

6 WORLD

● Major Russian attack kills 20 in Kyiv

● Beijing says China-EU trade talks set in fall, to be held regularly each year

8 NATION

● TMC feud: Rebel faction meets EC

● Dipke launches 'chai pe charcha with cockroaches'

Assam CM calls on Kiren Rijiju for flood rehabilitation at Delhi

Himanta gives push to airport projects

NEW DELHI, July 2: Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday met Civil Aviation Minister Kinjarapu Ram Mohan Naidu and discussed the status of six proposed greenfield airports in the state, and said the government is not only improving connectivity but aiming to create new opportunities for people.

Sarma also discussed rehabilitation plans for flood-affected people of Assam with Union minister Kiren Rijiju.

"Just concluded a very productive meeting with Hon'ble Union Minister Shri @RamMKN ji, who enthusiastically shares our vision to transform Assam into a key aviation and logistics hub," he said in a post on X.

The chief minister said he had a discussion on the status of six proposed greenfield airports in Assam's Silchar, Manas, Umrangso, Majuli, Diphu and

Charadeo, and a heliport in Haflong. "On Silchar's new airport we have completed most of the preparatory work and I have requested the Ministry to expedite the process. For the other proposed airports we agreed to accelerate the ongoing pre-feasibility studies," he said.

Sarma said during the meeting, they also reviewed the ongoing expansion plan of Rupsi airport.

"It is indeed an exciting time for the aviation sector in Assam. We are not only improving connectivity but aiming to create new opportunities for our people," he said.

On his meeting with Rijiju, the chief minister said he conveyed his gratitude to him for his recent visit to Assam to review the flood situation.

"Today in Delhi, I had a fruitful meeting with Hon'ble Union Minister Shri @KirenRijiju Ji. I conveyed him grati-



tude for his recent visit to Assam to review the flood situation. During our meeting he also shared some very valuable observations," Sarma said.

Sarma said the discussions focused on strengthening rehabilitation efforts for people affected by the recent floods across the state. "Our double engine

government will intensify rehabilitation efforts as we help rebuild the livelihoods of all those who have been impacted by these floods."

Rijiju said he met Sarma and complimented him for the proactive measures taken by the state government during the monsoon floods.

"Had a meeting with Hon'ble Chief Minister of Assam Dr @himantabiswa ji at my New Delhi residence. Complimented him for proactive steps taken to secure the people of Assam during monsoon floods. His dynamic leadership is taking Assam to an unprecedented level of development," the Union minister wrote on X.

The meeting underscored the Centre and Assam government's continued co-ordination in relief, rehabilitation and long-term recovery efforts following this year's monsoon floods in the state, an official release said. (PTI)

Union minister Margherita, Bihar Govt to represent India at Khamenei's funeral: MEA



NEW DELHI, July 2: Minister of State for External Affairs Pabitra Margherita and Bihar Governor Syed Ata Hasnain will travel to Iran on Friday to represent India at the burial ceremonies for Iran's late Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) announced this on Thursday.

Hasnain and Margherita will visit the Islamic Republic of Iran on July 3 to attend the funeral ceremony of Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, late Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it said.

"The high-level representation in the ceremony underscores the importance of civilisational ties, including people-to-people connection, between the two countries, providing a robust foundation to political and economic engagements," the ministry said in a brief statement.

Iran President Masoud Pezeshkian had invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the funeral. Khamenei, who ruled Iran for last three decades, was killed on February 28, the first day of massive US and Israeli air strikes on Tehran. The funeral programme will begin with a farewell event in Tehran during July 4-5, and the main funeral procession in the Iranian capital is scheduled for July 6, according to Iran's state-run media.

On July 7, ceremonies will be held in the holy city of Qom, and the burial in Khamenei's hometown of Mashhad is scheduled for July 9. (PTI)

Zubeen death probe panel gets 2nd extension

GUWAHATI, July 2: The tenure of the one-man judicial commission, headed by Justice Soumitra Saikia of the Gauhati High Court, to probe the mysterious death of musician Zubeen Garg, has been extended for three more months.

According to an official notification, the term of the commission has been extended "for a further period of 3 (three) months w.e.f. 04/07/2026 or till the submission of its report, whichever is earlier".

This is the second extension for the commission.

On October 3, the Assam government had set up the judicial commission, which has been given time to submit its report within the next six months.

The state government had given an extension of three months from April 4, which will end on July 3.

The celebrated singer died under mysterious circumstances in Singapore on September 19 while

swimming in the sea. He had gone to the Southeast Asian nation to attend the 4th edition of the North East India Festival (NEIF).

The Judicial Commission has been probing into the "facts and circumstances" leading to the unfortunate death of Garg in Singapore. The one-member panel has also been investigating if there were any lapses, acts of omission or commission, or negligence on the part of any individual, authority or institution in connection with the incident.

Besides, it has been asked to "ascertain whether any external factors, including the possibility of foul play, conspiracy, or unlawful acts, contributed to or were connected with the incident".

NEIF chief organiser Shyamkanu Mahanta, the singer's manager Siddharth Sharma, his two band members Shekhar Jyoti Goswami and

(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Flood situation improves in Assam, over 25,000 people still affected

GUWAHATI, July 2: The flood situation in Assam improved on Thursday, with the number of affected people dropping to over 25,000 across two districts, according to an official bulletin.

The daily flood bulletin issued by the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) said nearly 25,100 people remain affected in Dhemaji and Dibrugarh districts.

Dhemaji is the worst-hit district, with more than 21,000 people affected, followed by Dibrugarh, where nearly 4,000 people continue to reel under floodwaters. On Wednesday, more than 48,000 people across four districts were af-

ected by the floods.

The flood-related death toll in the state this year remained unchanged at one. The ASDMA said four relief camps and relief distribution centres are being operated in the two affected districts, where 129 displaced people are currently taking shelter. During the past 24 hours, the authorities distributed 82.26 quintals of rice, 15.2 quintals of dal, 4.56 quintals of salt and 294.9 litres of mustard oil among flood-affected people.

According to the bulletin, 52 villages remain inundated, while floods have damaged crops spread over 393.44 hectares across the state. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

SC dismisses plea against Manipur HC order extending panchayat polls deadline

NEW DELHI, July 2: The Supreme Court on Thursday refused to entertain a plea challenging the Manipur High Court order extending the deadline for conducting panchayat elections in the state to October 16 this year.

A partial working day bench comprising Justices N Kotiswar Singh and N V Anjaria dismissed the appeal filed by Pheiroijam Heramani and others against the May 19, 2026 judgement of the high court.

The bench took note of the submissions of Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Manipur government, that the state is bound by the directions of the



high court and may be committing contempt if the polls of local bodies are not conducted.

It said there was no merit in the appeal

to interfere with the high court order.

The high court had extended the deadline for conducting the sixth general panchayat elections to October 16.

The high court bench comprising Chief Justice M Sundar and Justice A Guneshwar Sharma also cleared the path for the state to adopt a three-tier panchayati raj system in accordance with recent legislative amendments.

