The UK Foreign Office said the new measures also expose and target a Russian military intelligence (GRU) network centred around GRU front company LLC Neptune Co Ltd. Neptune is allegedly involved in covertly procuring Western technology for Russia's military.

This week's sanctions target three companies and 10 GRU officers suspected of acquiring military technology that Russia "desperately needs to sustain its military aggression in Ukraine".

"Elsewhere, sanctions also hit third country suppliers of critical military equipment to Russia in China, Thailand and Türkiye. Several organisations helping Russia illegally move money, bypassing western sanctions, are also targeted, including one entity in Nigeria supporting the illicit finance network A7's sanctions evasions scheme," the Foreign Office stated. (PTI)

German President says Europe is worried over tensions in disputed South China Sea



MANILA, June 16: German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said in the Philippines on Tuesday that Europe is worried over tensions in the disputed South China Sea where a major flare-out could endanger freedom of navigation as has happened in the Strait of Hormuz.

In a joint appearance with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in Manila, where Steinmeier is on a state visit, the German president referenced the blockade of the Hormuz as a result of the Iran war and said European leaders were concerned about continuing territorial confrontations in the South China Sea, particularly between the Philippines and China.

The United States lays no claims to the South China Sea but has repeatedly warned it's obligated to help defend the Philippines, its oldest treaty ally in Asia, if Filipino forces, ships and aircraft come under an armed attack.

China has repeatedly warned the US not to meddle with the disputes, which also involve Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan.

"The situation in the South China Sea ... continues to be tense and that gives us cause to be concerned because the Indo-Pacific, in particular the region of Southeast Asia, is one of the most economically dynamic regions of the world," Steinmeier said through an interpreter.

"If incidents occur in that part of the world that is also cause for great concern in Europe," Steinmeier said. "Violations of the international law of the sea endanger the freedom of navigation as the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz has brought home to us recently in a very drastic manner."

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz, which led to global spikes in fuel and fertiliser prices, was among the issues Steinmeier and

Marcos discussed in a closed-door meeting.

Steinmeier did not blame any country for tensions in the South China Sea, a key global trade route, but Germany has previously said China's actions in the disputed waters violate the rights of coastal states like the Philippines and threaten freedom of navigation.

While visiting Manila in 2024, then German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said China's actions, which have led to minor collisions with Philippine vessels at sea, are of concern to Germany and other European countries "because such risky manoeuvres violate rights and opportunities for economic development of your own country and other littoral states."

China's claims "are not covered by international law," Baerbock said then while calling for a peaceful resolution to the disputes. She visited the Philippine coast guard headquarters in Manila and boarded a patrol ship, where she briefly flew one of surveillance drones donated by Germany.

Steinmeier on Tuesday pledged Germany's continued support to the Philippine coast guard, which has been a front line guardian of Manila's territorial interests and had figured in several altercations in the waters with Chinese forces.

Marcos thanked Steinmeier and Germany "for consistently and publicly expressing its support for Philippine efforts to uphold the rule of law in the South China Sea, including by calling on all parties to abide by the final and binding 2016 Arbitral Award."

The 2016 arbitration ruling, citing the 1982 UN Convention of the Law of the Sea, invalidated China's expansive claims in the South China Sea. Beijing did not participate in the arbitration initiated by the Philippines, rejected its outcome and continues to defy it. (AP)

China, Nepal FM's hold 'comprehensive' talks, discuss bilateral ties

BEIJING, June 16: China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Nepalese counterpart Shisir Khanal held "comprehensive talks" covering the entire gamut of bilateral ties, including border management, connectivity and trade.

Khanal arrived in Beijing on a four-day visit on June 14 after his weeklong trip to India.

After he met with Wang Yi on Monday, Khanal said in a post on X. "We held a comprehensive discussion on the entire gamut of bilateral relations, including in the areas of connectivity, border management, trade, technology transfer and multilateral cooperation."

"We also exchanged views on expanding people-to-people ties and reaffirmed shared commitment to further strengthening Nepal-China relations for the mutual benefit of our two countries," he said.

At the meeting, Wang Yi said China has always placed its relations with Nepal in an important position in its neighbourhood diplomacy and pursues a friendly policy toward all Nepalese people.

China will, as always, support Nepal in safeguarding its national sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, and in exploring a development path suited to its own national conditions, Wang Yi said, according to a press release by the Chinese Foreign Ministry on Monday.

Besides Wang Yi, Khanal also met Wang Huning, the influential Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and Liu Haixing, Minister of the International Department of the ruling Communist Party of China. Discussions on various aspects of bilateral ties, in-

cluding investment, tourism, political exchanges and people-to-people ties, took place in Khanal's separate meetings with Wang Huning and Liu Haixing.

In a post on X, Khanal said he appreciates Wang Huning's "strong commitment to deepening longstanding friendship between the two countries".

The visiting foreign minister was also given a briefing at the Institute of Tibetan Plateau Research which specialises in countering the Dalai Lama's spiritual influence in the Himalayan region.

Khanal's visit to Beijing is regarded as significant as both countries were expected to reset the relations after the massive victory of the new Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) this year, ending the prolonged rule of leaders of Nepal's Communist parties, K P Sharma Oli and Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda', who sought to move Kathmandu closer to Beijing, away from India. The RSP's victory in the general elections marked an end to the dominance of the communist parties, which gained political prominence after the abolition of monarchy in Nepal in 2008.

Both Prachanda and Oli, who became prime ministers thrice each since 2008, advocated closer political and economic ties with China and played a central role in helping Beijing advance its influence in Nepal with measures like the Belt and Road Initiative. Speaking at the meeting with Khanal, Wang Yi said China is willing to work with Nepal to jointly advance the high-quality 'Belt and Road cooperation', focus on collaboration in power grids, highways, border ports and aviation, and help Nepal transform from a "land-locked country into a land-linked country". (PTI)

FBI claims to have foiled attack on White House during UFC event on Sunday



WASHINGTON, June 16: The FBI on Tuesday said it had foiled a possible attack on the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) event here last weekend and arrested multiple people.

The UFC event, organised on the White House lawns on Sunday, and streamed live at a large park, was attended by President Donald Trump, his cabinet colleagues and special invitees. Tens of thousands had gathered at South Park near the White House to watch the event on giant screens.

"On June 10, FBI and our law enforcement partners became aware of a potential threat to the UFC America 250 event in Washington, D.C. involving individuals outside of the National Capital Region - and thanks to the rapid action of this FBI, our partners, and the Department of Justice in a multi-state operation, multiple individuals are

now in custody and allegedly planned attacks were stopped cold," FBI Director Kash Patel said in a post on X.

Fox News reported that five people were in custody as of Monday, and investigators identified 23 people as part of a potential network of plotters.

The alleged plan involved using explosive-laden drones to hit buildings near the event, force a mass evacuation and steer crowds toward a pre-staged sniper team, Fox News quoted unnamed officials as saying.

A "second wave" was then allegedly planned to storm the White House gate, according to officials.

"While the result represented the best of investigative work, it was also nothing out of the ordinary for this law enforcement team - we are built to detect, respond to, and bring to justice those who threaten the lives of American citizens - particularly during large gatherings like the historic UFC 250 fight," Patel said.

"That's exactly what we did here. I want to thank our great agents and partners, this work remains ongoing and we will continue to update the public as permitted," the FBI Director said. (PTI)

At least 9 dead, 25 hurt after train and bus collide in Zimbabwe

HARARE (ZIMBABWE), June 16: Police and rail authorities say at least nine people, including two children, are dead after a train collided with a bus in Zimbabwe.

The crash occurred at a railway crossing in Triangle, a sugar-producing town in the country's south, when a freight train collided with the bus, according to police.

National Railways of Zimbabwe spokesperson Andrew Kanambura said in a statement that the bus driver failed to stop and check for oncoming trains before crossing the tracks, violating railway safety regulations. He said at least 25 others were hurt.

Tuesday's accident occurred less than a week after a minibus carrying schoolchildren caught fire in central Zimbabwe, killing seven.

Road crashes are common in Zimbabwe, where a traffic accident occurs every 15 minutes and an average of five people are killed and 38 injured each day, according to the country's road safety agency. (AP)

Former Sri Lankan President moves court to prevent arrest

COLOMBO, June 16: Former Sri Lanka President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on Tuesday filed a petition in a court to prevent his arrest in connection with the Easter Sunday attacks.

On April 21, 2019, nine suicide bombers, including a woman, carried out a series of devastating blasts that tore through three churches and as many luxury hotels, killing 270 people, including 44 foreigners, 11 of them Indians, and injuring over 500 others.

Rajapaksa, 77, filed a writ petition in the Court of Appeal, citing the police chief, the director of the Criminal Investigation Department and the officer in charge as respondents.

His attorneys told the court that there was a likelihood of his arrest under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

Rajapaksa, who served as president from 2019 to mid-2022, was slapped with a foreign travel ban by the courts in March, following the arrest of former state intelligence chief Suresh Sallay.

Sallay has been in detention under PTA provisions since late February and staged a hunger strike last month, claiming ill-treatment in cus-



tody.

Sallay is accused of orchestrating the Easter Sunday attacks to help Rajapaksa win the presidency in 2019 by harbouring and maintaining links with the National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ), which carried out the bombings.

The Islamic State terror group claimed the attacks, but the government blamed the local Islamist extremist group NTJ.

Sallay was later appointed as head of state intelligence in 2020 by Rajapaksa. (PTI)

Returned B'desh from Delhi airport to register 'instant protest': PM's aide

DHAKA, June 16: A top adviser of the Bangladesh Prime Minister on Tuesday said he returned home from New Delhi airport after he was initially denied entry as he felt the need for an "instant protest".

Dr Zahed Ur Rahman, the PM's Adviser on Policy and Strategy Affairs, and Information and Broadcasting, was stopped at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi on Sunday when his name was reportedly flagged during a routine security check, state-run BSS news agency reported.

Although Indian authorities later allowed him to proceed with his visit, he decided to return home, it added. "I felt there needed to be an instant protest," Rahman told a press conference here, speaking for the first time about the incident.

He alleged that despite being informed by the Bangladesh officials about his official tour in advance, he was made to wait for around two and a half hours upon arrival at Delhi airport and was initially denied entry.

"I felt a message needed to go out, both inside and outside the country, that this is not (deposed premier) Sheikh Hasina's government; this (BNP regime) is a government elected by the people," he said. He added that Indian authorities eventually tried to



facilitate his entry following instructions from higher authorities, but he preferred to return home as a mark of protest. He returned to Dhaka via Colombo.

Bangladesh on Monday summoned India's Deputy High Commissioner Pawan Badhe and conveyed its "deep disappointment" over the incident.

Rahman said he did not intend the incident to create any "tit-for-tat escalation".

The cooperation should be based on equality, including trade and other areas, he added.

The adviser was travelling on a regular Bangladeshi passport with a SAARC visa and was not carrying a diplomatic passport. (PTI)

UK gallery defends 'artistic expression' after Churchill blamed for Bengal famine

LONDON, June 16: The National Portrait Gallery in London has defended "freedom of artistic expression" after Winston Churchill was accused in a video installation of deliberately starving Indians during the Bengal famine under British colonial rule.

The gallery's 'Artists First: Contemporary Perspectives on Portraiture', which went on display in September last year, hit the headlines this week when some sections of the UK media highlighted claims relating to Britain's wartime prime minister.

Jamaican heritage British artist Helen Cammock's film 'Persistence' references Churchill as being behind the "wilful starvation of the Indian population" during the famine in 1943.

"At the National Portrait Gallery, in addition to our own permanent collection displays, we also give opportunities to artists to create works of art in response to our collection,"



the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) said in a statement.

"This work by Helen Cammock, which was commissioned in 2023 and has been on temporary display at the NPG since September 2025, is

created and narrated by the artist and includes her personal reflections on historical and current events.

"We support freedom of artistic expression while not necessarily endorsing the opinions expressed by

any of the artists shown at the gallery," it stated.

Cammock's narration suggests that starvation was used as a "weapon of war", echoing the views of some authors that the millions of deaths in Bengal in the 1940s were preventable and the result of a man-made crisis.

Lord Andrew Roberts, a biographer of Churchill, has written to the NPG board defending the Conservative Party grandee and dismissed the video installation as an "ideologically motivated rant".

"The accusation that it (starvation) was deliberately visited upon Bengalis by Churchill is foul and vile. It is also historically ludicrous," he said, in the letter signed by several fellow House of Lords peers, including Churchill's grandson Lord Nicholas Soames.

He claims that Churchill directed that "every effort must be made", even by the diversion of shipping needed for the ongoing Second

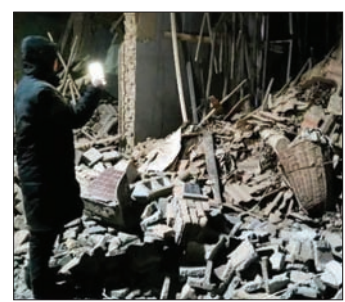
World War, to "alleviate local shortages" in Bengal.

Meanwhile, the 'Artists First' installation is on display at the NPG near Trafalgar Square until August.

"It's a really quiet film. It's designed to feel intimate, almost like a one-to-one conversation with a viewer, so there's a great use of close-up shots. I look at texture and colour, asking objects to represent stories and ideas," says Cammock, in an audio clip about her installation.

"I guess I would like visitors to be sitting in a gallery that has had a particular focus on important sitters, and I'm asking questions about who has value and who has worth. I want people to go away feeling touched by that conversation in some way," she adds. Also exhibited are South African artist Ravelle Pillay's figurative works that explore the colonial structures that influence historical narrative, tracing the indentured migrant worker journey from India to Africa. (PTI)

1 killed, 4 injured as 6.3-magnitude earthquake hits northwestern China



BEIJING, June 16: One person was killed and four others injured on Tuesday after a 6.3-magnitude earthquake jolted Haixi Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in northwest China.

The quake struck at 5:06 PM (local time) at a depth of 10 km, with the epicentre at 37.80 degrees north latitude and 95.56 degrees east longitude, said a report issued by the China Earthquake Networks Centre.

The Qinghai provincial seismological bureau dispatched an on-site work team to the quake-hit area to assist local authorities with emergency response.

A Level II provincial emergency response for earthquake disasters was issued at 6:10 p.m., according to the provincial emergency management bureau, state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

All operating staff at coal mine enterprises near the epicentre have been fully evacuated. Inspections are underway to tally further casualties and damages.

The Ministry of Emergency Management has mobilised rescue forces to the quake-hit area to conduct all-out searches for trapped people.

The ministry has also allocated relief supplies for affected people and stepped up seismic monitoring, tracking and assessment, the China Central Television (CCTV) reported.