The matter before the high court arose from review petitions filed by the Manipur government against a previous August 2025 order that had mandated elections within six months. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Honeymoon murder Meghalaya govt moves SC against HC order granting bail to prime accused

NEW DELHI, July 2: The Meghalaya government has moved the Supreme Court against the bail granted to Sonam Raghuvanshi, who is accused of murdering her husband during their honeymoon in the northeastern state in 2025.

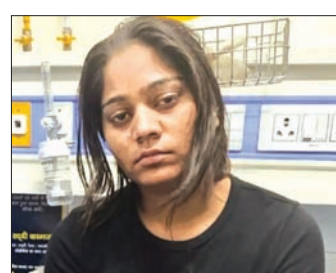
A bench of justices MM Sundresh and Sheel Nagu was told by Solicitor General Tushar Mehta on Thursday that the high court has erred in granting bail to the prime accused in the case and sought urgent listing of the plea.

Mehta submitted that bail was granted as the grounds of arrest were not fully supplied to her at the time of arrest.

"The concerned non-supply of documents relates to a provision that was wrongly cited due to a typographical error," he said, while emphasising that there was a chance of the accused absconding.

The bench agreed to list the matter for hearing on Friday.

Sonam, a resident of Indore in



Madhya Pradesh, was arrested in June last year in connection with the murder of her businessman husband Raja Raghuvanshi.

The couple had gone missing while vacationing in Meghalaya's Sohra area on May 23 last year. Subsequently, Raja's body was found in a deep gorge on June 2 in 2025.

Police have alleged that Sonam conspired with hired assassins to kill her husband for financial gains. On June 29, the Meghalaya High Court had upheld a trial court order granting bail to Sonam.

The high court had dismissed the criminal petition filed by the state government, seeking cancellation of the bail granted by the trial court on April 27.

It held that the manner in which the grounds of arrest were prepared reflected a "total non-application of judicious mind".

"It is evident that such preparation was made without any application of mind... and nowhere is found any specific allegation or information as to what are the actual charges against her," the high court had observed.

"If this is the manner in which the intimation of the grounds of arrest is made, the same reflects a total non-application of judicious mind on the part of the arresting agency," it had observed.

The high court had dismissed the state's petition, holding that there were no grounds to exercise its inherent powers to cancel the bail. (PTI)

Maintain proper records of achievements, Nagaland MP to depts

HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, July 2: Nagland's lone Lok Sabha Member of Parliament (MP) S Supongmeren Jamir on Thursday asked the numerous departments to maintain proper records of their achievements and ensure accurate data management.

He said this while highlighting the importance of documentation during the District Development Coordination and Monitoring Committee (DISHA) meeting a Chumokedima DC's conference hall.

Jamir also called for greater convergence among departments to maximise the impact of various government programmes.

Referring to welfare measures under the labour department, he urged the department to intensify awareness campaigns in clusters of villages so that workers and youth are well informed about government schemes, particularly those related to eSHRAM registration

and labour cards.

Jamir also asked the department to explore ways to extend the benefits of labour welfare schemes to more youth across Nagaland.

He further urged all stakeholders to continue working in close convergence for the overall development of Chumokedima district.

The MP further said that primary objective of the meeting was to assess the progress made by various departments in achieving their targets, identify the challenges encountered in implementation and collectively find practical solutions to improve developmental outcomes in the district.

He stressed that developmental activities should reach every section of society and that the purpose of the DISHA committee is to strengthen governance and improve service delivery rather than oppose any department or the state government.

India, Japan unveil transformative initiatives to boost ties



NEW DELHI, July 2: India and Japan on Thursday unveiled a raft of landmark initiatives including an economic partnership framework, a defence pact to co-develop military hardware and steps to enhance energy ties to tackle oil shocks following summit talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Japanese counterpart Sanae Takaichi.

The major outcomes from the meeting included a declaration on economic security, a joint statement for cooperation in the field of artificial intelligence and a document to bolster engagement in the energy supply chain.

The two sides also finalised a mobility framework to facilitate required framework for cooperation in shipbuilding, aviation and logistics.

"In today's era of uncertainty, both India and Japan fully understand the importance of economic security and energy security. With this in mind, we have today prepared a joint roadmap for economic security," Modi said in his media statement.

"Through this, we will strengthen supply chain resilience in strategic sectors such as semiconductors, quantum technology, and advanced materials," he said.

Modi and Takaichi also deliberated on the situation in Indo-Pacific, a region that has witnessed growing Chinese military muscle flexing.

"Today, both India and Japan are among the world's largest economies. A free, prosperous, and rules-based Indo-Pacific is our shared priority."

"As the region's largest democratic and market economies, we have launched several significant initiatives today. Through these, we will jointly pave the way for peace, stability, and progress across the entire region," he said.

Modi said both the sides have also taken several significant decisions in the field of energy security.

"Through the India-Japan Bio-gas Initiative, we will receive assistance in setting up one thousand bio-gas and organic fertilizer plants in India."

Modi said it will give new impetus to sustainability, prosperity, and rural livelihoods in India's villages. "We have also taken a significant initiative regarding energy resilience to tackle situations like oil shocks." (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'We want to understand how the vehicle performs from lift-off through every phase of ascent'

Skyroot unveils Vikram-1 launch window



NEW DELHI, July 2: Hyderabad-based Skyroot Aerospace on Thursday announced that a launch window between July 12 and August 4 for the maiden test flight of its Vikram-1 launch vehicle -- the nation's first privately developed orbital-class rocket.

The final date of the lift-off will be subject to the completion of assembly and testing operations at the launch site in the Satish Dhawan Space Centre, Sriharikota, and weather, safety,

and range clearance.

"We want to understand how the vehicle performs from lift-off through every phase of ascent. This data cannot be fully replicated through ground testing," Pawan Kumar Chandana, co-founder and CEO of Skyroot Aerospace, in a statement said.

"It will help us validate our designs and inform subsequent vehicle development as we build a reliable, high-cadence commercial

launch programme," he added.

The mission, called "Agaman", will gather critical data across propulsion, stage separation, guidance, navigation, control and overall vehicle performance. Vikram-1 is a seven-storey-tall, multi-stage orbital launch vehicle built with an all-carbon composite structure and powered by in-house developed propulsion systems, including 3D-printed engines and high-thrust solid-fuel rocket boosters.

Designed to carry small satellites weighing up to 350 kg to low Earth orbit (LEO), Vikram-1's maiden mission will target an orbit at an altitude of 450 km with a 60-degree orbital inclination.

The launch will mark Skyroot's second mission following the successful suborbital flight of Vikram-S, the first private rocket to reach space from Indian soil, on November 18, 2022.

Naga Bharath Daka, co-founder and COO, Skyroot Aerospace, said in a statement, "With Vikram-S in 2022, we validated the foundation of our technology stack; with Vikram-1, we take our biggest step yet, toward a reliable, high-cadence launch programme built in India, for India and the world. This mission is designed as both a technology demonstration and a learning mission." (PTI)

Sensex jumps 579 pts on easing crude oil prices, buying in IT

MUMBAI, July 2: Stock market benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ended nearly one per cent higher on Thursday amid softening crude oil prices, following positive developments on the geopolitical front and buying in blue-chip IT stocks.

The 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 579.48 points, or 0.75 per cent, to end at 77,502.12. During the day, it surged 656.29 points, or 0.85 per cent, to 77,578.93.

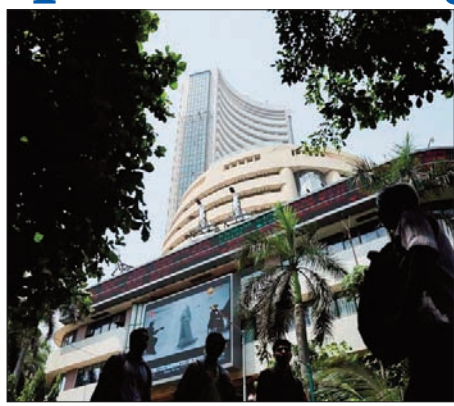
The 50-share NSE Nifty rallied 169.85 points, or 0.71 per cent, to settle at 24,175.70.

From the Sensex pack, Infosys jumped 5.64 per cent, followed by Tech Mahindra (4.32 per cent), Tata Consultancy Services (4.28 per cent) and HCL Tech (4.12 per cent). Bajaj Finserv, Adani Ports, Titan and ICICI Bank were also among the major gainers.

Larsen & Toubro, Maruti Suzuki India, Axis Bank and Reliance Industries were among the laggards. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, dropped 1.45 per cent to USD 70.53 per barrel.

India and Japan on Thursday unveiled a raft of landmark initiatives, including an economic partnership framework and defence pact to co-develop military hardware, following summit talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Japanese counterpart Sanae Takaichi.

The major outcomes from the meeting included a declaration on economic security, a



joint statement for cooperation in the field of artificial intelligence and a document to bolster engagement in the energy supply chain.

"Indian equities extended their winning streak despite pressure in global markets, where technology stocks dragged overseas indices lower. Easing energy prices and fresh India-Japan agreements in strategic areas such as AI, defence technology and energy security helped sustain domestic market optimism," Ponnudi R, CEO of Enrich Money, an online trading and wealth tech firm, said.

According to Ajit Mishra, SVP-Research, Religare Broking Ltd, the rebound in IT shares supported the rally, but profit booking in the

banking and select heavyweight stocks affected the gains.

"The rebound in the IT pack further strengthened sentiment after the sector witnessed sharp selling in recent sessions. However, profit booking in the banking pack and select heavyweight stocks from other sectors capped the pace of the rally," Mishra said.

The global tech sell-off intensified as chip stocks slumped across Asia, with Korean stocks tumbling 8 per cent as AI jitters triggered a sharp correction, reviving concerns that the blistering rally in artificial intelligence shares this year may have gone too far, too fast, he added.

Meanwhile, passenger vehicle sales in the country are estimated to have grown nearly 25 per cent in June to about 4 lakh units, led by Maruti Suzuki, Tata Motors PV and Mahindra & Mahindra.

Among auto stocks, TVS Motor jumped 3.78 per cent, Tata Motors climbed 2 per cent, Ashok Leyland advanced 1.51 per cent and M&M went up by 1.39 per cent on the BSE.

In Asian markets, South Korea's Kospi tumbled 7.89 per cent, Japan's Nikkei 225 index declined 2.47 per cent and Shanghai's SSE Composite index dropped 2.03 per cent, while Hong Kong's Hang Seng index ended 0.76 per cent higher. Markets in Europe were trading in positive territory. (PTI)

Petrol, diesel price reduction only when crude oil rates stabilise at lower levels, hints Puri

NEW DELHI, July 2: International crude oil prices may have fallen to a four-month low, but retail petrol and diesel prices in India are unlikely to be cut anytime soon as state-run refiners are still processing costlier crude purchased during the peak of the West Asia crisis, Oil Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said.

Petrol and diesel prices were raised by about Rs 7.50 per litre each in the second half of May - more than two months after the outbreak of the West Asia conflict and by less than the increase in global fuel costs - resulting in state-owned fuel retailers absorbing a significant portion of the higher crude prices.

The delayed and partial pass-through left Indian Oil Corp (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corp Ltd (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corp Ltd (HPCL) with substantial losses on the sale of petrol and diesel, even as international oil prices have since retreated.

Puri said state-owned fuel retailers incurred cumulative losses of Rs 74,781 crore on the sale of petrol, diesel and subsidised cooking gas (LPG). The figure includes losses from selling petrol and diesel below cost for four months following the outbreak of the West Asia conflict on February 28, as well as unrecovered LPG subsidies for the same period and earlier months.

International oil prices have retreated over the past two to three weeks after the United States and Iran signed an interim peace deal, easing concerns over the Strait of Hormuz - a critical energy shipping route used to transport oil and gas from Gulf producers.



Crude oil prices have fallen from USD 119 per barrel at the peak of the conflict to around USD 70 now. Puri, however, said refiners, who turn crude oil into fuels like petrol and diesel, are currently processing crude bought two or two and a half months back.

That crude was bought at high prices. "That crude would have been obtained two months back (when) prices were high, cost of insurance was high, cost of freight was high," he said. "Crude priced at current lower rates will arrive (at refineries) later." A fuel price cut can be looked at if oil prices remain at low levels for a sustained period, he said. "If it (oil prices) remains like this (at current rates), it (cutting retail prices) is a legitimate thing," he said.

On Nayara Energy, India's largest private fuel retailer, cutting petrol prices by Rs 5 per litre and diesel by Rs 3 per litre while state-owned firms have not followed suit, Puri said the company was effectively rolling back the increases it had implemented in March. He added that Nayara subsequently matched every price in-

crease undertaken by state-run refiners in May. The latest cuts, he said, have effectively brought Nayara's retail fuel prices back in line with those of state-owned competitors.

Talking about how India managed the four-month period when the Iran war largely blocked access to Gulf producers, Puri said refiners diversified the sourcing of crude oil across continents and brought more LPG from the US.

The result was that no retail outlet in the country ran dry, even when countries in the neighbourhood rationed fuel. "Every one of our refineries is stocked, every port, terminal, pipeline, and depot is stocked. In all, we have stocks to cover the country's requirement for 76-80 days," he said. "This is not to say that we don't need additional (strategic) storage. We will be augmenting that."

On price outlook, Puri said he is "not worried but we have to prepare for its stocking. That means increasing storage space and intensifying outreach to bilateral partners (for sourcing energy)." (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Labour Min makes EPF contributions beyond ₹ 1,800 voluntary

NEW DELHI, July 2: The Labour & Employment Ministry has made all contributions in the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) above the monthly wage ceiling of ₹ 15,000, which is beyond ₹ 1,800, voluntary under the new Employees' Provident Funds Scheme 2026 notified on Monday.

Earlier, under the old scheme, the Employees' Provident Funds Scheme 1952, the wage ceiling, which is ₹ 15,000 per month at present, was relevant at the time of joining a firm for providing the employee with mandatory social security cover. All employees whose basic wages were up to ₹ 15,000 were mandatorily covered under the scheme and others had the option to join the social security schemes run by the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO), voluntarily. Once covered under the scheme, employees used to contribute on their actual basic wages and employers used to match that contribution, which were even higher than the wage ceiling notified by the government from time to time. The present wage ceiling of ₹ 15,000 was notified in 2014. The new Employees' Provident Funds Scheme 2026 provides that "the contribution payable in respect of a member shall be subject to the wage ceiling limit, notified by the Central Government from time to time."