China's State Council's earthquake relief headquarters and the Ministry of Emergency Management jointly activated a Level IV earthquake disaster emergency response, and dispatched a work group to guide on-site response operations, Xinhua reported. (PTI)

Modi govt views Northeast as 'Ashtalakshmi', says Union minister Margherita

KOHHIMA, June 16: Union minister Pabitra Margherita on Tuesday said the Narendra Modi-led government considers the Northeast as the country's 'Ashtalakshmi' and has prioritised the region's development through sustained investments in infrastructure, connectivity and welfare programmes over the past 12 years.

Addressing a press conference at the BJP Nagaland state headquarters here to mark 12 years of the NDA government, Margherita said the region has witnessed unprecedented attention under Modi, who has repeatedly described the region as a key driver of India's growth story.

Margherita, the minister of state for external affairs and textiles, said the Centre's commitment to the Northeast is reflected in improved connectivity, expanded welfare coverage and increased financial support to the region.

According to him, the region has recorded significant progress in road, rail, air and digital connectivity, alongside investments in healthcare, education, tourism and entrepreneurship.

Turning to Nagaland, Margherita said the state has been a major beneficiary of the Centre's development initiatives and welfare schemes.

He highlighted investments in infrastructure, tourism, handloom and handicrafts, as well as enhanced fiscal support to the state.

Under the North East Special Infrastructure Development



Union Minister Pabitra Margherita (right) and Nagaland Chief Minister Papun Sharma (left) shake hands during a press conference in Kohima. Margherita is holding a folder and a certificate. The background features a banner for the 12th anniversary of the Modi government.

Margherita said the Centre is working to connect artisans from Nagaland to national and international markets through digital platforms and major textile exhibitions such as Bharat Tex.

He noted that traditional Naga handloom products have gained visibility at national events, creating new opportunities for local weavers and entrepreneurs.

Highlighting the state's tourism potential, he said the state's rich cultural heritage, biodiversity, cuisine and natural landscapes place it in a strong position to attract investment and visitors.

He added that the Centre and state government are working together to promote tourism and create sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Referring to the Hornbill Festival, he said the event has evolved into a major attraction that draws visitors from across the country and abroad.

He added that digital marketing platforms introduced by the Centre are helping artisans and weavers from remote areas access wider markets.

On financial assistance, Margherita said tax devolution to Nagaland increased from ₹ 5,405 crore during 2004-2014 to more than ₹ 59,327 crore since 2014.

He said grants and other forms of central support have also risen substantially, reflecting the Centre's commitment to the state's development.

He further noted that Kohima's inclusion under the Smart City Mission and investments in connectivity

projects are contributing to urban development and economic growth in the state.

The minister further outlined the impact of flagship welfare schemes in the state.

He said more than 4.13 lakh Jan Dhan accounts have been opened in the state, over 7.7 lakh Ayushman Bharat cards issued, and more than 1.22 lakh LPG connections provided under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana.

He added that over 3.42 lakh rural households have received tap water connections under the Jal Jeevan Mission.

According to Margherita, around 14 lakh beneficiaries in the state are covered under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, while more than 1.8 lakh farmers have benefited from assistance under PM-KISAN.

He maintained that the development witnessed in Nagaland over the past decade reflects the Centre's broader vision for the Northeast as India's 'Ashtalakshmi' and growth engine.

He reaffirmed the government's commitment to supporting the state's progress through continued investments in infrastructure, welfare and economic development.

"The government of India will continue to work closely with the people of Nagaland to unlock the state's full potential and ensure inclusive growth," Margherita said. (PTI)

Sikkim CM interacts with 105 newly recruited Agniveers



Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang on Tuesday interacted with the newly recruited 105 Agniveers from the state and urged them to serve the nation with pride, commitment, and honour over the next four years.

Tamang expressed delight at Sikkim achieving its highest-ever recruitment under the Agnipath scheme, with 105 young men joining as Agniveers.

"Earlier today, I had the opportunity to meet the newly recruited Agniveers from Sikkim at Samman Bhawan," he said in a social media post.

These recruits will serve the nation with pride, commitment, and honour over the next four years, the chief minister said.

Tamang wished them all for their journey ahead and encouraged them to uphold the highest standards of discipline, dedication, and service.

As Agniveers, they carry the spirit, aspirations, and values of Sikkim while contributing to the strength and progress of our nation, Tamang said, and expressed confidence that their exemplary service will bring pride and distinction to both Sikkim and the country.

The CM said that his government follows a policy under which 20 per cent reservation is given to the Agniveers in recruitment to the Sikkim Police upon the successful completion of their four-year tenure. (PTI)

PROTEST OVER TREATMENT OF YOUTHS

Sole responsibility to provide medical care: RIMS



IMPHAL, June 16: The Regional Institute of Medical Sciences here has said its sole responsibility was to provide medical treatment to people and is not responsible for bringing in patients to the hospital.

The remarks came a day after the hospital premises witnessed firing of tear gas shells and baton charging amid protests alleging that three youths being treated at the facility were militants.

The three injured being treated at the hospital, all belonging to the Kuki community, were brought to the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) by security forces. The demonstrators questioned whether similar security arrangements would be provided to ordinary citizens travelling through Kuki-majority areas of Kangpokpi district.

In a statement issued on Monday night, RIMS said, "The injured persons were brought in by 183 Military Hospital, Leimakhong, for necessary medical treatment."

Denying allegations made in "various reports and public discussions" that the RIMS authority is responsible for bringing the injured persons to the hospital and the subsequent security arrangements, it

said, "The Institute has no role in bringing patients to the hospital or in the deployment of security personnel."

"The injured persons were referred and brought by 183 Military Hospital, Leimakhong and the security arrangements in connection with their movement and treatment were made by the authorities concerned, RIMS said.

"The sole responsibility of RIMS is to provide medical care to all patients brought to the hospital. It is the professional, ethical, and humanitarian duty of doctors and healthcare workers to attend to and treat patients requiring medical attention, irrespective of their background or circumstances," it said.

RIMS urged the public "not to obstruct or disrupt hospital services, as the institute caters to numerous critically ill and emergency patients whose treatment and well-being may be adversely affected by such disturbances".

In a statement on Tuesday, it strongly condemned the firing of mock bombs and smoke bombs within the hospital premises following the large-scale public protest that occurred on Monday. (PTI)

Arunachal cabinet approves MSME ordinance, ₹ 2,000-cr rural roads plan

ITANAGAR, June 16: The Arunachal Pradesh cabinet on Tuesday approved a slew of proposals, including promulgation of an MSME ordinance, a ₹ 2,000-crore rural road connectivity programme, simplification of land-use conversion rules, and a one-year ease-relaxation for eligible APSSC aspirants.

The proposed Arunachal Pradesh Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (Facilitation of Establishment and Operation) Ordinance, 2026, which will be placed before the assembly, seeks to reduce regulatory burden by allowing eligible enterprises to start operations through a self-declaration mechanism, subject to existing laws.

The move would improve ease-of-doing business, encourage entrepreneurship, attract investment and generate employment,

a statement from the Chief Minister's Office said.

The cabinet chaired by Chief Minister Pema Khandu also reviewed the progress of the flagship 'Shikshita Bharat to Shikshita Arunachal' Mission.

It observed that ₹ 3,612.50 crore has been invested during phase-I (2023-26) to improve school infrastructure, teacher deployment, digital education and learning outcomes, with another ₹ 1,500 crore proposed for phase-II, taking the total outlay beyond ₹ 5,100 crore by 2029, the release said.

The cabinet was also apprised of the implementation framework for the Chief Minister's Comprehensive State Rural Road Development Programme (CM-CSRDP),

under which 1,129 unconnected habitations with populations below 250 will be linked by all-weather roads by 2029.

The programme will cover around 6,567 km through phased investments of ₹ 2,000 crore over the next three financial years, the statement said.

To facilitate planned urban growth, the cabinet approved amendments to the Arunachal Pradesh Land Settlement and Records Act, 2012.

Agricultural land within notified master plan areas will automatically be deemed converted to the prescribed land use without requiring separate permissions, while the record of rights format will be modernised for digital integration and transparency, it said. (PTI)

Donyi Polo airport observes Yatri Suvidha Diwas

ITANAGAR, June 16: The Donyi Polo Airport authorities organised a series of passenger-centric activities on Monday, such as a traditional tilak ceremony and distribution of saplings to mark Yatri Suvidha Diwas.

The initiatives are aimed at enhancing passenger experience and reaffirming the Airport Authority of India's commitment to providing world-class services and a seamless travel environment, airport director Narendra said.

Key activities included a traditional tilak ceremony to welcome arriving passengers, the distribution of saplings under the theme 'Ek Ped Maa Ke Naam', setting up a photo booth, and collecting passenger feedback.

The officer noted that several services have been enhanced with the optimisation of the new terminal for public use. The car parking capacity has been expanded from 100 to 300 vehicles.

Responding to queries about the recent flight rescheduling, the airport director said that a new schedule has been implemented in view of the ongoing West Asia crisis.

Under the revised plan, direct flights to Kolkata will stand cancelled on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays starting June 16, meaning the service will now be available four days a week. (PTI)

Fire guts temple in Sikkim's Jorethang; probe ordered



GANGTOK, June 16: A fire gutted parts of the revered Sri Satya Sai Nilayam Mandir at Jorethang in Sikkim's Namchi district early Tuesday, prompting an investigation into the cause of the blaze, police said. The fire broke out around 3 am and caused extensive damage to the interior of the temple, a prominent place of worship.

Personnel of the fire and emergency services went to the spot after receiving

information and brought the blaze under control.

The exact cause of the fire is yet to be ascertained, and a detailed investigation has been launched, officials said.

As news of the incident spread, locals gathered at the temple premises.

Some residents voiced suspicion that the incident could involve theft followed by arson, though authorities have not confirmed any such angle and said all

possibilities are being examined.

A team led by Jorethang SDPO, along with the SHO and other officers, visited the temple and initiated an inquiry.

Experts from the State Forensic Science Laboratory are expected to inspect the site to help determine the cause of the fire.

A high-level team led by area MLA Madan Chintury also visited the site following the incident.

In a statement, chief minister's press secretary Yougan Tamang said the exact cause of the blaze remains unknown and is under investigation.

He said Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang had been informed about the incident and had expressed concern over the damage caused to the temple.

"The state government stands in solidarity with the devotees and the local community affected by this incident and remains committed to extending all necessary assistance for restoration and rehabilitation efforts," Tamang said, adding that authorities have been directed to conduct a thorough inquiry and take appropriate action based on the findings. (PTI)

Tripura witnessing development boom, says CM Saha

AGARTALA, June 16: Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha on Tuesday said the state is witnessing a "development boom" with projects worth over ₹ 1,400 crore launched or inaugurated by him during the 2025-26 financial year.

Addressing a programme to lay the foundation stone and inaugurate 14 projects worth ₹ 26.96 crore at Kamalpur in Dhalai district, Saha said the government was working for the all-round development of the people.

"Our state is witnessing a development boom with projects valued at ₹ 1,400 crore either inaugurated or having their foundation stones laid by me during the 2025-26 financial year. The figure will be much bigger if we combine the inaugurations and foundation stones laid by the ministers," he said.

Asserting that development work was being carried out at a fast pace, the chief minister said Prime Minister Narendra Modi

had asked him to transform aspirational districts and blocks into "inspirational" ones by accelerating development.

Tripura has one aspirational district and 12 aspirational blocks, all of which are tribal-dominated areas.

Claiming that NITI Aayog had appreciated the state's growth, Saha said investors were also showing interest in Tripura due to its emerging opportunities.

Saha said he had urged the PM to sanction an additional national highway connecting the backward areas of Dhalai and South Tripura districts.

"During my last visit to Delhi, I submitted a request to set up 15 more Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRSs) to ensure proper and quality education for the tribal students," he said, adding that around 10 EMRSs are already functioning in tribal areas. (PTI)

First batch of Kailash Mansarovar Yatra pilgrims arrive

GANGTOK, June 16: The first batch of this year's Kailash Mansarovar Yatra pilgrims arrived here for their onward journey through the Nathu La Pass.

Officials said the first batch that arrived here on Monday evening comprises 44 people, including two liaison officers and one medical officer. Among them are 32 men and 12 women. A statement from the Tourism Department said the pilgrims were accorded a warm welcome at a local hotel by Sikkim Tourism Development Corporation Chairman Lukendra Rasally and deputy general manager Amit Kapil Chettri.

The pilgrims will undergo a four-day acclimatisation programme here, following which they will on June 20 proceed for Gyangze, a town in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, that serves as a transit point for pilgrims taking the Nathu La Pass route. (PTI)

Enumeration phase of SIR of electoral rolls begins in Arunachal Pradesh

ITANAGAR, June 16: The enumeration phase of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls has got underway across Arunachal Pradesh, as part of a nationwide drive by the Election Commission to update voter lists. According to a statement issued by the state's Chief Electoral Officer (CEO), electors whose enumeration forms are submitted by July 14 will be considered for inclusion in the draft electoral rolls.

Voters who are unable to submit the forms within the prescribed period can still seek enrolment during the claims and objections stage by filing 'Form 6' along with the required declaration form, it said.

As part of the exercise, booth-level officers (BLOs) have started visiting households to distribute, collect and verify enumeration forms from Monday, it said. Election officials said the BLOs would make repeated visits, wherever necessary, to ensure wider coverage.

The Commission has expanded the role of recognised political parties in the revision process by allowing booth-level agents (BLAs) to collect up to 50 completed forms a day from the public, and hand them over to the BLOs before publication of the draft rolls, they said. (PTI)

Nagaland set to play key role in Agarwood production: Minister

HT Correspondent
DIMAPUR, June 16: Nagaland minister for environment, forest & climate change CL John on Tuesday said the state is all set to emerge as a key player in the Agarwood sector after the state cabinet approved the Nagaland Agarwood (Conservation and Promotion) Policy, 2026, recently.

He said the policy is aimed at encouraging Agarwood cultivation on private and community lands, generating employment opportunities, strengthening rural livelihoods, and conserving the endangered species in its natural habitat.

Addressing an awareness workshop on cultivation and trade of Agarwood at the Dimapur forest office complex, John stressed the importance of promoting Agarwood cultivation as a sustainable livelihood opportunity.

Highlighting the immense economic and ecological value of Agarwood, he said the aromatic tree species is highly prized worldwide for its use in perfumes, in-



Agarwood cultivation in Nagaland.

He noted that Nagaland's favourable climate and land conditions, particularly in the foothill regions, make the state ideal for cultivating high-quality Agarwood.

John noted that farmers in several districts have already begun cultivating Agarwood due to its high market value and growing international demand.

He said traders, especially from West Asian countries, are increasingly looking to source Agarwood products from the Northeast, including Nagaland.

He also pointed out that neighbouring states such as Assam and Tripura have made significant progress in Agarwood cultivation and expressed confidence that Nagaland would now be able to accelerate its growth with a comprehensive policy framework in place.

Addressing trade-related issues, he said the state currently has a limited export quota for Agarwood chips and oil and urged the Centre to consider revising the existing quota to enable farmers and traders to reap greater benefits from the expanding market.

He further assured that the forest department would provide technical guidance and support to growers, including access to quality planting materials, inoculation techniques, processing methods, and marketing assistance.

He added that collaboration with institutions such as the Rain Forest Research Institute (RFRI), Jorhat, and central agencies would help ensure effective implementation of the policy.

No. DDB-148/15th FC/2020-21/1170

Dated Debitola the 16th June, 2026

SHORT NOTICE INVITING TENDER

Sealed tender affixing Court Fee of Rs. 8.25 (Rupees eight & twenty five paise) only with a validity period of 180 (One hundred eighty) days, which will subsequently to be converted and drawn up in the APWD's F-2 forms are invited from the registered contractors of Class-III, Class-II and Class-I (A, B & C) category of Assam (Roads & Building) and BTC, according to their eligibility for submitting tenders for the following works under 15th Finance Commission for the year 2024-25 during 2025-26. The tenders will be received by the undersigned up to 2:00 PM on 09/07/2026 and will be opened on the same date and place at 2:30 PM.

Sl. No.	Name of work	A. A. Amount	Earnest Money	Cost of tender paper	Time of completion
1	Const. of Boundary Wall at No. 23 Ubarjhora L.P. School at Ubarjhora Village	Rs.15,00,000/-	Rs. 15,000/- (1% for ST, SC & OBC) & Rs. 30,000/- (2% for Gen)	Rs. 450/-	3 Months
2	Const. of road with CC Block road from Tipkai PWD road to Gambanbil Tea Garden	Rs.15,00,000/-	Rs. 15,000/- (1% for ST, SC & OBC) & Rs. 30,000/- (2% for Gen)	Rs. 450/-	3 Months
3	Const. of Market Shed at Duligaon Bazar	Rs.17,00,000/-	Rs. 17,000/- (1% for ST, SC & OBC) & Rs. 34,000/- (2% for Gen)	Rs. 510/-	3 Months
4	Const. of Market Shed at Bistampur (Bikibadha) Bazar	Rs.18,00,000/-	Rs. 18,000/- (1% for ST, SC & OBC) & Rs. 36,000/- (2% for Gen)	Rs. 540/-	3 Months

Details NIT may be seen in all working days during office hours in the office of the undersigned tender papers will be issued to the contractors or their authorized agent from 17/06/2026 to 09/07/2026 in the office of the undersigned on payment of cost of tender paper in the form of demand draft/bankers cheque from any Nationalized Bank, duly pledged in favour of the Principal Secretary, BTC, Kokrajhar, payable at Kokrajhar.

IPR(BTC)/C/2026-27/554

Sd/(Mukul Basumatary, AFRDS)
Block Dev. Officer, Debitola Dev. Block

North Bengal development roadmap ready, all central schemes will reach hills: CM

KURSEONG (WB), June 16: West Bengal Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari on Tuesday said his government has prepared a comprehensive roadmap for the development of the state's northern region and assured people in the hills that the benefits of all Central schemes would reach them smoothly.

The CM also warned of action against corruption in the Gorkhland Territorial Administration (GTA), a statutory autonomous administrative body constituted for the governance and development of the Darjeeling region, and announced that recruitment of teachers and police personnel in the hills would begin within the next few months.

Addressing a public welfare camp here during his first visit to the hills after assuming office as chief minister, he said, "We are committed to the development of the hills. A comprehensive roadmap for the development of North Bengal has already been prepared."

The state government is committed to ensuring transparency in appointments and would not tolerate irregularities, Adhikari said at the programme, in which he was accorded a grand welcome.



Referring to alleged irregularities in teacher recruitment through the GTA, he invoked Prime Minister Narendra Modi's slogan: "Na khaunga, na khane dunga" (I will neither indulge in corruption nor allow others to do so).

"All instances of corruption will be investigated. Nobody will be spared," the chief minister said, reiterating his government's commitment to probing alleged recruitment irregularities in the hill body.

Adhikari said large-scale recruitment in the police force and teaching positions would be undertaken soon.

"Within the next few months, there will be major recruitment in the police department. Teachers will also be recruited, and the entire process will be conducted transparently," he said.

Launching a sharp attack on the previous Trinamool Congress government, Adhikari alleged that appointments were not carried out properly during its tenure.

"The former chief minister used to visit the hills only as a tourist. I have not come here as a tourist; I have come here to work," he said.

Adhikari also assured the residents that all benefits of the double-engine government and

Central welfare schemes would reach the people of the hills.

"Everything will be implemented gradually. The Centre and the state government will work together on this. You can remain assured," Adhikari said.

The CM also asserted that transparency would be maintained in government appointments and recruitment. "There will be no corruption in recruitment anymore," he told the gathering.

Speaking at the programme, he outlined a series of development initiatives for the Darjeeling hills, including the establishment of a medical college in Kalimpong, fresh police recruitment and expansion of sports infrastructure, during his first visit to Kurseong after assuming office.

"Recruitment to the police force would begin within a month, with 33 per cent of the posts reserved for women," Adhikari said.

He also said work under the VB-G RAM G scheme would begin in panchayat areas from July 1, providing 125 days of employment.

The Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramen) Act, or VB-G RAM G, replaced the MGNREGA enacted by the UPA government in 2005.

The Bengal CM said his govern-

ment was committed to inclusive development and would work to strengthen infrastructure, employment opportunities and public services across north Bengal.

Adhikari said that a Central scheme meant for the welfare of tea garden workers had not been implemented by the previous government.

"Although the Prime Minister launched the PM Tea Workers' Scheme in 2021, it was not implemented because of corruption in the previous regime," he claimed.

The chief minister said development projects worth Rs 334 crore for 25 closed tea gardens would be launched shortly.

He added that the chairman of the Tea Board had been entrusted with overseeing infrastructure development in tea garden areas.

"There was nothing except extortion and cut money during the previous government's tenure. This government will not tolerate extortion or cut money. There has been corruption in the GTA. It will not happen under this government," he said.

The meeting was attended by several ministers, including North Bengal Development Minister Nishith Pramanik, and MPs and MLAs from the region. (PTI)

False propoganda, person in video not me: Mann



CHANDIGARH, June 16: A day after the Sikh clergy declared him 'Guru Dokhi' (anti-Guru) and 'Khalsa Panth virodhi' (anti-Khalsa Panth) over an "objectionable" video, Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Tuesday rejected it, saying the person in the video was not him.

In a video message, the chief minister expressed surprise over the people occupying the highest positions of religious bodies "indulging in false propoganda at the behest of their political bosses" to defame him.

In a post on X, Mann said, "The president of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee has openly become a propagandist for the Akali Dal.

"The only thing left now is to get a directive issued through the Jathedar Sahib saying, 'Vote for Sukhbir Badal, otherwise the Panth' is in danger. Such a decision could be taken at any time," he said.

The matter stems from the summoning of Mann by the Akal Takht, the highest temporal seat of Sikhs, in January this year for allegedly making comments on 'Guru ki Golak' (gurdwara donation box) and indulging in "objectionable activities" with the pictures of the Sikh Gurus and slain militant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale in a purported video clip.

In his video message on Tuesday, Mann said a 'hukamnama' (edict) had been issued against him over the video, claiming that it featured him and that it was AI-generated. "I completely reject this video," he said.

Mann said when he was summoned to the Akal Takht earlier, he had said that it was not him in the purported video.

"The person seen in the video does not match my height and physique," he said.

"But I am surprised at how the people sitting at the highest positions of religious bodies are in-

dulging in such false propoganda at the behest of their political bosses," Mann said, alluding to Akal Takht Jathedar Giani Kuldeep Singh Gargaji, who pronounced the edict against the CM on Monday.

"They are indulging in mud-slinging to defame me. Because I am taking decisions for safeguarding Punjab's waters, youths, farmers and teachings of the Guru Sahiban," he said.

He said religion was being used to defame him.

"I have always considered Sri Akal Takht Sahib as the supreme temporal authority and bow before it with utmost humility and devotion. The very thought of challenging its authority is beyond imagination and I have never deviated from this belief. Neither I nor generations of my family can ever imagine challenging Sri Akal Takht Sahib," he added.

Questioning the appointment of the Akal Takht Jathedar, Mann said, "The political appointments that have taken place there, the Sikh Sangat knows very well about the kind of decisions being taken there." He said it was completely wrong that attempts were being made to defame him.

"Punjab resides in every fibre of my being, Punjab lives in my heartbeat and I am working day and night for Punjab," he said. Now that the people have welcomed the anti-sacrilege law brought by the government, some vested interests have become uncomfortable, the chief minister said.

Mann said the "parbandhaks" at the Akal Takht and the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee were earlier asking why an anti-sacrilege law had not been framed. "When the law was enacted, they said why it was enacted without consulting them and refused to accept it. It proves that they change decisions every day," he said, referring to the Jaagat Jot Sri Guru Granth Sahib Satkar (Amendment) Act, 2026. (PTI)

Kejriwal targets BJP over TMC defections; calls CJP 'good party'

PANAJI, June 16: AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal on Tuesday accused the ruling BJP of "breaking" parties, against the backdrop of the recent rebellion in Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress (TMC), saying such things were harmful for democracy.

He also called the Cockroach Janta Party a "good party", when asked about the Abhijeet Dipke-founded CJP.

CJP, a satirical youth-led movement, has launched a campaign demanding the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, alleging systemic failures in the education sector, particularly concerns surrounding the NEET-UG 2026 "paper-leak" controversy.

The TMC faced a drubbing in the recent West Bengal assembly polls, following which 58 of its 80 MLAs broke away.

On Sunday, 20 rebel TMC MPs in the Lok Sabha met Speaker Om Birla seeking a separate seating arrangement in the House, while announcing the bloc's merger with the little-known Nationalist Citizens Party of India (NCPi).

To a query about TMC leaders quitting the party, Kejriwal alleged that what happened in Kolkata and Maharashtra (a reference to the Shiv Sena and NCP splits) shows that the BJP is "basically an immoral and unethical party".

People vote for a party, but the BJP either "buys" legislators with huge amounts of money or sends the Enforcement Directorate (ED) to "break" parties, he charged.

"This is not good for our democracy. This is not good for our democratic system," the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader said.

"Whatever the BJP is doing -- breaking political parties, weakening the Opposition, misusing the ED and misusing money -- is very harmful for democracy, and everyone should raise their voice against it," he said.

Asked further about developments in West Bengal, Kejriwal said, "What is happening is wrong."

"If people voted for the Trinamool Congress and elected its 28 or 29 MPs because they believed in the party, and then 20 or 22 of them are lured away and made to support some unknown party, that is simply not right," he said.

Asked about AAP MP Raghav Chadha joining the BJP recently, he said it was "unfortunate". (PTI)

'Cong must accommodate; Left's role needs to be proactive in INDIA bloc'

NEW DELHI, June 16: The INDIA bloc must regroup and regain momentum after recent electoral setbacks, with the Congress taking greater responsibility for sustaining the coalition and the Left providing ideological direction proactively and strengthening mass struggles, CPI(ML) Liberation general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya said.

In an interview with PTI, Bhattacharya said the recent INDIA bloc meeting reflected both a "sense of urgency" and an awareness among opposition parties that they were entering a difficult political phase. "There was a sense of urgency. Everybody thought that it was high time that we resumed the process and did something," he said. The CPI(ML) Liberation leader pointed out that the meeting came against the backdrop of major setbacks suffered by opposition parties, including in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, and underscored the need for the alliance to become more active and purposeful.

According to him, opposition leaders were also conscious that contentious issues such as delimitation were likely to return to the political agenda.

"We were successful in stalling the delimitation issue in April. But after this May verdict, the BJP is bound to come back again with the entire delimitation agenda,



and they would like to link the women's reservation also with this. So, we will have to fight it all over again," he said.

Bhattacharya suggested that the changed political landscape could make such battles more challenging for the opposition than before. Against this backdrop, he said the Congress, as the largest constituent of the alliance, would have to play a greater role in nurturing the coalition.

"The Congress is a party which is looking for its own revival. So, for the Congress, revival of its own party is a priority," he said. At the same time, he noted that the Congress had been among the biggest beneficiaries of opposition unity in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

"The Congress too needs to take a call that this coalition is in need of care. And to

sustain the coalition, Congress being the biggest party with the greatest kind of national footprint, it has to be more responsible, more responsive, accommodative too," Bhattacharya said.

He also argued that the Left needed to shoulder greater responsibility within the opposition alliance.

"INDIA (bloc) is not a Congress project. India, as a country needs it. So, all the parties, we all have stakes in it," he said.

"It is not for the Left just to complain about this party or that party. It is for the Left also to own the whole INDIA bloc and play a more proactive role and especially on the ideological front and the agitational movement front," he added.

Describing the Left as the strongest ideological opposition to the BJP, Bhattacharya said ideological clarity would become increasingly important at a time when several opposition parties were facing political challenges.

"Look at the way the TMC was so powerful till the other day. But now, it is imploding like anything. Why? Because it is built around power. But there is hardly that kind of ideology to sustain it," he said.

He said opposition parties needed to engage not only with alliance partners but also with students, workers, civil liberties groups and other social movements. (PTI)

PM Modi must take up with Trump killing of Indian seafarers: Priyanka

NEW DELHI, June 16: Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Tuesday urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to take up with US President Donald Trump the issue of the killing of three Indian seafarers in American attacks on ships when the two leaders meet on the sidelines of the G7 Summit in France.

Prime Minister Modi and Trump are set to meet on the sidelines of the G-7 meeting in France on Wednesday. This will be the first meeting between the two leaders since February last year in Washington and comes against the backdrop of concerns over the death of Indian mariners on commercial ships targeted by the US navy in the Strait of Hormuz.

Speaking with reporters, the Congress leader said, "Yes, I think definitely he should take it (the issue of three Indian sailors killed in US strikes) up."

"It is surprising that we are not more outspo-

ken about what is happening," the Congress general secretary said.

The meeting between Trump and Modi will also be the first face-to-face interaction since the India-US relationship hit a rough patch after Operation Sindoar and Washington's decision to impose heavy tariffs on New Delhi.

The two leaders have had a couple of phone calls and also agreed on a framework for an interim bilateral trade deal in February, which is being negotiated.

Priyanka Gandhi's remarks come after the US said it conveyed to India that any violation of its blockade in the Strait of Hormuz and illicit transport of Iranian oil will not be tolerated.