Subject to the provisions contained in sub-paragraph (4) of paragraph 9, where the monthly wage of such a member exceeds the wage ceiling, the employer's and employee's contributions shall be limited to the contribution payable on the 'wage ceiling,' it also says. Provided further that an employer may make such contribution for wages beyond the wage ceiling to the Pension Fund in respect of such cases, which have been permitted for contribution on higher wages under the Employee's Pension Scheme, 1995, it also says. (PTI)

Not true: WhatsApp says claims of people reserving popular, well-known usernames false

NEW DELHI, July 2: WhatsApp has asserted that username reservation relating to well-known public figure names is restricted only to their legitimate account owners, and termed as "false" any claims that people are reserving popular or well-known usernames.

The rebuttal came as part of a set of FAQs released by the Meta-owned messaging platform around its contentious username feature - which is under fire over impersonation and fraud concerns.

"A few more things to keep in mind...People are making false claims about reserving popular or well-known usernames - this isn't true, only the legitimate account owners are able to reserve well-known public-figure names," WhatsApp said in the FAQs. On Wednesday, the Centre issued a notice to Meta over the planned feature on WhatsApp, citing concerns that it could materially increase online fraud, phishing, digital arrest scams, and impersonation attacks. It directed the platform to pause the feature until consultations on the issue are completed "to the satisfaction of the Government".

India is a key market for WhatsApp, and the go-to messaging platform has over 500 million users here. Some prominent personalities have taken to X recently to flag concerns after they discovered that most variations of their names were already taken during the ongoing reservation phase.

Former Delhi deputy CM Manish Sisodia put a post on X expressing his surprise that "almost every variation" of his own name, along with his party, AAP, seemed to have already been reserved.

Others, like MobiKwik CEO Bipin Preet Singh too found that close versions of their names had already been taken during the early window for username reservation.

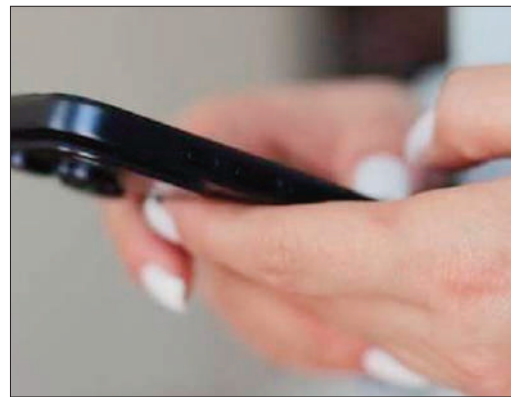
WhatsApp's proposed username feature has raised a red flag among experts and users, who believe the new offering could trigger a surge in impersonation, spoofing, and financial fraud.

In its notice, the government expressed concern that the WhatsApp username feature may "materially increase" cases of online fraud, phishing, digital arrest scams, and impersonation attacks by enabling bad actors to solicit and message victims. It has asked Meta to explain why action shouldn't be initiated under the IT Act and rules over WhatsApp's new feature that may increase cybercrimes.

The Centre has also reminded Meta that WhatsApp, as a significant social media intermediary, is bound by due diligence obligations under the IT Act and rules.

WhatsApp, in a statement on Wednesday, defended the feature, citing built-in safeguards to prevent scams and impersonations and protect users.

A WhatsApp spokesperson said the ability to use a username is not yet live and will roll out slowly



later this year.

"To protect against impersonation, we've held the highest-profile names - think public figures, government entities, celebrities, verified Meta accounts - so they can only ever be claimed by their legitimate owners and lookalike derivatives of known names are held as well," a WhatsApp spokesperson said.

Users still require a phone number to use WhatsApp, Meta said and added that it has built multiple layers of defence against scams into usernames.

"Other users need to know the exact username to message you. We will limit how many new people an account can contact, block repeated attempts to guess someone's username key, and have systems to detect and remove activity showing common impersonation and abuse patterns," the company had said.

WhatsApp will show whether a first-time sender is a new account, contact, mutual group member or from another country before users respond.

"When the feature becomes available, and someone sends a message for the first time via your username, we will show you if they're a new account, if they're your contact, if you have groups in common, and if they're based in a different country, so you can decide whether to respond," WhatsApp had said.

The Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) has, however, expressed concern over the Centre's missive, saying the notice to WhatsApp has no clear basis in law.

"It is an attempt by the executive to decide what a company may build and ship, which no statute permits," the digital rights advocacy group said.

In a social media post, the IFF further wrote: "The notice treats the launch of a lawful feature as a wrong the company must justify. That reverses the ordinary position, especially given the absence of any clear legal power that exists. MeitY does not name any provision that lets it approve a product feature before release or order one withdrawn, because there is none, and the provisions it does cite do not supply that power." (PTI)

Canon launches EOS R6V, first L-series power zoom lens in India

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 2: Canon India has expanded its professional imaging portfolio with the launch of the EOS R6V full-frame camera and the RF 20-50 F4L IS USM lens, the company's first professional-grade L-series full-frame lens with a built-in power zoom, aimed at filmmakers and digital content creators.

The new camera-lens combination has been designed to cater to India's rapidly growing creator economy by offering cinematic imaging, advanced video capabilities and enhanced mobility in a compact package.

Alongside the launch, Canon also unveiled #IndiaIn-

Motion, a creator-led initiative to promote authentic visual storytelling from across the country.

The EOS R6V features a 32.5-megapixel full-frame CMOS sensor with 7K Open Gate recording, enabling creators to capture high-quality footage while offering greater flexibility for horizontal and vertical content production. The camera also incorporates a built-in cooling fan for extended recording sessions, a dedicated vertical tripod socket, five-axis in-body image stabilisation and support for Canon Log 2/3, waveform monitoring, four-channel audio recording and custom LUTs for professional video workflows.

Bandhan Life launches Secure 'N' Grow insurance solution

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 2: Bandhan Life Insurance, the life insurance arm of the Bandhan Group, has launched Bandhan Life Secure 'N' Grow, a new insurance solution that combines guaranteed benefits, life insurance protection and market-linked investment opportunities under a single offering.

The new product integrates two of the company's existing offerings—Bandhan Life iGuarantee Vishwas, a non-linked, non-participating life insurance savings plan that provides guaranteed maturity benefits, and Bandhan Life iInvest II, a unit-linked insurance plan (ULIP) designed to offer market-linked wealth creation through professionally managed funds.

Under the combined solution, premiums are automatically allocated between the two plans to provide customers with a balanced approach towards capital protection and long-term growth, while ensuring life insurance coverage throughout the policy term. Women policyholders will also receive enhanced benefits through higher payouts under the capital guarantee component.

Announcing the launch, Bandhan Life Insurance Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer Satishwar B. said customers were increasingly seeking financial solutions that offered both stability and growth.