Rubio conveyed this to Jaishankar, who spoke with him last Friday to lodge a strong protest against the death of Indian nationals in US attacks on ships off the coast of Oman. (PTI)

Top Slovakian award to PM honour for all Indians: Adityanath

LUCKNOW, June 16: Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has termed the conferment of Slovakia's highest national award to Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a matter of pride to all Indians.

In a post on X late on Monday night, Adityanath said, "The conferment of The Order of the White Double Cross (1st Class) upon PM @narendramodi ji by Slovakia is a moment of immense pride and honour for 140 crore Indians."

He said the recognition reflected the growing global respect for Bharat and acknowledged the prime minister's "exceptional contribution" towards international partnerships, mutual prosperity and bonds of friendship between nations.

The chief minister said that under Modi's leadership, India continues to emerge as a leading voice on the global stage, earning admiration, trust and goodwill across the world.

Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya said the honour symbolises India's rising stature on the

global stage.

In a post on X in Hindi late on Monday night, Maurya said the award was a "matter of pride for every Indian."

"Under the distinguished leadership of the prime minister, India has established a new identity rooted in trust, cooperation, and shared development within the global community. His diplomatic vision has positioned India as a strong and respected nation at the heart of global decision-making," Maurya said.

Deputy Chief Minister Brajesh Pathak termed it a "historic achievement."

"Another moment of pride for every Indian. Prime Minister Narendra Modi ji has been conferred with Slovakia's highest civilian honour, 'The Order of the White Double Cross' (First Class)," he wrote on X.

On Monday, Modi, who has been on a visit to Slovakia, was conferred with the Order of the White Double Cross (1st Class). This is his 33rd international honour. (PTI)

Mehbooba urges authorities to allow Muharram processions in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, June 16: PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti on Tuesday appealed to the authorities in Jammu and Kashmir to allow Muharram processions in the valley and release youths booked under the Public Safety Act (PSA) during protests over developments in Iran.

In a statement, the former chief minister said religious processions are an integral part of the region's cultural and spiritual heritage and must be facilitated in a manner that respects the sentiments and constitutional rights of the people.

Muharram, the first month of the Islamic New Year, will begin in Jammu and Kashmir on Wednesday and 'Ashura' processions will be held on the 10th day, June 26.

"Muharram is a time of reflection, sacrifice and remembrance. The values embodied by Imam Hussain continue to inspire people to stand for justice, compassion and human dignity. It is incumbent upon the government to ensure that mourners are able to observe these sacred days freely and peacefully," Mehbooba said.

She said Muharram is not merely a religious observance, but an inseparable part of the region's spiritual, cultural and historical

fabric. "Muharram carries profound religious and emotional significance for the people of Jammu & Kashmir and the administration must ensure all necessary arrangements for mourners and devotees," she said. The PDP chief urged the authorities to put in place adequate measures for traffic management, healthcare facilities, sanitation, drinking water, electricity and other essential services to facilitate the smooth conduct of religious gatherings and processions.

Expressing concern over "reports that several young men who participated in demonstrations relating to recent developments involving Iran" have allegedly been booked under the PSA and lodged in jails outside J&K, Mehbooba said such actions are "deeply troubling and risk further alienating the youth". She said that the use of "harsh laws" against young people, particularly during the sacred month of Muharram, is both "insensitive and counterproductive".

"Muharram is a time when people mourn and remember the sacrifices made in Karbala. It is a period of reflection, compassion and solidarity with those who suffer." (PTI)

Andhra CM showcases Amaravati vision at World Cities Summit in Singapore

AMARAVATI, June 16: Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu on Tuesday showcased his vision for Amaravati at the World Cities Summit in Singapore, describing the greenfield capital city as a people-centric urban centre built on the principles of equity, sustainability, opportunity and livability.

Addressing the Leadership Plenary-2 session on the theme "Can Smart Cities Love Humans?", the chief minister said Amaravati is being developed as one of the finest cities in the world with world-class infrastructure, advanced digital capabilities and a strong focus on quality of life.

"People first is our policy. Amaravati will be a city based on equity, nature, opportunity and livability," Naidu said.

Reflecting on his focus on technology-driven growth, the chief minister said he had spoken about information technology 25 years ago and that the first-mover advantage had helped Telugu people emerge among the leaders in per capita income.

Naidu said the bifurcation of

Andhra Pradesh provided an opportunity to build another city and that Amaravati is being developed as a greenfield capital and a platform of opportunities.

The CM said the city is taking shape around the Krishna River with inner and outer ring roads and iconic bridges forming key elements of its infrastructure.

He noted that Amaravati would be developed as a 21-km waterfront city and would incorporate specialised zones such as Sports City, Financial City, Knowledge City, Justice City, Tourism City, Health City and Media City.

The CM said farmers had voluntarily contributed 35,000 acres of land under the land pooling model after a single call from the government and noted that a portion of the land is being developed and returned to them as developed plots.

Drawing a comparison with Cyberabad, Naidu said land that was valued at Rs 2 lakh per acre when the project was launched had appreciated to around Rs 200 crore per acre.

He described Cyberabad as



proof that development leads to wealth creation. The chief minister said Amaravati is being developed as a Knowledge City and that efforts are underway to attract national and international educational institutions.

He added that a Quantum Computing Hub and advanced digital infrastructure would be among the city's major attractions.

Naidu invited people to visit Amaravati and leverage the opportunities being created through the

capital city's development with fresh and innovative ideas, the release added.

Earlier, the CM invited global semiconductor companies to explore investment opportunities in Andhra Pradesh, describing the state as one of India's most investment-friendly destinations.

Addressing the Semicon Ecosystem Roundtable, the chief minister said Andhra Pradesh follows a "Speed of Doing Business" approach to facilitate investments

and industrial growth.

"This is the right time for investors to explore opportunities in Andhra Pradesh. I invite industrialists to visit the state within the next 30 days and assess the policies and opportunities available," Naidu said in an official release.

He said India is among the safest destinations for investments globally and noted that Andhra Pradesh offers a conducive environment for industries through investor-friendly policies and faster approvals. Highlighting the state's potential in semiconductor manufacturing, he said a semiconductor manufacturing facility would soon be established in the Rayalaseema region.

The CM noted that Rayalaseema also offers significant opportunities in defence, aerospace, electronics, fighter aircraft manufacturing and automobile production.

Representatives of several Singapore-based semiconductor companies attended the roundtable meeting and discussed opportunities for collaboration and investments in Andhra Pradesh. (PTI)

'NTA places on record that the intelligence-sharing and coordinated take-down action led by the Ministry of Home Affairs'

NEET-UG re-test: Govt blocks Telegram app till June 22

NEW DELHI, June 16: The government on Tuesday temporarily restricted access to the Telegram messaging app ahead of the NEET-UG 2026 re-examination, with the National Testing Agency (NTA) saying the measure was aimed at tackling cheating rackets and misinformation.

NTA Director General Abhishek Singh said the restriction on Telegram till June 22 was part of efforts to ensure that the June 21 re-test is conducted without malpractice.

"We will not let anything go wrong. We will take all possible actions to ensure that the examination is conducted without any malpractice," Singh told PTI when asked about the move.

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), acting on recommendations made by the NTA, has issued a direction under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, restricting access to the Telegram platform in India for a defined and limited period ending June 22, 2026 covering the day of the NEET-UG 2026 re-examination and its immediate aftermath.

A separate direction requires Telegram to disable in India the message-editing feature for already-posted messages till June 30, addressing the specific structural feature through which the platform has been used to fabricate after-the-event "paper leak" evidence in respect of national examinations, the NTA said

in a statement.

"Both measures have been taken in the interest of public order, in response to the organised use of the platform by cheating rackets to defraud candidates appearing for the NEET (UG) 2026 re-examination scheduled on 21 June, 2026," it said.

Asked whether the action was prompted by any reports of a paper leak, the NTA chief said there was no such trigger and that authorities had instead been dealing with fake messages circulating online.

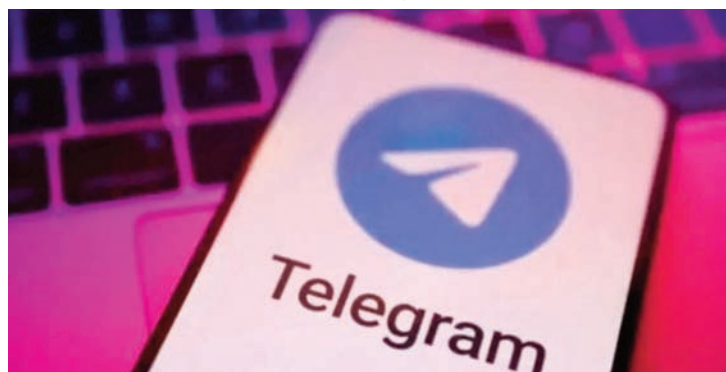
"No, these were all fake messages. Yesterday also, the Ahmedabad police cracked a case in which fake messages were being circulated," he said.

Singh said the circulation of such messages was causing anxiety among candidates. "Since this was going on, it was leading to a lot of people being anxious and a lot of mental stress to the students. We had to take this action," he said.

On whether any specific meetings preceded the decision, Singh said discussions on examination security are held regularly. "A lot of meetings are held every day," he said.

The medical entrance examination held on May 3 was cancelled amidst allegations of irregularities, leaving lakhs of aspirants in despair.

The agency expressed its gratitude to MeitY for what it described as a "timely action" taken in the interest of students and said it would help ensure the conduct of "safe and secure examinations" on June 21.



The NTA said the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) under the Ministry of Home Affairs has served as the principal nodal agency coordinating the operational response to the Telegram-based fraud and misinformation targeting NEET candidates.

According to the agency, acting on inputs from the NTA, state law enforcement agencies, including the police forces of Bihar, Gujarat and Rajasthan, and its own monitoring efforts, I4C secured the prompt take-down of "substantial number" of Telegram channels, groups and bots that openly advertised fraudulent and misleading purpose.

"NTA places on record that the intelligence-sharing and coordinated take-down action led by the Ministry of Home Affairs, through I4C, and MeitY has been continuous, prompt and substantive, and remains the operational backbone of the response," the statement said.

"This sustained inter-agency effort, well in advance of the present platform-level action, is the reason the harm caused by these rackets has been contained to the extent it has," it added.

The agency said the directions were issued after references from the NTA and the Department of Higher Education highlighting the limitations of channel-by-channel action and seeking platform-level compliance.

"The directions are a measure of last resort, taken only after intermediate remedies, including the take-down action coordinated by I4C, had been pursued and had not produced, at the platform level, the response required to protect candidates in the run-up to the examination," it said.

"The calibration of the directions - a narrow platform-access restriction confined to the examination window, together with a feature-specific compliance direction for the

post-examination period - reflects an effort to address the public-order concern with the minimum restriction necessary," it added.

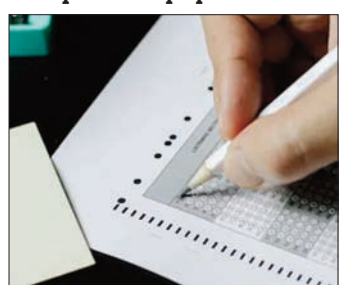
The NTA said over the preceding weeks, channels operating openly on the platform under names that themselves advertised their purpose - "PAPER LEAKED NEET", "RE-NEET 2026", "Private Mafia", "REE NEET MAFAIA" and similar formulations - demanded sums ranging from a few thousand to several lakhs of rupees from candidates and their families, in exchange for purported access to the re-examination paper.

"NTA has placed on the record, and reiterates, that there is no such paper available outside the secured examination chain. The promise of any such material is, in every instance, a fraud," it said.

Explaining the decision to disable the message-editing feature, the agency said the feature, in its present form, permits a channel administrator to edit previously posted messages, including the substitution of attached files such as PDFs while the original send-time stamp is retained.

"This capability has been used, in respect of multiple recent examinations, to fabricate after-the-event 'paper leak' artefacts," the statement said, adding administrators could edit old messages after an examination to insert the actual question paper and later circulate screenshots as purported proof that the paper had been available beforehand. (PTI)

Centre debunks claims of civil services prelims exam question paper leak



NEW DELHI, June 16: The Centre on Tuesday debunked social media posts claiming that the recently concluded civil services prelims exam question paper was leaked as "fake".

In a post on X, the Press Information Bureau's Fact Check wing said that "several social media posts circulating online are alleging that the UPSC Civil Services (Preliminary) Examination, 2026 question paper was leaked".

"This claim is fake," it said, attaching a photo of a social media post by the National Students' Union of India (NSUI), the student wing of the Congress party.

The civil services examination is conducted annually by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) in three stages -- preliminary, main and interview -- to select officers of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Indian Foreign Service (IFS) and Indian Police Service (IPS) among others. The preliminary exam was held on May 24 and its result was announced on Monday.

"UPSC examination question papers are developed by experts in the relevant subjects selected from across India," the PIB Fact Check said. "Please refrain from sharing misleading and unverified claims," it said, adding that "rely only on information obtained from official sources".

The PIB Fact Check also shared a link to a clarification given by an institute regarding the alleged leak.

"A claim has been circulating that Anantam IAS already had the UPSC civil services prelims 2026 questions -- or that the paper was leaked to us -- because some of our answer-key explanation articles showed a publish date from before the exam," said the clarification note, also put up on the institute's website. "We want to address this head-on, because it is both serious and false," it said.

"Once the paper was in the public domain, our faculty did what we do every year: solved General Studies Paper-I, prepared a detailed answer key, and wrote a set of in-depth articles explaining each answer -- the concept behind it, the elimination logic, and the source," the institute said.

"That is a large amount of content. Publishing dozens of detailed explanations at once, all stamped with the same date and time, would have fired off a flood of push notifications and newsletter emails to our subscribers in a single burst -- and made the series hard to read in any sensible order.

"So we did something routine for a big content series: we backdated the publish dates of some (not all) of those articles so the explanations sat in a logical sequence and did not spam everyone on one day," it said. (PTI)

From factory floors to freedom: 84 child labourers rescued in Gujarat; 26 offenders booked

GANDHINAGAR, June 16: Police have rescued 84 children from exploitative working conditions from different parts of Gujarat and registered 16 criminal cases against 26 offenders during the first 14 days of a month-long state-wide drive, officials said on Tuesday.

The drive, 'Operation Childhood Freedom', is a campaign against child labour. The campaign has intensified enforcement action across industrial clusters, commercial establishments, and informal labour units where children were found working in violation of labour laws.

Launched by the police under the leadership of Deputy Chief Minister Harsh Sanghavi, the initiative seeks to ensure that "every child is in school and not at work".

Director General of Police (DGP) G S Malik said the operation is not limited to enforcement

alone, but also focuses on rehabilitation and long-term recovery of rescued children.

"The Gujarat police have rescued 84 children from exploitative working conditions and registered 16 criminal cases against 26 accused persons during the first 14 days of a month-long state-wide drive titled 'Operation Childhood Freedom'," an official release stated.

Police in Surat city raided a textile unit, Jay Ambe Textiles, following a tip-off and rescued two minor boys who were allegedly being forced to work under exploitative conditions. Preliminary investigation revealed that the children were being paid barely Rs 200 per day, far below legal and ethical labour standards, the release said.

Police further found that when the minors resisted to work continuously, they were allegedly forced back to their duties against their will. The

children were made to work from 8 am to 7 pm with only a one-hour lunch break, enduring long hours of physical, mental, and economic exploitation, officials said.

The children rescued from the textile unit were immediately shifted to safety, while the employer was booked under relevant provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act.

"Under Operation Childhood Freedom, 84 child labourers have been rescued, 16 offences registered, and 26 accused booked in the first 14 days of the drive. Alongside enforcement, 67 children have already been rehabilitated and 160 awareness programmes have been conducted across the state," said DGP Malik. (PTI)

CSIR-NIIST, BAIF sign MoU for sustainable technologies, rural development

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, June 16: The CSIR-NIIST and BAIF Development Research Foundation have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to collaborate on sustainable technologies and climate-resilient rural development.

The MoU was exchanged on Monday between the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research-National Institute for Interdisciplinary Science and Technology (CSIR-NIIST) Director C Anandharamakrishnan and BAIF President and Managing Trustee Bharat Kakade at BAIF's Central Research Station in Uruli Kanchan, Pune. The partnership will focus on research, innovation, technology validation and capacity building, with special emphasis on agrivoltaics, which combines solar power generation with agricultural production, according to a statement on Tuesday. CSIR-NIIST has been developing agrivoltaic technologies to improve solar energy generation and farm productivity, while BAIF has carried out field-scale studies on such systems and their impact on agriculture and sustainability.

The two organisations will work together on validation, demonstra-

tion and deployment of agrivoltaic technologies across different agro-climatic regions of the country.

Speaking on the occasion, Anandharamakrishnan said the collaboration would help accelerate the adoption of sustainable technologies for climate-resilient agriculture, renewable energy and improved rural livelihoods.

During the visit, officials from both organisations also explored cooperation in areas such as vegan leather technology, wastewater treatment, biomass utilisation, agricultural waste management, AI-enabled drone applications, biodegradable plastics and eco-friendly packaging solutions. Founded in 1967 by Dr Manibhai Desai, BAIF is a leading rural development organisation working in sustainable agriculture, livestock development, natural resource management and livelihood enhancement.

The partnership is expected to support the development of scalable solutions in sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, water management and circular bioeconomy, contributing to India's climate and rural development goals, the statement added. (PTI)

Madhya Pradesh set to emerge as a major nuclear power hub in country: Official

BHOPAL, June 16: After harnessing thermal, hydro and renewable energy sources to the best of its abilities, Madhya Pradesh is set to emerge as a major nuclear power hub in the country with projects to the tune of 7,000 MW in progress, a top energy official said on Tuesday.

"Madhya Pradesh is emerging as a key destination for nuclear power development, with projects under implementation by NTPC (National Thermal Power Corporation) and NPCIL (Nuclear Power Corporation of India), and growing interest from private sector developers," the official said.

Additional Chief Secretary (ACS) to the Chief Minister and Energy Department, Neeraj Mandloi, told PTI that the state government has formed a high-power committee under the chairmanship of ACS Energy, including revenue, water resources, and collectors of the concerned sites, to coordinate and expedite investments in line with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's SHANTI Act of 2025.

"This is a very unique arrangement, no other state has done it so far, and in yesterday's video-conferencing meeting by the Secretary, Department of Atomic Energy, they appreciated Madhya Pradesh's proactive role in attracting

new nuclear power projects under the Prime Minister's mission," he said.

The senior bureaucrat said the Centre has set a target of 100 GW of nuclear power by 2047, and the MP government is on track towards the nuclear energy goal.

The state currently identified nuclear power projects with a planned capacity of approximately 7,000 MW, while additional private-sector proposals are under preliminary consideration, he said.

The Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act, 2025 is a unique legislation that overhauls the country's nuclear governance.

It is aimed at breaking the state's monopoly by allowing private-sector and joint-venture participation to accelerate progress toward clean energy goals, an official said.

The nuclear power projects whose current status is "In Progress" are NTPC Limited's Basi, Neemuch district's 2,800 MW (700x4 units), the official said.

"Basi was shortlisted after the evaluation of five potential sites. It also got in-principle approval for the allocation of 140 MCM water from Gandhi Sagar Reservoir," the official said. (PTI)

Gunshots fired, man dead in Delhi's Dayalpur

NEW DELHI, June 16: A 40-year-old man was shot dead by unidentified persons in northeast Delhi's Dayalpur area, police said on Tuesday.

The victim, Rashid, received multiple gunshot wounds and was rushed to a hospital, where doctors declared him dead. A video purportedly of the incident showed three men arriving on a motorcycle, with two of them wearing helmets. The three are seen getting off the vehicle, opening fire on the victim, and riding away.

"Rashid was a known bad character (BC) of the area and had previously been found involved in cases related to extortion, grievous hurt, theft and other criminal activities. Both the deceased and the accused belong to the same community," a police officer said. The officer said that the accused involved in the crime have been identified and multiple leads about their whereabouts have been received.

The police said CCTV footage from the area is being examined to identify the riders. Several angles as motives behind the murder, including enmity, are under probe. (PTI)

3 children killed after water tank collapse

JAIPUR, June 16: Three children were killed after a water tank wall collapsed on them at a construction site of a factory in Bhiwadi town of Rajasthan's Khairthal-Tijara district. The incident occurred at the under-construction plant on Old Samtal Road in the industrial area on Monday afternoon, they said.

According to the police, a four-year-old girl, Meenu Sharma, died on the spot, while the two injured boys -- Jyotish Sharma (8) and Shivam (12) -- were referred to a hospital in Delhi, where they succumbed to their injuries during treatment late Monday night, police said.

Three other injured persons, identified as Shrimani (40), Jeetu (25) and Aruna (40), are undergoing treatment at a private hospital in Bhiwadi. Their condition is said to be serious.

Bhiwadi Deputy Superintendent of Police Pradeep Nehra said on Tuesday that the victims were present near the water tank when its wall collapsed on them. The factory is being constructed by a private builder, he said. (PTI)

Four brothers killed in bus-car collision

JAIPUR, June 16: Four brothers were killed in a collision between a Rajasthan Roadways bus and a car in Balotra district on Tuesday, police said.

The accident occurred near Goliya-Pareu circle under the Pachpadra police station limits when the bus, travelling from Barmer to Jodhpur, collided head-on with a car.

The impact of the collision was so severe that the car was completely crushed, trapping all four occupants inside.

Residents rushed to the spot and, after considerable effort, pulled the injured out of the mangled vehicle and took them to a hospital. Doctors at Patodi hospital declared two of the brothers dead, while the other two, who were critically injured, were referred to Nahata Hospital in Balotra. They succumbed to injuries on the way, police said.

The deceased were identified as Uda Ram (39), Rekha Ram (35), Joga Ram (31) and Vishan Ram (29), all brothers. The deceased, who were labourers, were on their way to work when the accident took place. Following the incident, angry villagers blocked the Pareu road by placing stones and bushes on it.

Station House Officer Geeta Kumari reached the spot with a police team and persuaded the protesters to clear the road. Police have registered a case and initiated an investigation into the cause of the accident, officials said. (PTI)

4 down in Baran while bathing in Parvati river

JAIPUR, June 16: Four people drowned while bathing in the Parvati river in Rajasthan's Baran district on Tuesday, police said. The incident took place in the Gugor village where the youths had come to attend a wedding ceremony. They went to the river for a bath and reportedly slipped into deep water.

On receiving information, local residents and authorities rushed to the spot and pulled the four people out of the river. They were immediately taken to the Chhabra Hospital, where doctors declared them dead after examination, police said.

The deceased have been identified as Guddi (45), Arman (17), Salam (22) and Yunus (18), SHO Rajesh Khatana said.

The bodies were shifted to the mortuary of the hospital. Necessary legal formalities have been initiated, and the families of the deceased have been informed, police said. (PTI)

Lion kills restaurant worker in Gujarat's Amreli

AMRELI (Gujarat), June 16: A lion mauled to death a 25-year-old man who worked at a restaurant in Gujarat's Amreli district and ate several body parts of the victim, officials said on Tuesday. Locals found a few body parts of the victim and his severed head close to an approach road near Kovaya village of Amreli district under Rajula forest range early Tuesday morning.

Assistant Conservator of Forests Viralsinh Chavda said a pride of four lions was moving in the area and efforts were underway to cage them all based on suspicion that one of them killed the man, who hailed from Uttarakhand. "After receiving the message at 6 am today, the local beat guards and forest officials reached the spot. Prima facie, it was found that the man was killed by a lion, with a pride of four lions seen in the nearby areas. We are working to rescue them all," Chavda said.

According to locals, the victim left the hotel after work late at night and was on his way back home when a lion mauled him in a nearby bush. When they found his remains in the morning, they informed the police and forest department officials, who later reached the spot. (PTI)

Indigenous HPV test emerges as low cost tool for cervical cancer screening

NEW DELHI, June 16: An indigenous point-of-care HPV test has emerged as a promising low-cost tool for cervical cancer screening, with a multinational validation study finding that it meets international performance standards and could significantly expand access to early detection in resource-constrained settings.

The study, published in the International Journal of Cancer in June, found that Truenat HR-HPV-Plus satisfied all International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) reduced-valency and non-inferiority validation criteria, making it the first formally validated reduced-valency HPV assay targeting seven to eight high-risk HPV types.

Researchers reported that the test demonstrated 80.4 per cent sensitivity and 91.5 per cent specificity for detecting cervical intraepithelial neoplasia grade 2 or worse, a key precursor to cervical cancer.

The assay also showed high inter-laboratory agreement of 93.3 per cent.

"Cervical cancer is one of the few cancers where we know the cause, we have prevention tools, and we can detect risk early. Yet,

thousands of women in India continue to be diagnosed late because screening does not reach them at the right time and in the right setting," Dr Neeraja Bhatla, Professor Emeritus at the National Cancer Institute, AIIMS, Hajar, said.

Former head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at AIIMS Delhi, Dr Bhatla, who is the lead author of the study, said for many women above 30 years of age screening is the most immediate strategy for reducing cervical cancer risk.

"We need robust screening systems that can identify women at risk before cancer develops. HPV DNA testing is central to this strategy," she said.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends HPV DNA testing as the preferred method for cervical cancer screening because it is more sensitive than cytology (Pap smear) in identifying women at risk of developing cervical pre-cancer and cancer.

However, adoption has remained limited in many low and middle-income countries because of cost, laboratory infrastructure requirements, long turnaround times, and challenges in ensuring follow-up. Dr Bhatla pointed out



According to the researchers, the higher specificity could reduce unnecessary referrals and follow-up procedures, making the test a reliable, cost-effective and scalable option for cervical cancer screening in India and other low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). The validation drew on cervical samples from the ESTAMPA study, a multi-centric cervical cancer screening programme conducted across Latin America that screened 44,135 women aged 30-64 years between 2012 and 2022.

Samples for the validation were sourced from the IARC biorepository and obtained from study centres in San Jose, Costa Rica, and Buenos Aires, Argentina. The study involved a collaboration between AIIMS, Delhi, ICMR-National Institute of Cancer Prevention and Research (NICPR), Noida, ICMR-National Institute for Research on Women's Health (NIR-WoH), Mumbai, DBT-BIRAC, IARC/WHO, the University of Antwerp, ANLIS Malbran in Argentina and Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social in Costa Rica.

Testing responsibilities were distributed across Indian institutions, including AIIMS, ICMR-NIRWoH and ICMR-NICPR. Cervical cancer remains a major public health challenge in India, accounting for an estimated 127,000 new cases and about 80,000 deaths annually. While screening can identify precancerous lesions before they progress to cancer, coverage remains low despite the inclusion of cervical cancer screening under national programmes. Persistent infection with carcinogenic HPV types is the necessary cause of cervical cancer. The WHO recommends HPV testing as the preferred strategy for cervical cancer elimination, with evidence suggesting that screening women twice -- at ages 35 and 45 years -- using validated HPV tests can substantially reduce disease burden. However, most currently available HPV tests are expensive and require sophisticated laboratory infrastructure, limiting their use in many LMICs, Dr Bhatla said. She said the study was among the first to evaluate Indian-developed reduced-valency HPV assays using WHO Target Product Profile and IARC validation criteria. "The study demonstrates that indigenous platforms can achieve clinical validation, quality standards and accuracy comparable to global gold-standard tests. It has

the potential to be a game-changer for cervical cancer prevention and early detection in India," she said.

ICMR-NICPR director Dr Shalini Singh said affordable indigenous HPV testing solutions were critical for expanding screening coverage and advancing WHO's cervical cancer elimination goals.

Dr Showket Hussain, one of the corresponding authors, said the validated platform could be readily integrated into screening programmes because healthcare personnel at district-level facilities were already familiar with the technology.

He added that future developments, including self-sampling and high-throughput adaptations, could further improve access. Researchers noted that while HPV vaccination is expected to substantially reduce future disease burden, effective screening remains essential for women above 30 years of age who remain at risk of cervical cancer. Notably, other assays evaluated in the study did not meet the required validation benchmarks, underscoring the significance of the Truenat HR-HPV-Plus findings for India-led diagnostic innovation. (PTI)

Have never seen an audience watching a film so quietly: Imtiaz Ali on 'Main Vaapas Aaunga'

Imtiaz Ali knew each time he picked up a newspaper that he wanted to connect the headlines of displacement and destruction to his story of Partition. He realised that vision in "Main Vaapas Aaunga", a film that draws an arc from past to present, and from the subcontinent to the rest of the world.

"I kept reading that there is some destruction, there is some battle and there are more and more people getting abandoned, becoming refugees and getting on to the verge of existence... I couldn't help but think that this is exactly what happened in Partition," Ali told PTI on his 55th birthday on Tuesday.

His greatest birthday gift possibly is the response to the film, starring Naseeruddin Shah, Diljit Dosanjh, Vedang Raina and Sharvari: youngsters sitting quietly and empathising with the story about a 95-year-old remembering the love he left behind on the other side of the border.

The film is told through the ramblings of the old man (Shah) to his grandson (Dosanjh) who joins the dots to draw a picture of Partition trauma and a romance that survived the decades.