CLEANING AND PAINTING OF LHB AND ICF SPRINGS

E-Tender Notice No.: DBWS-NIET-10-2026-27; Dated: 30-06-2026. E-tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following work: Name of the work: Cleaning and Painting of LHB and ICF Springs at DBWS for 2 years. Estimated Tender Value: ₹29,02,754/- inclusive of GST @ 18%. Bid Security: ₹58,100/-; E-tenders will be closed at 15:00 hrs. on 22-07-2026 and Opened at 15:30 hrs. on 22-07-2026. The complete information about the tender document of above e-tender will be available upto 15:00 hrs of 22-07-2026 in website <http://www.irrps.gov.in>

Chief Workshop Manager/
Mechanical Workshop/Dibrugarh
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PUBLIC NOTICE

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BTC chief reviews devp works in Kokrajhar

Hagrama Mohilary directs departments to remove bottlenecks, ensure transparency and quality execution

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, July 2: Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) Chief Executive Member (CEM) Hagrama Mohilary on Thursday reviewed the progress of developmental schemes and infrastructure projects in Kokrajhar district, directing departments to ensure timely completion, quality execution and greater accountability in project implementation.

The high-level review meeting, held at the Conference Hall of the BTC Secretariat at Bodofa Nwgr, began with a welcome address by BTC Secretary Karmadev Brahma. It was attended by MLAs Rupam Ray, Ashrafal Islam Sheikh and Sabharan Basumatary; MCLAs Dhaneswar Goyary, Antaj Ali, Jubiraj Basumatary and Azamul Hoque; Executive Members Derhasat Basumatary, Rabiram Narzary, Mrityunjay Narzary and Prakash Basumatary, along with secretaries and senior officials of various departments.

The meeting reviewed the performance of the Public Works Department (Roads), Public Works Department (Buildings), Pan-



chayat and Rural Development Department and the Municipal Board, besides assessing the implementation of projects funded under the 15th Finance Commission and the 6th State Finance Commission.

Progress of major Central and State Government schemes, in-

cluding the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G), MGNREGA, National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), Asom Mala, RIDF-XXIX, Pradhan Mantri Ayushman

Bharat Health Infrastructure Mission (PM-ABHIM), skill development initiatives, urban development projects, mini stadiums, skill centres and Self-Help Group activities, was also reviewed.

During the meeting, Mohilary instructed the concerned departments to remove bottlenecks delaying project implementation, adhere strictly to prescribed timelines and maintain accountability at every stage of execution.

He stressed that all development works must be completed with quality and transparency to strengthen public infrastructure and improve service delivery across the district.

The BTC Chief also announced that surprise inspections would be conducted to verify the progress reported by departments and directed officials to expedite incomplete projects.

He further informed that the next departmental review meeting would be held in September to assess progress and ensure compliance with the directions issued during the meeting.

CPI(M) stages protest in Tezpur against price rise, submits six-point charter

Party blames Centre and State for inflation, seeks rollback of fuel price hikes and stronger market regulation

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, July 2: The Sonitpur district committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] on Thursday staged a demonstration in Tezpur to protest against rising prices of essential commodities, alleging that the Central and State governments had failed to curb inflation and protect the interests of common people.

Party workers and supporters assembled in front of Hem Baruah Bhawan around 11 am before taking out a protest march through the town.

The demonstration was led by CPI(M) leaders Maneswar Boro, Royel Soreng, Bhabananda Roy and Rabin Tamuli.

Addressing the gathering, the leaders alleged that rising prices of petrol, diesel, LPG, food items and life-saving medicines had severely affected the livelihoods of workers, farmers and middle-class families.

They accused the governments of pursuing "anti-people policies" and failing to check inflation.

The protesters demanded the immediate rollback of the recent increases in the prices of petrol, diesel and domestic LPG cylinders, reduction of excise duty, cess and other levies on petroleum products and regular supply of do-



mestic cooking gas.

They also called for effective price control measures and affordable availability of essential commodities and life-saving medicines, strengthening of the public distribution system, strict action against hoarding, artificial scarcity and profiteering, and a fair taxation policy that reduces the burden on ordinary citizens while ensuring higher taxes on the wealthy.

The party leaders further alleged that government policies favoured large corporate houses through tax concessions and financial incentives while placing an increasing economic burden on the common people.

Following the demonstration, the protesters submitted a memorandum containing their six-point charter of demands to the Chief Minister of Assam through the District Commissioner of Sonitpur.

Krishak Samman Diwas celebrated in Kokrajhar

Progressive farmers, cooperative societies honoured as BTC stresses diversification and modern agriculture

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, July 2: The Department of Cooperation, Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), in association with Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS) of Kokrajhar district, celebrated Krishak Samman Diwas on Thursday to mark the fifth Foundation Day of the Ministry of Cooperation, Government of India and Cooperation Week 2026.

Held at the Jwhlwao Nileswar Brahma Auditorium of Bodoland University under the theme "Sahkar Se Samridhhi - A National Campaign Through People's Participation," the programme began with flag hoisting, oath-taking, a condolence meeting for departed members of the cooperative fraternity, lighting of the ceremonial lamp and felicitation of guests.

Addressing the gathering, BTC Executive Member for Food and Civil Supplies Lakhi Das urged cooperative societies to diversify beyond conventional credit services by engaging in the procurement, processing, storage and marketing of agricultural produce and essential commodities.

He also emphasised scientific storage of food grains, modernisation of cooperative godowns and promotion of allied activities such as dairy farming, piggy and poultry to strengthen rural livelihoods.

BTC Executive Member for Cooperation Mritunjoy Narzary called upon farmers and cooperative societies to adopt modern agricultural technologies and scientific farming practices.

Referring to successful models from states such as Punjab, Haryana and West Bengal, he stressed the need to strengthen credit support for poultry, piggy, dairy farming, rice milling and other agricultural enterprises through cooperative institutions.

He assured that the department would address long-pending issues, including infrastructure development, renovation of cooperative offices and repair of storage facilities.

Earlier, Council Head of Department (Cooperation) Kabita Rani Das highlighted the role of the cooperative movement in rural development and spoke on the government's initiatives, including the computerisation of PACS to improve transparency, accountability and service delivery.

She also outlined various schemes being implemented by the Ministry of Cooperation and the BTC Cooperation Department.

The session, chaired by Deputy Registrar of Cooperative Societies Jayanta Kherketary, highlighted the objectives of Cooperation Week 2026 and the role of cooperatives in promoting inclusive and sustainable development.

A total of 100 progressive farmers from different cooperative societies across Kokrajhar district were felicitated for their contributions to agriculture and rural development.

Three best-performing cooperative societies were also honoured.

As part of the programme, The Assam Co-operative Apex Bank Ltd., Kokrajhar Branch, distributed 17 Micro ATMs to PACS to strengthen digital banking and financial inclusion in rural areas.

Registration certificates were handed over to 10 newly registered cooperative societies, while a Kisan Credit Card (KCC) loan sanction letter was presented to Bashbari MPACS to facilitate agricultural credit.

Representatives of various PACS also shared their experiences and submitted a memorandum highlighting the challenges and future requirements of cooperative societies for consideration by the authorities.