As the credits roll, news clips from various contemporary events of war, bombings and bloodshed, of displaced people from around the world and different ethnicities flash across the screen. Also hope with shots of children smiling through it all.

It is set to a song of peace, "Kya Kamaal Hai", voiced by Dosanjh and composed by A R Rahman. An anonymous quote by a refugee ties it all together: "If I had a choice between death and leaving my home, I would have gladly chosen death. Unfortunately, I did not have such a choice."

"I felt that 'let's do this in the end'. And we present actual footage of people that are going through the severities of being partitioned from their homes, like we did in 1947. And also connect the visuals. And I wanted this song for that," Ali said.

Ali, whose filmography includes "Jab We Met", "Rockstar", "Love Aaj Kal" and "Amar Singh Chamkila", has been doing the rounds of theatres to gauge the response of audiences.

It has been a gratifying experience. "There is this feeling that what I wanted to say has been communicated... I have never seen an audience watching the film so quietly. In all of my successful films also, people have this habit of fidgeting here and there. This time, they're really paying attention, the younger people are paying attention," Ali said.

The director, famous for his take on relationships, is especially happy that the "intimacy and affection" central to the story have connected with the young.

"I have said it many times that the present generation feel a little lost because they don't find sustaining love, something they can just hold in their hearts, that old-fashioned love, like old music. That longing, that yearning, that holding one person and being with that person, they are relating to that," Ali said.

The film, he added, is about discovering inter-generational connections that we need to make sense of the present.

"The situation 78 years back was different and the way those guys had to be in order to survive is different. Now Nirvair (Dosanjh) has the mind space to reconnect and he should because otherwise, he will never feel whole or settled."

Discussing his last sequence, Ali said it became possible because of Dosanjh and his long-time collaborator, lyricist Irshad Kamil.

"A lot of people have said that they think the whole film is on one side and the music video on the other. I must acknowledge Irshad Kamil who said, 'Sir, you have made this film, but then there is something that you can do, which goes beyond the film'."

"Diljit Dosanjh said, 'Sir, from here, this will be a very different connection. A very different aspect of the mind will open. You have to make this song'."

There was no budget for the sequence and the money was taken from the publicity budget.

"But I wanted to do this. And Diljit wanted to do this. We shot it quickly," he said, adding that cinema is permanent and the visuals will be there for all time as evidence of what happened.

According to Ali, he deliberately did not over-emphasise the magnitude of the tragedy told through the remembrances of the aging man on his deathbed.

"Whenever there was something emotional coming up in the script or during the shooting, I did not linger on it. I did not over explain it. I did not over-emphasise it. I did not create an atmosphere of great emotionality..." he said.

"I knew this had strength. I knew I didn't have to hold its hand because the emotion was so strong. I thought let it flow while I got ready for the next scene," he said.

In the film, the old man clubs rioters and Hitler as those who came from Mars. It was very deliberate, Ali explained, adding that he didn't want to connect them to any religion, human or even animals. (PTI)



Was sick of playing boy next door roles: Vikrant Massey



Actor Vikrant Massey says he was tired of essaying the boy next door roles and is happy that he is finally getting to step into the shoes of a different character in the Avinash Arun-directed series "Pritam and Pedro".

Arshad Warsi, Vir Hirani, Mona Singh star alongside Massey in the series, which has filmmaker Rajkumar Hirani attached as creator and producer.

"Like everyone says, even if we get one passing shot or scene in Hirani-verse, then it's more than enough. I am very excited for the show. Also, the good man turn bad or anti-hero... I was sick of playing village boy or the next door boy. Finally, sir (Hirani) has given me a chance. In Hirani-verse, antagonists are not conventional. It's same with the Martin," the "12th Fail" star told reporters at the trailer launch of the show.

Created and produced by Hirani, "Pritam and Pedro" revolves around completely mismatched men who get pulled into a strange cyber crime mystery filled with humour, confusion and unexpected twists.

The 39-year-old actor said the series revolves around "a relevant topic".

The actor said he has been a victim of cyber crime as his emails were hacked twice and his wife also faced an issue when money was deducted from her account.

"...It's such a relevant topic, I think everyone have become a victim of it. It's entertaining and you will also see the human side of Martin," said the actor, known for his roles in "Haseen Dilluba", "Aankhon Ki Gustakhiyaan" and "Ginni Weds Sunny".

The series is set to stream on JioHotstar on July 3. (PTI)

Anya Taylor-Joy joins 'The Lord Of The Rings: The Hunt for Gollum'



Hollywood actor Anya Taylor-Joy is set to feature in "The Lord Of The Rings: The Hunt for Gollum".

The actor will essay the role of Seren, a Sindar Elf of the Woodland Realm, who is described as "a trusted and lethal agent of King Thranduil," according to the entertainment news outlet Variety.

Taylor-Joy will join the previously announced cast comprising Andy Serkis, Ian McKellen and Elijah Wood.

It is directed by Serkis. The film is set between "The Hobbit" trilogy and

"The Lord of the Rings" trilogy.

The story follows Aragorn and Gandalf as they search for Gollum to learn more about the origins of Bilbo's mysterious ring.

Peter Jackson is set to produce alongside Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens.

"The Lord of the Rings: The Hunt for Gollum" is slated for release worldwide in December 2027. Besides "The Lord Of The Rings: The Hunt for Gollum", the actor will feature in Apple TV's series "Lucky". She will essay the role of Luciana Armstrong in the series. (PTI)

'Lagaan' to run in theatres till June 18



The theatrical re-release of Aamir Khan's Oscar-nominated film "Lagaan" has been extended till June 18.

The makers announced the re-release of the film earlier this month on the occasion of its 25th anniversary, which was scheduled for June 12 to June 14. Following the "popular demand", the screenings have been extended till June 18, according to a press release.

The film, which originally released on June 15, 2001, was directed by Ashutosh Gowariker. The period sports drama told the story of a cricket match between a group of untrained villagers and their colonial masters.

"Lagaan" was nominated in the Best Foreign Language category at the 74th Academy Awards and received widespread critical and commercial acclaim. (PTI)

Prithviraj Sukumaran, Manju Warrier to feature in 'Odiyan'

Actors Prithviraj Sukumaran and Manju Warrier are set to star in "Odiyan".

The film is directed by Rahul Sadasivan and is produced by Sukumaran alongside Karan Johar's Dharmam Productions.

It marks the first Malayalam project for the banner.

Johar shared the announcement with the film's poster on his Instagram handle on Tuesday.

"We at @dharmamovies are taking our first step into the world of Malayalam cinema, and I am proud to announce that we have the best partners to do it with. Prithviraj, we've come such a long way with multiple collaborations behind us and hopefully many more ahead of us too," read the caption.

"It gives us great pride to announce our film - 'Odiyan', directed by the supremely talented @rahulsadasivan... His knack for eery storytelling rooted in folklore is a feat in this age of cinema. Bringing this to life on screen is the exceptional @manju.warrier of course, our favourite Prithviraj himself. Soon," it added. (PTI)

'Lagaan' wouldn't have been made without Aamir Khan: Screenplay writer Kumar Dave

Screenwriter Kumar Dave says "Lagaan" struggled to find support due to its unconventional support and it could be made only after Aamir Khan boarded the film as an actor and producer.

Set in 1893, the story centers on an Indian village affected by severe drought and high colonial taxes. To clear their debts, the locals accept a high-stakes cricket wager from an arrogant British Army officer. Aamir Khan plays the role of a young farmer, Bhuvan.

"If Aamir wouldn't have turned producer, this movie ('Lagaan') wouldn't have been made even today. He believed in this as an actor and hence he believed in it as a producer."

"We never found a producer who believed in our subject. People used to say, 'Make it contemporary, why are you making the hero wear a dhoti? He should be in a suit,' etc." Dave, who also served as an associate director on the film, told PTI in an interview. He co-wrote the screenplay with Sanjay Datta from the story penned by Ashutosh Gowariker, who also directed the movie. The dialogues were by K P Saxena.

The film is celebrating the 25th anniversary of its release this month.

Dave said he too had reservations about the subject purely from a practical standpoint.

"I never doubted the subject from day one. Even though I tried to run away from it from a practical point of view, that we wouldn't get a producer," Dave, who had previously worked with Gowariker as third assistant on his directorial debut film, "Pehla Nasha," and later as chief assistant on his second movie, "Baazi", said.

"I knew the content was strong, it has a message about the hero swimming against the tide. You need courage to do so, and the character has to be courageous. You need courage to say, 'Sharat manjor hai', it's a golden line. Once we committed, we went into it completely, we didn't back down from our responsibilities," he added.

At one point, Dave said he too tried to dissuade Gowariker from pursuing the film, given its scale and the uncertainty of getting a producer for it.

"I remember Ashutosh said, 'We will write

'Lagaan.' I tried my best (to stop him from making it) saying, 'Don't make this. We've already tried something new with 'Pehla Nasha' and 'Baazi' but things didn't work, so don't make the third film ('Lagaan'), instead do something very contemporary. This is a very international film; it will be very difficult to get a producer for this subject,'" he said.

"Even though I would tell him, 'Let's not do it,' he would insist saying, 'Let's do it.' I would tell him that the strong belief you have in your subject is good, but you need a producer who will believe in it equally. He was adamant about it (making 'Lagaan')," the screenwriter added.

The trio comprising Gowariker, Dave and Damya eventually went to Karjat, near Mumbai, where they spent weeks developing the screenplay in isolation.

Dave said the writing process was intense and immersive, with discussions beginning as early as 8:00 am and continuing through breakfast, lunch, tea, and dinner.

It was only at the very end of the night that they managed a brief, 10-to-15-minute break to unwind over a quick game of carrom before heading to sleep, he said, adding that they had written a total of 12 drafts during their month-long stay in Karjat.

"Ashu had the story and we went along with him to work on the screenplay. We knew that there are three different minds working on the film but we will go with the majority, like if Ashu and Sanjay feel this is correct, I'll go with what they say."

"Otherwise, we will keep arguing and the story will not move forward. We brought a huge pothi and then till 2000 we kept making some change or the other over the years," Dave said.

"Lagaan" featured an ensemble cast including Gracy Singh, Kulbhushan Kharbada, Raghuraj Yadav, Rajendra Gupta, Raj Zutshi, Akhilesh Mishra, Yashpal Sharma, AK Hangal, Shrivallabh Vyas, Pradeep Rawat, Rachel Shelley, Paul Blackthorne among others.

After Aamir came on board, the team began filming "Lagaan" in Bhuj for six to seven months.

The production officially kicked off on January 5, 2000 at 11 am with a muhurat shot featuring



Sahasini Mulay, who played Bhuvan's mother, Yashodamai. The scene is where she is looking at the sky, responding to off screen question from Aamir's character about what she was watching in the sky, she simply says, 'I'm looking at the clouds,' Dave shared.

To a query if at any moment they felt things were getting difficult, the screenwriter said that the team never felt overwhelmed by the scale of the film because they had mentally braced themselves from the very beginning.

"We knew from day one that it was a difficult task, so when you know that every scene or shot is difficult, you put in that kind of preparation. Like,



we shot with sync sound technique, and we had to wait in between some scenes when a flight would pass by as that would create disturbance," Dave said.

"Besides, we shot in extreme heat and winter conditions. We knew it is going to be challenging and the idea was to just overcome it," he said.

Dave credited Aamir's production team for ensuring a smooth shoot despite the challenges.

"Aamir Khan's production team was mind-blowing; everything was taken care of. Sometimes there can be ego clashes between artists and technicians but on this movie, nothing of that sort happened. The entire unit worked as a real unit." (PTI)

Elijah Just's 2-goal World Cup breakthrough lifts New Zealand to gritty draw with Iran



INGLEWOOD (US), June 16: Elijah Just made history as the first New Zealand player to score two goals in the World Cup. It wasn't quite enough for the team from the bottom of the world to pull off its first-ever win.

The All Whites held Iran to 2-2 on Monday night in the Los Angeles area, the fourth consecutive draw in World Cup play for New Zealand, which was unbeaten in the 2010 edition with three draws.

"That may be our best performance ever," coach Darren Bazeley said. "We came here to win and we were so close to making history."

The All Whites led 1-0 and 2-1 thanks to Just, who blew kisses to a crowd that included FIFA President Gianni Infantino after his second goal. Chris Wood, the Kiwis' best known player, assisted on both goals.

"We showed today that we're a dangerous team," Just said. "You can't be disappointed. A point in the World Cup is always tough to get."

The 26-year-old winger came into the World Cup off a strong season with Motherwell in the Scottish Premiership, where he was a contender for player of the year.

"It doesn't surprise me. I've known him a really long time," Bazeley said of Just. "He showed the world how dangerous he can be. He's of slight build but he gets into pockets, turns and reacts quick. A lot of people are probably watching that today and saying, 'He's a good player.' This is going to help him a lot."

Just had his parents, brother, uncle and girlfriend in the crowd, which was dominated by Iranian fans, which was to be expected given that Los Angeles is home to the largest population of Iranians outside of their home country.

"Walking out the adrenaline was really high," Just said. "Once the game started you kind of calm down a little bit. We were quite good with the ball. We dealt with the occasion really well. The players were really brave. Overall, it's the performance we needed."

Before the World Cup expanded to 48 teams for this edition, the All Whites had qualified only twice in 1982 and 2010. They have never advanced past the group stages.

The team spent the day watching other World Cup matches, including underdog Cape Verde drawing against Spain. That left Bazeley thinking it could be his team's day.

New Zealand, which entered the tournament as the lowest ranked qualifier at 85th, is better known as a rugby union powerhouse.

Just's performance in challenging Iran, which was heavily favored, gave the All Whites a jolt of confidence.

"He's an amazing player and he's so dangerous when we get him going forward," defender Finn Surman said.

The All Whites' next chance to notch their first World Cup victory comes Sunday, when they play Egypt in Vancouver, British Columbia.

"It's potentially changed people's view on us and what they kind of expect from us," Surman said. "We still think we can be better. We know we can be better." (AP)

India women beat Japan 2-1, secure semifinal berth in FIH Nations Cup



AUCKLAND, June 16: The Indian women's hockey team booked its place in the semifinals of the FIH Nations Cup with a hard-fought 2-1 victory over Japan, courtesy goals from captain Salima Tete and Lalremsiami here on Tuesday.

The win was India's second in Pool A of the tournament, which serves as a qualifier for next year's FIH Pro League. With six points from two matches, India secured a spot in the last four.

India broke the deadlock in the third quarter, with skipper Salima Tete scoring in the 33rd minute after sustained pressure from the forwards.

Japan responded quickly, equalising just two minutes later through Ai Hiramitsu.

However, Lalremsiami struck the decisive goal in the 49th minute as India held firm against a late Japanese challenge to seal the victory.

The match was also a memorable occasion for midfielder Jyoti, who celebrated her 100th senior international appearance.

The first half was closely contested, with both teams creating opportunities but failing to find a breakthrough before the interval.

The game came to life in the third quarter when India took the lead through a penalty-corner variation in the 33rd minute. Nikki Pradhan's deft touch redirected Navneet Kaur's strike perfectly

into the path of Salima, who calmly slotted the ball home.

Japan hit back almost immediately, with Hiramitsu converting a penalty corner in the 35th minute to restore parity.

With everything to play for in the final quarter, Lalremsiami netted the winner. Sushila Chanu Pukhrabam delivered a precise

pass from the edge of the circle into the danger area, where Lalremsiami expertly deflected the ball into the net to hand India a crucial victory.

India will next face Uruguay in their final Pool A fixture on Thursday, while Japan and the USA will battle for the remaining semifinal berth from the group. (PTI)

World Team Snooker: China 'B' edge out India in opener

GUANGDONG (CHINA), June 16: Former champions India suffered a narrow defeat to China 'B' in their opening match of the World Team Snooker Championship here on Tuesday.

The 2-3 loss to the hosts in the three-team Group 'B' leaves India with a must-win game against Turkey on Wednesday.

With the match poised on a knife's edge at 2-2, Aditya Mehta, who gave India the opening frame, frittered away the advantage and allowed the formidable Zhou Jinhao to help the hosts prevail in a thriller.

Down 20-22, Jinhao capitalized on Mehta's poor safety shot with a crucial break of 23.

The Chinese cueist resorted to safety after taking the penultimate red. After a bit of a cat-and-mouse game, the Indian missed a long red and sold it to the top left-hand pocket.

The promising Jinhao took the generous offering gleefully to seal the frame and match for China 'B', who had earlier outclassed Turkey 3-0.

Earlier, Jinhao had defeated Pankaj Advani with a gritty break of 53 in the second frame to draw level with India. Partnering Xu Jinhao, Zhou later compiled a flowing break of 81 to down Advani and Mehta in the doubles for a 2-1 lead.

Advani brought India back into contention with a splendid win over Ma Hailong. (PTI)

Bhavani Devi among 24 members in Indian squad



NEW DELHI, June 16: Olympian C A Bhavani Devi was on Tuesday named in India's 24-member squad for the Senior Asian Fencing Championship, to be held here from June 19-24. The squad comprises 12 women and 12 men.

The championship will feature over 400 athletes from more than 30 countries and will serve as a direct qualification event for the Asian Games later this year in Japan.

Bhavani Devi said hosting the tournament would provide India with a valuable opportunity to promote and popularise fencing across the country.

"Hosting a tournament of this magnitude is a monumental milestone for Indian fencing. Playing in front of our home crowd on such a prestigious platform is an incredible honour and an immense opportunity for growth," she said.

"This championship is a critical stepping stone in our outlook to qualify for the upcoming Asian Games, and it serves as the perfect launch pad for our long-term road to the LA 2028 Olympic cycle," she added. Fencing Association of India president Satej Patil said he was confident the home team will perform "exceptionally well" and secure qualification spots for the Asian Games. (PTI)

Twenty years after playing in the World Cup for Australia, Popovic is now guiding the Socceroos

VANCOUVER, June 16: Maybe when Australia's World Cup journey is over, Tony Popovic can reflect on his legacy with the Socceroos.

For now, though, the United States awaits. Popovic is back at the World Cup as Australia's head coach, 20 years after he played for the Socceroos at the sport's premier tournament.

Australia made a statement in its Group D opener, defeating Turkey 2-0 on Saturday night in Vancouver, British Columbia. Turkey, making its return to the World Cup for the first time in 24 years, was widely considered the stronger side going into the match.

"I think, as a coach, you're proud of the group, you're proud of the staff, you're proud that you made so many people happy in the stands. You don't really reflect too much on what it does for you, but I think that's normal for a coach, because you're already thinking, is there anyone that's injured?" Popovic said. "We need to recover well, and we need to get the boys focused quickly on the next challenge. So personally, of course, I'm proud, but maybe one day in the future I can look back on this and reflect and remember, and it'll probably be a very special moment for me, my family."

The Socceroos, training during the World Cup in Oakland, California, head to Seattle on Friday to face the United States, which also won its opener 4-1 over Paraguay to assume the top spot in the group standings.

Popovic was a defender for the Socceroos, earning the nickname



"The Enforcer." Detail oriented, he was known for his focus not just on the field, but also on nutrition, training and recovery — attributes he brings to the team as coach.

He made 58 appearances and scored eight goals with the national team during his playing career. He announced his retirement shortly after the World Cup in 2006, when Australia lost to eventual champion Italy in the round of 16. Popovic scored in a friendly against Paraguay in his final appearance with the squad that year.

On the club side, he was best known for a lengthy stint with Crystal Palace in the English Premier League.

Following his playing career, he became an assistant with Sydney in the Australian top tier before taking over as the inaugural head coach of Western Sydney Wanderers. He guided the Wanderers to the Asian Champions League title in 2014, becoming the first Aus-

tralian club to win that continental tournament. More recently he was coach of the Melbourne Victory until taking over the Socceroos in September 2024 when Graham Arnold resigned following a pair of poor results.

"He challenges me a lot, not just on the pitch, but I think off the pitch, as a professional, and even just as a man," Australia goalkeeper Paul Izzo said during camp earlier this month. "For that, I'm extremely grateful. He's a coach that I tend to really respond well with. Sometimes it may seem quite intense, that's what I prefer."

Football Australia gave Popovic a contract extension before his first game in charge at a World Cup.

Popovic responded by making some bold moves with his starting lineup against Turkey, starting 22-year-old Patrick Beach in goal over Mathew Ryan, who has played 104 times for Australia. He also left veteran midfielder Jackson Irvine on the bench and had 10 players on World Cup debut in the starting lineup.

Afterward Popovic said the win was great for the young Socceroos' confidence, while at the same time admitting there's a ways to go before they reach their full potential.

"Yes, they should get a boost, of course," he said. "Ceiling? They're nowhere near it, because they're a young group with no experience in the World Cup, very limited experience playing for their national team. So their ceiling should come in four or eight years, really, most of these boys. So we know we need that, but we are delighted with the result." (AP)

Former India chief selector Hemlata Kala wants Yastika in playing XI

NEW DELHI, June 16: Yastika Bhatia should be utilised in the upcoming games of the Women's T20 World Cup, reckons former India international and chief selector Hemlata Kala who also wants to see an improvement in the fielding department.

India began their World Cup campaign with a thumping win over Pakistan in Birmingham on Sunday.

They effectively need to beat either South Africa or Australia from their group to enter the semifinals.

In the Pakistan match, India chose to play the big hitting Bharti Fulmali over Bhatia who has a more conventional game.

Kala, who served as chief selector from 2016 to 2020, a phase when India reached the finals of 2017 ODI World Cup and 2020 T20 World Cup, wanted Bhatia in the playing eleven for the game against Netherlands in Leeds on Wednesday.

"I would like to see Yastika in the playing eleven. She doesn't have to play one down necessarily. She can play in the middle-order also and we should use her, she also did well in the recent series against England," Kala told PTI.

Bhatia usually bats at number three while Bharti batted in the middle-order against Pakistan but could not contribute much.

India's fielding has been their weakest link for a while and Kala would like to see a positive change.

"I won't agree that we are over reliant on openers. We have good batters down the order also.

"And India have to bowl as per potential. But yes fielding needs improvement. We need to save runs like other teams do (Australia and England)," she said.

India don't possess power-hitters like Australia but Kala doesn't see that as an issue.

"We are better than South Africa when it comes to power hitting. We are competing with Australia. No one plays better than Harry (Harmanpreet Kaur), Shafali bats at a high strike-rate.

"Smriti's class doesn't need power hitting. I would say game sense is much more important than power hitting. Our players have the game awareness and know how to bounce back from tough situations.

"With the way we played against Pakistan, we are certain to play the semifinals. As a team we have most bases covered. It is about playing well in the semifinal and if you do that you are in the final. I would like to see an India and Australia final."

Kala also won't like to read too much into India's performance in the preceding series losses to South Africa and England. (PTI)

No allrounder has matched Deepti Sharma's impact for India: Anjum Chopra

Anjum also said that India's World Cup-winning captain Harmanpreet Kaur is enjoying great success and commands huge respect from her peers.

"Harmanpreet is a good leader. She commands great respect in the dressing room. She walks tall in the dressing room because of her performances. The team backs her. She is the leader of that team.

"Everyone happily follows her. For any leader who commands that kind of respect, it is a great thing to happen.

"She knows how to score runs. India is very proud of her and her team. I just hope that success continues in that direction every day," said Anjum, who was a senior player of the side led by Mithali Raj, that reached the 2005 World Cup final.

She added that there was a lot of positivity and mutual respect in the dressing room.

"There is great respect for each individual's skill level. And when they walk onto the park together, they emerge as a strong, unified force. And that is why India has achieved results in the past."

She pointed out that Harman-

preet has shown great maturity, sometimes choosing to play second fiddle and allowing others to flourish.

"At the end of the day, it's a team game. You know, you need two people at the crease to score runs. So, whether she is striking the ball or she is the non-striker, at the end of the day, we saw that even in the game against Pakistan, Smriti was flourishing at the other end when Harman was also at the crease."

On whether she considers India among the favourites, she kept her cards close to her chest.

"In my book, nobody starts as a favourite. Everyone has come to win the World Cup. Nobody has come just to participate in a World Cup. I mean, at the end of the day, whoever gets the better of the opposition will win."

She asked the India players to back their skills, saying their confidence would help them achieve their goals.

"My piece of advice is just to back yourself and back your skill. They are a confident bunch. This confidence should help them sail through." (PTI)

No allrounder has matched Deepti Sharma's impact for India: Anjum Chopra

NEW DELHI, June 16: Former India captain Anjum Chopra acknowledged all-rounder Deepti Sharma's impact on Indian cricket, saying very few cricketers in the world possess the ability to influence a game through batting, bowling, fielding, or a combination of all three.

Deepti delivered a match-winning performance against Pakistan in the Women's T20 World Cup in Birmingham, claiming five wickets and helping India register a 64-run victory in their opening match.

"I don't remember any all-rounder who has had such an impact for India. We have had all-rounders, yes, but when it comes to making a consistent impact in recent times, I think Deepti Sharma -- not only in India but in world cricket -- is one of the very few players who can bring individual brilliance to any playing XI.

"She is undoubtedly on India's elite list of all-rounders," Anjum told PTI on Tuesday.

The former left-handed top-order batter pointed out that Deepti is a big-match player who consistently delivers on the biggest stages, especially in ICC tourna-



ments.

"She likes performing on the big stage. In fact, not only Deepti, there are a few more cricketers in this present Indian team who thrive under the spotlight. That's what makes this team so special because they love making an impact in high-pressure matches.

"Obviously, there is always the pressure of expectations, but when you are able to come through with flying colours, it's always nice to see such performances," she noted.

Anjum said India's chances in the ongoing World Cup will depend heavily on star batter Smriti

Mandhana.

"Look, she is a star player. She is a stylish batter and continues to score runs and help India win matches. I have always seen Smriti as an accomplished batter. She has won the ICC Women's Cricketer of the Year award more than once, I think.

"So, she is already an accomplished batter. I would not classify her as the best player ever to play for India, but she is certainly very good. That is why she continues to score runs and why she has won the ICC Cricketer of the Year award multiple times," said Anjum.

Belgium settles for 1-1 draw with Egypt at World Cup

SEATTLE, June 16: Romelu Lukaku's entrance as a second-half substitute drew a standing ovation from the smattering of Belgium supporters.

It took only 23 seconds to turn those hopeful cheers into raptures of euphoria.

Lukaku's presence sparked an immediate attack that led to Belgium's lone goal against Egypt on Monday, helping to earn a 1-1 draw in the team's opening World Cup match.

"He's a target man," Belgium captain Youri Tielemans said. "He needs to build up his fitness, which is understandable after being out for the season. But, he helps us in this way."

Lukaku, a Napoli striker who leads his nation in goals scored, withdrew from Belgium's friendlies in the United States in the spring to get fitter as he continues to recover from a hamstring injury.

That injury didn't look too bothersome in the 66th minute when he ran down the middle of the field moments after entering the game and lunched to tap a cross from the right into the net. Egypt defender Mohamed Hany got there first, however, and scored an own-goal to even the score.

With 66,775 spectators watching, the Egyptians took the lead



early in the Group G match. Emam Ashour scored his first international goal in the 19th minute.

If not for Lukaku's impact in the second half, Belgium easily could have dug itself into quite a hole in a group it is heavily favored to win, much as it did when failing to advance past the group stage at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

Despite out-possessing Egypt, the Red Devils struggled to score all afternoon.

Midfielder Kevin De Bruyne came the closest for Belgium, pushing a shot wide left in the seventh minute before clanking another off the left post in the 53rd. Lukaku could have put Belgium in front late, too, but his header sailed

far above the goal.

Belgium coach Rudi Garcia said because only 20% of his team's shots were on target, netting one goal was a fair representation of their efforts. Still, Garcia would have preferred a faster start.

"We weren't really in the groove," Garcia said in French. "Technically, we left a lot to be desired."

Egypt, meanwhile, were the more aggressive side in the first 45 minutes. Ashour, a midfielder who was playing in his 30th game for his country, took advantage of a defensive breakdown to give his team only its second lead in a World Cup match.

The Egyptians, who are playing

in their fourth World Cup, have still never won a game at the tournament.

"The match shows we were closer to earning the win," Egypt coach Hossam Hassan said in Arabic.

Belgium demonstrated it is still quite reliant on national team stalwarts like De Bruyne, Lukaku and goalkeeper Thibault Courtois, each of whom is playing in their fourth World Cup.

Winger Jérémy Doku, 24, kept his squad competitive in the first half, but the Red Devils were fortunate to only trail by one entering halftime.

"Our biggest challenge was about us. We lost too many balls, we weren't quick enough in transition, and when we had the ball, we didn't find the solutions," Tielemans said. "We were too static, especially in the first half. In the second half, we created some chances, which — we could have won the game, but they had some chances as well."

In Garcia's opinion, Egypt and Belgium are the two best teams in Group G, which also features New Zealand and Iran.

"We have to win against Iran," Garcia said of his team's next match on Sunday. "There's no two ways around it." (AP)

Uruguay's Maxi Araújo scores equalizer in 1-1 World Cup draw with Saudi Arabia

MIAMI GARDENS (US), June 16: Maxi Araújo finally gave the crowd of mostly Uruguay fans in South Florida something to cheer about with his tying goal late in Monday's World Cup opener against Saudi Arabia.