Ministers stress timely execution, doorstep delivery of development in Cachar

HT Correspondent
SILCHAR, July 2: Timely implementation of government schemes and ensuring that the benefits of development reach every household dominated a high-level review meeting of developmental works in Cachar district on Thursday.

The meeting, held at the new conference hall of the District Commissioner's office in Silchar, was chaired by Cachar Guardian Minister and Public Health Engineering, Barak Valley Development and Hill Areas Development Minister Krishnendu Paul, along with Food, Public Distribution and Consumer Affairs, Housing and Urban Affairs and Cooperation Minister Kaushik Rai. Senior district officials reviewed the progress of infrastructure projects, drinking water supply, sanitation, flood control measures, transport management, road connectivity and key welfare schemes.

Addressing the meeting, Krishnendu Paul said development could be considered meaningful only when people experienced its benefits in their daily lives. He directed all departments to complete projects within stipulated timelines while maintaining quality and accountability.

Stressing the need for better co-ordination among departments, he said administrative delays often resulted from communication gaps and urged officials to resolve issues promptly to ensure uninterrupted execution of public works.

Kaushik Rai emphasised that an integrated administrative approach was essential to sustain the pace of development in the district. He called for efficient, transparent and responsible implementation of welfare schemes, stating that public perception of governance depended on the quality of services delivered.

Among the key decisions taken at the meeting was the formation of a district-level task force to crack down on overloaded commercial vehicles entering Cachar.

Comprising officials from the District Transport Office, Police, Additional District Commissioners, Assistant Commissioners and other departments, the task force will conduct inspections at major entry points and initiate legal action against violators.

Officials said overloaded trucks had caused extensive damage to district roads over the years. National Highways and Infra-

structure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL) officials informed the meeting that repair work on the damaged National Highway stretch between Capital Point and Rangrikhari would commence on Friday. Reviewing monsoon preparedness, the ministers directed the Water Resources Department to immediately repair vulnerable embankments, keep pumping stations operational, ensure the proper functioning of double-shutter sluice gates and maintain efficient drainage systems in flood-prone areas.

Krishnendu Paul warned that even minor lapses during the monsoon could have serious consequences and instructed officials to maintain constant vigilance through regular monitoring and field-level coordination. Kaushik Rai also directed departments to keep rescue and relief arrangements in readiness and ensure timely response in vulnerable areas.

The ministers further instructed departments to expedite repairs of damaged highways and important district roads to ensure uninterrupted transportation during the rainy season, with particular emphasis on facilitating the movement

of students, patients, farmers, traders and daily commuters.

The meeting also reviewed drinking water supply, sanitation, rural and urban infrastructure, environmental improvement, administrative coordination and the implementation of various Central and State government schemes.

In his concluding remarks, Krishnendu Paul said the true measure of governance lay in the confidence and satisfaction of the people and urged officials to remain responsive and efficient in delivering public services. Kaushik Rai reaffirmed the government's commitment to strengthening infrastructure and improving service delivery through coordinated planning and timely execution.

The meeting was attended by Silchar MP Parimal Suklabaidya, MLAs Dr Rajdeep Roy, Rajdeep Goala, Kishore Nath, Kamalakhya Dey Purkayastha, Amiya Kanti Das and Aminul Haque Laskar, Cachar District Commissioner Rahul Kumar Gupta, District Development Commissioner Rajib Roy, senior district officials, the Senior Superintendent of Police and heads of various government departments.

According to the findings of the inquiry report, the District Commissioner issued the suspension order against the official.

The suspension was ordered after a report submitted by the Chariduar Revenue Circle Office alleged that Nath had accepted a bribe in connection with the issuance of a trace map.

The report also accused him of causing unnecessary delays in the disposal of official work.

Acting on the findings of the inquiry report, the District Commissioner issued the suspension order against the official.

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Land Records Assistant suspended over bribery allegation in Sonitpur

HT Correspondent
TEZPUR, July 2: The Sonitpur district administration has suspended a Land Records Assistant posted at the Chariduar Revenue Circle Office following allegations of accepting a bribe and causing undue delay in official work.

According to an official order issued by the Office of the District Commissioner on Wednesday evening, Gobin Chandra Nath, who was serving as a Mandal and Land Records Assistant in the Chariduar Revenue Circle, has been placed under suspension pending further proceedings.

The suspension was ordered after a report submitted by the Chariduar Revenue Circle Office alleged that Nath had accepted a bribe in connection with the issuance of a trace map.

The report also accused him of causing unnecessary delays in the disposal of official work.

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KAAC IPR Department to strengthen outreach, embrace digital platforms

HT Bureau
DIPHU, July 2: Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) Executive Member for Information and Public Relations (IPR) Madhuram Lekthe on Thursday reviewed the functioning of the department for the first time since assuming office, outlining a series of measures to strengthen public communication and expand the department's outreach.

Chairing a departmental review meeting at the office of the Deputy Director of IPR in Diphu, Lekthe said the department plays a crucial role in communicating the Council's policies, welfare schemes and development initiatives to the people of Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong.

He stressed that the IPR Department must serve as an effective

bridge between the administration and the public by ensuring transparent and timely dissemination of information.

To modernise the department's functioning, Lekthe directed officials to make greater use of print, electronic and digital media platforms to enhance public awareness of the KAAC's developmental programmes and achievements.

He also called for the installation of Fixed Loud Speaker (FLS) systems at all headquarters to facilitate the prompt dissemination of government announcements, public health advisories and emergency information.

The Executive Member further instructed the department to formulate a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for the release of government advertisements to

print media and advocated the promotion of development journalism to encourage responsible reporting focused on governance and public welfare.

Earlier, Deputy Director of the IPR Department Zahid Ahmed Tapadar presented a detailed overview of the department's activities, operational framework and future plans aimed at strengthening community outreach.

As a gesture of welcome, Tapadar presented the Executive Member with copies of books authored by him.

The meeting, Lekthe's first major departmental review since taking charge on June 26, was attended by officials and staff of the Information and Public Relations Department, as well as Samphri Kimi editor Kiri Ronghang.

Baan Theatre launches month-long children's drama workshop

Annual summer programme aims to nurture young theatre enthusiasts in Tezpur

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, July 2: The month-long summer children's drama workshop organised by Tezpur-based Baan Theatre got underway on Wednesday evening, continuing the organisation's long-standing initiative to nurture young talent in the performing arts.

Organised annually since 2010 during the summer vacation, the workshop aims to introduce children and adolescents to the fundamentals of theatre under the guidance of experienced trainers.

This year's edition was inaugurated with the traditional lighting of lamps and incense.

The inaugural ceremony was attended by Baan Theatre president Bankim Sarma, vice-presidents Bhabananda Das and Mrigen Chandra Bora, general secretary Ji-



tumoni Deva Choudhury, and executive members Bhupen Sarma, Debabrata Sarma, Dwijen Nath, Sanjay Krishna Gohain Baruah,

Jintu Borthakur, Hemanta Kumar Sarma, Bhupen Baruah and other office-bearers.

Welcoming the participants, Jitu-

moni Deva Choudhury highlighted the importance of theatre in nurturing creativity and confidence among children.

Former general secretary Dwijen Nath, one of the supervisors of the workshop and president Bankim Sarma urged the participants to maintain discipline and punctuality throughout the training.

The inaugural programme was conducted by Baan Theatre secretary Pankaj Baruah.

This year's workshop will be supervised by Gautam Pathak, Moon Deka, Kishore Sarma, Hemadhar Das and Gautam Koch. The script for the production to be staged at the conclusion of the workshop has been jointly written by four former trainees—Nishtha Mahanta, Aditi Talukdar, Jagriti Kaundinya and Priyankshi Madhukalya.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Self-preservation is the first law of nature.
- Samuel Butler

Restoring trust of student community

India's education system today is grappling with more than shortages of resources, outdated curricula or institutional shortcomings. The deeper crisis is one of trust. Millions of students and their families spend years preparing for competitive examinations, investing enormous amounts of time, money and hope. When paper leaks, cancelled examinations, disputed results and delayed recruitment processes become recurring headlines, the issue extends far beyond a single examination. It raises serious questions about a system on which the future of an entire generation depends. Over the past few years, several national and state-level competitive examinations have come under scrutiny. Investigations in many cases have suggested that the problem was not limited to isolated instances of malpractice or local administrative failures. Questions have been raised about the integrity of the entire examination chain—from the setting and printing of question papers to their transportation, examination centres and overall security protocols. As a result, years of hard work by millions of students, along with the financial sacrifices made by their families, have been pushed into uncertainty.

Against this backdrop, the "Chatron Ki Goonj" (Students' Voice) campaign seeks to initiate a nationwide conversation on the state of education. The campaign gained momentum following Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi's interaction with students in Kota, one of India's largest coaching hubs for competitive examinations. During the interaction, he listened to students' experiences and highlighted concerns relating to education, examinations and employment in the larger public discourse. The campaign is not merely about protesting paper leaks; it seeks to build a national conversation around accountability, transparency and restoring public trust in India's education system. One of the most positive aspects of the campaign is that it places students' experiences at its centre rather than political speeches. When students like Lakshya from Panna and Khushi from Khandwa in Madhya Pradesh publicly share their struggles and anxieties about their future, their stories become more than individual grievances. They reflect a larger reality in which students appear to be more worried about the fairness and credibility of examination processes than about the examinations themselves. A medical aspirant feels that uncertainty surrounding examinations has put her dream on hold, it signals the need for far more than incremental reforms.

Perhaps the most disturbing dimension of this crisis is its impact on students' mental well-being. Kota and several other parts of the country have witnessed repeated incidents of student suicides among competitive examination aspirants. Repeated paper leaks, cancelled examinations, disputed results, prolonged recruitment delays and an uncertain future have only added to the mental pressure faced by students. It is deeply unfortunate for any nation when its brightest students begin losing hope not because they lack the ability to succeed, but because they lose confidence in the system itself. Education should provide opportunity and inspire confidence, not

Writer-Director Vijaya Mehta's passing away is a big loss to the Indian theatre

By: Tirthankar Mitra

People often do not find the profession they are suited to. But when eminent theatre director, Ebrahim Alkazi spotted a young girl essaying the role of Desdemona in a stage adaptation of Othello, he asked the upcoming actress to join his drama group, Theatre Group. From this moment Vijaya Jaywant's life and career moved away far from square pegs finding themselves into round holes.

Time flew and the slip of a girl became Vijaya Mehta, the doyen of Marathi stage. Her career graph moved in a steep elliptical curve till she passed away in Mumbai on June 30 at the age of 91 due to old age complications. Arguably not the central protagonist in Othello, the budding actress put her heart into the role. She encapsulated a woman's tragedy. She pleaded with her jealous and murderous husband even in her dying moments.

Small wonder, Alkazi's keen eyes spotted Vijaya's talent. She was then a third year student at Wilson's College. Later she studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London. The trained actor was also a part of the socialist movement, Rashtriya Seva Dal. Mehta helped open up the imagination of artists across the country. It was to her credit and a few others that some of the best theatre practices from around the world were tried out in India and vastly enriched it's stage. Working in a newly independent country was of great help to put ideas into practice. There were no roadblocks which stymies the path of creativity for those who seek to walk down the road less travelled these days.

Small wonder, she gave a new shape to Marathi theatre. She became the doyen of realism and experimentation. Arguably, no accolade is sufficient for her. Her works speak for herself. Her stage production, Ek Shunya Bajirao is a landmark in contemporary Indian theatre. It changed the conception of a hero. The story revolves round a theatre group performing a mystery drama. A nondescript actor named Bajirao watches from the audience and makes profound and mocking comments. He is dressed in an ill-fitting suit. He is armed with a twisted stick, the anti-thesis of a hero till then portrayed as an immaculately dressed person representing the goodness of human nature. The search for the divine in beastly tendencies in a human came to light in this play. It is among those stage productions which helped Indian theatre come of age. Mehta is credited with introducing Bertold Brecht in Marathi theatre. The Caucasian Chalk Circle is introduced as Ajab Nyay Vartulacha. But Mehta did not rest on her laurels. She continued to reach out and her efforts enthralled her audience.

Collaborating with German theatre director Fritz Benneewitz, Bhasa's Mudrarakshahas was staged, by Mehta. It was a traditional performance with German actors. Always on the vanguard of the theatre movement, Mehta helped overseas actors conduct workshops in India. Among them were English theatre director and film maker Peter Brook and Eugene Barba from Denmark.

Vijaya Mehta was in her element on both the stage and in the screen. Her performances in the films Party, Kalyug and Shakuntalam to name a few prove her class on screen. Her directorial ventures, on the other hand in Rao Saheb and Pestonjee are pointers that her virtuosity was not restricted to the stage. She won Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for excellence in direction.

For the film Pestonjee, Mehta was awarded the National Film award for best supporting actress. But her heart lay in stage being one of the founder members of the theatre group, Rangayan with Vijay Tendulkar, Arvind Deshpande and Dr Sriram Lagoo. She left an indelible mark on theatre and cinema as an actor. "Desdemona" has indeed come a long way. American actor Daniel Dafoe once said "Great theatre is about challenging how we think and encourage us about imagining a world we aspire to" Vijaya Mehta's life and works was a living example of this saying. (IPA Service)

Shiksha Setu and the transformation of Assam's educational landscape

The educational discourse in Assam has undergone a profound shift in recent times, largely catalyzed by the introduction and implementation of the 'Shiksha Setu' initiative. This digital intervention has moved far beyond the initial confines of academic discussions among educators and administrators,



DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

permeating the daily consciousness of parents, students, and the general public alike. While any policy shift of this magnitude inevitably invites debate and intense scrutiny, a dispassionate and analytical review reveals that Shiksha Setu has successfully brought to the forefront critical systemic issues and, more importantly, established a robust, technology-driven framework for accountability and transparency. By prioritizing the regular monitoring of student and teacher attendance, this initiative has begun to address the historical malaise of systemic absenteeism that has long hindered the progress and potential of the state's school system.