La Celeste salvaged a point, but they were not thrilled with the result.

"We gave it away. We have to be honest," midfielder Federico Valverde said in Spanish after his side played to a 1-1 draw, making up for a flat first half by controlling the second.

"We gave away the first half," Valverde added. "We didn't play the way we had trained. It wasn't what we were aiming for. We rushed things too much. We wanted to win the game in the very first minute. Sometimes you need a bit more patience and just play our game. We improved a lot in the second half."

Abdullah Al-Amri scored on a rebound in the 41st minute for Saudi Arabia, and Araújo got the equalizer in the 80th, firing a rebound past goalkeeper Mohammed Al-Owais from close range.

La Celeste dominated possession and had 29 attempts on goal to Saudi Arabia's seven but trailed until late in the second half.

It was the fourth international goal for Araújo and second at Hard Rock Stadium, home of the NFL's Miami Dolphins.

Al-Amri, who had a shot denied by Uruguay's Fernando Muslera earlier in the first half, put his squad ahead with a quick tap-in after Muslera palmed away a header.

Al-Amri fell to his knees after the goal and placed his head down on the pitch as he was showered with cheers from Saudi Arabia fans, who were greatly outnumbered in South Florida but loud enough to make up the difference.

Four years ago, they watched their team deliver one of the most memorable moments of the 2022 World Cup, coming back to stun Lionel Messi and eventual champion Argentina 2-1 in Saudi Arabia's opening match.

Monday's result was much less dramatic, but Saudi Arabia — behind a mostly solid performance by Al-Owais — was able to shut out Uruguay, a two-time World Cup champion, until late.

The Green Falcons were more pleased with the outcome than their opponents.

"Uruguay is a team that is very energetic," Saudi Arabia coach Georgios Donis said through an interpreter. "The players are well experienced, and there is depth on the bench. ... When you're faced with such an opponent, getting one point is a positive." (AP)



Donis replaced the fired Hervé Renard only two months ago. He said he's still learning the squad, though he was hopeful after Monday's performance. "I need to get to know my team better," Donis said. "I need to create a team that is competitive, and it only makes sense that we need time to do this. Today's outcome gives us an advantage."

La Celeste had plenty of chances. Al-Owais denied a point-blank header from Federico Vinas in the first half, then got his fingertips on an attempt by Manuel Ugarte in the 61st. He also denied Valverde's attempt a couple of minutes into stoppage time.

"When a team that is supposed to make a difference cannot do it, in terms of being dangerous or dominating the ball," Uruguay coach Marcelo Bielsa said through an interpreter, "then the weaker team actually dares to do something."

The result capped a surprising day for Group H — made up of Saudi Arabia, Uruguay, Spain and Cape Verde.

Cape Verde, making its World Cup debut, held heavily favored Spain to a scoreless draw in Atlanta. "The draw involving Spain may be the biggest surprise in this World Cup," Donis said. "Cape Verde was very competitive, very strong. It's not like the (group) favorites changed. It's Spain and Uruguay."

It was also a matchup of the past, present and future in World Cup history. Uruguay hosted the first World Cup in 1930 and will host a match commemorating the tournament's centennial in 2030, and Saudi Arabia will host the World Cup in 2034.

Among those at the match: FIFA President Gianni Infantino, Miami Heat star Bam Adebayo, former NFL star Chad Ochocinco and longtime Uruguay standout Luis Suárez -- Messi's teammate with Inter Miami who was not picked to represent his country at this tournament. (AP)

India A look to bounce back in must-win clash against Afghanistan A



DAMBULLA, June 16: Stung by two consecutive defeats in a tournament they were expected to dominate, an India A side filled with IPL specialists, will look to get their act together and return to winning ways when they take on Afghanistan A in their tri-series contest here on Wednesday.

Each of the three teams, including hosts Sri Lanka A, will play against the others twice before the finalists are decided. While two losses have indeed added pressure on the Indian side, a win over Afghanistan A would bolster their chances of making the summit clash.

The hosts Sri Lanka are sitting pretty on top with 4 points and a Net Run Rate of 0.494 with two wins and a defeat in three matches, effectively leaving India and Afghanistan to battle it out among themselves.

Only NRR separates India (2 points, 0.032) and Afghanistan (2 points, -1.392) so far, which means the Tilak Varma-led side will have to show greater resolve and hope inclement weather does not hamper their chances.

Additionally, the contest here on Wednesday could also be India A's last on this trip as Afghanistan A, who have two matches left, can still outmatch their rivals on points provided they win each of those.

India A had earlier put themselves in a strong position with a massive total of 349 for nine against Afghanistan A, who clinched the game by a mere four runs via DLS Method after reaching 177 for two in

25.5 overs.

On their part, India A would know they are yet to produce a complete game as even against Sri Lanka A in their tournament opener, they were made to work hard for the narrow win by eight runs.

Young batting sensation Vaibhav Sooryavanshi's run-in with Sri Lanka A's Kugathas Mathulan following a Super Over defeat in dying light on Monday has added spice to an otherwise placid event on very slow tracks.

Chasing 17 in the Super Over, India A could only manage nine runs with Sooryavanshi facing the final three balls of the over.

While he was returning back from the middle with his batting partner Suryansh Shedge, Sooryavanshi turned back towards the group of Sri Lankan players who were involved in vociferous celebrations that led to the altercation.

The young batter, meanwhile, was expected to carry his form from the IPL into the tri-series, but Sooryavanshi has not been able to convert his flying starts, recording scores of 14, 44 and 21 so far. The contest here on Wednesday would provide him another opportunity to make his mark.

The form of Ruturaj Gaikwad, who has scored 204 runs at 68 with one century and a half-century, would thus be crucial for India A along with the contributions of skipper Tilak (149), who has so far hit two half-centuries in three outings.

Shedge, Prabhshirman Singh and even Vipraj Nigam have a half-century to show each.

Arshad Khan, Anukul Roy and Ayush Badoni have taken four wickets apiece in three games so far but their counterparts seem to have done better in the competition. India A, meanwhile, have added tearaway quick Ashok Sharma in place of the injured Yudhvir Singh.

For Afghanistan A, it will be imperative to produce an all-round show against India A as so far they have too have not had a complete game. Apart from the washed-out fixture against India A earlier, Afghanistan A had also lost by a massive eight wickets to Sri Lanka A.

India squad: Tilak Varma (c), Ruturaj Gaikwad (vc), Priyansh Arya, Ayush Badoni, Kumar Kushagra (wk), Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, Prabhshirman Singh (wk), Anshul Kamboj, Anukul Roy, Nishant Sindhu, Suryansh Shedge, Arshad Khan, Ashok Sharma, Vipraj Nigam, Yash Thakur.

Match starts at 10:00am. (PTI)

Injured Matt Garbett replaced by Logan Rogerson



INGLEWOOD (US), June 16: Midfielder Matt Garbett was ruled out of New Zealand's squad at the World Cup on Monday, hours before the team's opening 2-2 draw with Iran.

New Zealand Football posted a statement on social media saying Garbett injured his hamstring in practice over the weekend.

"The whole squad's thoughts are with Matt at this time and we are gutted he won't be able to play in the tournament," New Zealand Football said.

The 24-year-old Garbett, who plays for Peterborough in England's third-tier competition, has played 38 games for New Zealand and scored five goals. He played in New Zealand's 1-0 friendly loss to England in Florida earlier this month.

Garbett has been replaced in the 26-man squad by Auckland FC forward Logan Rogerson.

New Zealand, playing at the World Cup for the first time since 2010, is in Group G with Iran, Egypt and Belgium. (AP)

Shock World Cup call for Renard to coach Tunisia in turmoil

NEW YORK, June 16: It seems no World Cup is complete without Hervé Renard and suddenly, somehow, surprisingly he will also be at this one.

The suntuined Frenchman in the trademark open-necked white shirt was hired to coach Tunisia on Tuesday for its final two group games following turmoil.

Tunisia fired coach Sabri Lamouchi early Tuesday after the team was routed 5-1 by Sweden in its opening game on Sunday.

So here comes Hervé for his third straight men's World Cup with a third different team. In between times, he also took France to the 2023 Women's World Cup.

Renard's latest reprieve comes just two months after he was fired by Saudi Arabia despite leading the kingdom through a shaky qualifying program, where it was given home advantage through the final rounds. His finest World Cup hour was guiding the Saudis to a shocking 2-1 win over eventual champion Argentina and Lionel Messi in their 2022 opener in Qatar.

Between men's World Cups, Renard left Saudi Arabia to coach the France women at their World Cup three years ago and then as the home team at the 2024 Paris Olympics. Both ended in quarterfinals exits.

His first World Cup was in 2018 with Morocco, which impressed in Russia with the core of a team that would reach the semifinals in Qatar. However, Morocco under Renard



did not advance to the knockout stage from a tough group with Spain, Portugal and Iran.

Renard has yet to lead a team out of the World Cup group stage which is now his short-term mission that could be all over within 10 days.

His appeal in an emergency to an African soccer federation like Tunisia — now the sixth to hire him — is that he made history winning Africa Cup of Nations titles with two different teams: Zambia in 2012 and Ivory Coast in 2015.

Renard has just four days to get his ideas across before Tunisia faces Japan on Saturday in Monterrey, Mexico. Tunisia then plays the group favorite Netherlands in Kansas City on June 25.

It could be another compelling chapter in the colorful career of a coach who first made headlines in the wider soccer world at English lower-tier club Cambridge in 2004.

Back then, Renard was assistant to another well-traveled French coach. Claude de Roy coached Cameroon at the 1998 World Cup six years before arriving at a soccer backwater in the city more famous for its university. (AP)

Belgium and its 'Golden Generation' veterans get off to unimpressive start in World Cup

SEATTLE (US), June 16: Seeking to avoid a repeat of its early World Cup exit in 2022, Belgium got off to an unimpressive start.

Romelu Lukaku entered in the 66th minute against Egypt on Monday and the veteran striker immediately created a scoring chance that led to an equalizing own goal, but that was all Belgium could manage in a 1-1 draw.

"No game's an easy game in the World Cup," coach Rudi Garcia said in French.

Perhaps not, but Belgium was expected to handle an Egypt squad that has never won a World Cup game. Instead, the Red Devils were outmaneuvered in the first half, with the speed of Egypt's younger players making the Pharaohs the aggressors.

"We know that we had a bad start in the match," captain Youri Tielemans said.

Now the question becomes whether Belgium can make one last World Cup run with the remaining veterans from its "Golden Generation" of stars — including the 33-year-old Lukaku and two 34-year-olds in midfielder Kevin De Bruyne and goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois. Belgium held the top spot in the FIFA rankings for several years and had its best World Cup performance when it finished third in Russia in 2018.

But the team fizzled four years later in Qatar, entering with championship hopes but failing to advance to the knockout round. (AP)

WC official says twitch caused gesture resembling supremacist sign; FIFA says no breach

GENEVA, June 16: A World Cup video review official said his hand gesture resembling a white supremacist sign was caused by an involuntary twitch, and a FIFA committee concluded the Australian didn't breach the sport's disciplinary code.

FIFA's discrimination monitor had called for Shaun Evans to be removed from the tournament.

Evans worked Germany's opening 7-1 win over Curaçao on Sunday as an assistant to the video assistant referee, based at the World Cup broadcast center in Dallas. When the official broadcast cut before the game to show the video review officials, Evans made an "OK" symbol with his right hand in front of his right leg.

"I did not intentionally make a hand gesture or symbol to communicate a message, affiliation, game or belief of any kind," Evans said in a statement released Monday by FIFA. "The only explanation I can offer is that the movement was an involuntary, subconscious twitch and I was unaware I had done it at the time. Images taken later during the match showed that I repeated this movement many times while holding a pen between my fingers."

In 2019, the gesture — with thumb and forefinger touching in a circle and other fingers outstretched — was designated a hate symbol by the New York-based Anti-Defamation League.

"Advice from our experts is that the gesture used clearly resembles an upside down OK hand symbol used as a white power symbol in global far-right circles," said the Fare network, a long-time partner of FIFA and European soccer body UEFA that monitors racist and discriminatory chants, flags and symbols at international games. (AP)

Serena and Venus Williams to play doubles together at Wimbledon

LONDON, June 16: Serena and Venus Williams are bringing their doubles partnership back at Wimbledon.

The All England Club announced a doubles wild card invitation on Tuesday for the sisters to the grass-court Grand Slam, which starts in less than two weeks.

The move comes after 44-year-old Serena recently returned to competition after nearly four years away from professional tennis.

Venus, who has still been competing sporadically, turns 46 on Wednesday.

The Williams sisters have won 14 Grand Slam titles together in doubles, including six at Wimbledon — the first of them in 2000 and the last in 2016. Their first two doubles titles at Wimbledon, in 2000 and 2002, came as wild cards.

Serena won her first doubles match with partner Victoria Mboko at Queen's Club in London last week and was slated to play doubles with Karolina Muchova at the Berlin Open later Tuesday.

The Williams sisters last played doubles together at the 2022 U.S. Open, where they lost their opening match. That was the first time they played doubles together in 4 1/2 years.

Serena and Mboko won their opening match at Queen's Club but then had to with-



draw after Mboko injured her knee in a singles match.

Singles wild card spot left open Serena has not ruled out a return in singles, too, and one of the eight wild card spots for women's sin-

gles was left as "to be announced."

Recent French Open finalist Maja Chwalinska received a singles wild card, as did six British women: Harriet Dart, Alicia Dudeney, Hannah Klugman, Mika Stojsavl-

jevic, Katie Swan, and Mimi Xu.

Wawrinka, Dimitrov and Kyrgios Men's singles wild cards went to Stan Wawrinka and Grigor Dimitrov and four British players: Jacob Fearnley, Arthur Fery, Jack Pinnington Jones and Toby Samuel.

Wawrinka, a three-time Grand Slam champion whose best result at Wimbledon was reaching the quarterfinals twice, plans to retire at the end of the year.

Dimitrov led eventual champion Jannik Sinner two sets to none in the round of 16 last year before having to retire early in the third due to an injured pectoral muscle. Dimitrov is now ranked No. 169.

Two more men's singles wild cards were also left open.

In men's doubles, a wild card went to the pairing of Alexander Bublik and Nick Kyrgios. Kyrgios was a singles finalist in 2022.

Matteo Berrettini, a Wimbledon finalist in 2021, was left off the list despite a quarterfinal appearance at the French Open. He's ranked No. 49 but was ranked outside the top 100 when Wimbledon's entry list was established. Still, Berrettini could get direct entry into the main draw depending on withdrawals.

Wimbledon starts June 29. (AP)