Education serves as the bedrock upon which the progress of any civilized society is built, acting as the vital engine for the intellectual, moral, and economic development of future generations. For an education system to be truly robust and effective, it must transcend the mere provision of physical infrastructure and standardized textbooks; it must guarantee the active and consistent presence of both the educator and the learner within the classroom. Regular attendance is not merely a bureaucratic requirement or a tool for data collection; it is the fundamental mechanism through which the pedagogical process unfolds and thrives. Like many other states across India, Assam has grappled with the perennial challenge of irregular attendance, a problem that has frequently acted as a significant bottleneck, preventing the state from achieving its broader educational objectives. In response to this, the Government of Assam launched the Shiksha Setu initiative—a revolutionary attempt to harmonize attendance, accountability, and the delivery of quality education. This initiative reflects a forward-looking vision, one that positions student and teacher attendance as the fundamental pillar of academic success and institutional integrity.

The significance of regular attendance for students cannot be overstated; it acts as the vital bridge between cognitive development and long-term social maturation. When students are consistently present in the classroom, they are afforded the continuity of learning necessary for deep engagement with the curriculum. Similarly, the role of teacher attendance is equally paramount, as it provides the stability required to maintain a nurturing and consistent learning environment. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that students with higher attendance rates tend to perform better academically, develop greater discipline, and exhibit significantly lower rates of school abandonment. However, Assam's historical reality had been starkly different, characterized by an absence of effective tracking mechanisms. This deficit gave rise to the widespread phenomenon of "invisible students"—individuals whose names appeared on official school rolls but who were rarely present in classrooms. This systemic flaw had far-reaching consequences, leading to the massive misallo-

cation of state resources, including mid-day meals, scholarships, and free uniforms, which were being directed toward phantom students rather than those truly in need. Furthermore, persistent teacher absenteeism, when left unchecked, severely eroded the quality of instruction, leaving a dangerous vacuum where meaningful learning should have occurred.

To confront these multifaceted challenges, the launch of 'Shiksha Setu Assam' signaled a new era of technological integration. At the heart of this digital transformation lies the Shiksha Setu mobile application, a real-time, AI-driven platform designed to modernize school management. By utilizing sophisticated geo-fencing and time-stamping technologies, the application ensures that attendance data is both accurate and immutable. This shift away from traditional, manual, and often opaque attendance registers has effectively curtailed the practice of proxy attendance, which had long compromised the integrity of the system. By digitizing the presence of students, teachers, and non-teaching staff, the initiative has fostered a culture of transparency, accountability, and operational efficiency that was previously unimaginable in the government sector.

The immediate aftermath of the implementation of Shiksha Setu brought to light some deeply concerning data regarding absenteeism, with reports occasionally indicating that up to 45% of students and 21% of teachers were absent on any given day. While shocking, this data has served as a necessary wake-up call, highlighting the severity of the problem and the urgent need for structural reform. The revelation of over 4.5 lakh "invisible students" was particularly transformative, as it compelled the education department to undertake a radical re-evaluation of how government resources are distributed across the state. This exposure of fake enrollments has not only curtailed the misappropriation of public funds but has also underscored the absolute necessity of linking welfare schemes to verifiable, real-time data.

Recognizing the gravity of these findings, the Government of Assam made digital attendance mandatory across all government schools starting in October 2023. This mandate was not merely a technical requirement but a powerful social signal intended to instill a sense of discipline and punctuality within the entire educational ecosystem. By requiring teachers to lead by example, the government has sought to re-establish the school as a space of rigorous professional and academic standards. Beyond the immediate impact on attendance, the system has dramatically enhanced the transparency of government-sponsored welfare schemes. Because the app provides a real-time record of active student participation, state authorities can now ensure that resources like mid-day meals and textbooks reach the intended beneficiaries, thereby maximizing the impact of social justice initiatives within the school system.

To facilitate this transition, the government has invested significantly in technological infrastructure, distributing over 52,000 tablets to schools across the state. This initiative ensures that even schools in the most remote, geographically isolated regions are brought into the fold of digital governance. This widespread availability of hardware has also served



as a catalyst for improving digital literacy among both educators and students, aligning the state's education sector with the broader objectives of global technological integration.

One of the most profound advantages of the Shiksha Setu platform is its capacity to generate data-driven insights. By analyzing trends in attendance, education authorities can now identify specific districts, sub-divisions, or schools that require targeted interventions. Rather than applying a blanket policy to the entire state, policymakers can now tailor their responses to the root causes of absenteeism. If data shows that absenteeism in a specific region is linked to seasonal agricultural work or economic hardship, the government can respond with specific scholarship programs or modified school hours. Furthermore, the application's AI features provide the potential for early intervention, flagging students who are at risk of dropping out so that counselors or local administration can engage with families before the disconnection becomes permanent.

The success and innovation of the Shiksha Setu platform have not gone unnoticed; in September 2024, it was rightfully recognized with a Gold Award for Excellence in e-Governance. This national honor serves as a validation of the Education Department's willingness to embrace technology as a tool for administrative reform and public accountability. The initiative has effectively transformed from a controversial experiment into a benchmark for other states looking to harmonize their educational outcomes through digital transparency.

However, as the system moves toward maturity, it faces the challenges inherent in long-term sustainability. The digital revolution in the classroom is only as effective as the people who manage it; therefore, continuous training for teachers, administrators, and parents is vital. Bridging the digital divide, especially in areas where connectivity remains unstable, is an ongoing project that requires constant attention. Furthermore, the issue of teacher absenteeism—while exposed by the app—must be addressed through a balanced approach that combines strict accountability with professional development and meaningful incentive programs. True change in the education sector requires not just the enforcement of rules, but the cultivation of a supportive professional

culture.

Community participation remains the final, and perhaps most important, piece of this puzzle. The success of Shiksha Setu ultimately rests on the active engagement of parents and local communities. Socio-economic factors such as household responsibilities, child marriage, and poverty remain the primary drivers of student absenteeism, and these cannot be solved by technology alone. Strengthening community-based awareness programs to communicate the long-term, life-altering benefits of education is crucial. When schools, parents, and local administrators work in concert, they create a social safety net that prioritizes the student's presence in the classroom above other pressures.

Looking toward the future, the potential of the data generated by Shiksha Setu extends far beyond simple attendance tracking. It serves as a strategic asset for the state, providing a granular view of how education is functioning on the ground. By layering artificial intelligence and machine learning on top of this existing framework, the government can transition from being reactive to being proactive, predicting and solving systemic hurdles before they manifest as crises. The commitment of the Assam government to this path is clear, and the results are already beginning to reflect a more focused, disciplined, and transparent system.

Ultimately, the goal of this ongoing reform is not merely to increase attendance percentages, but to cultivate a deep-seated culture of educational value, shared accountability, and meaningful participation. Attendance is the essential foundation upon which the future of Assam's youth is being built. Shiksha Setu has successfully laid the groundwork for this, demonstrating that when technology is tempered with strong governance and a clear sense of purpose, it can build a more vibrant and equitable environment for learning. As this journey continues, its success will be measured not just in figures on an application, but in the qualitative improvements in student outcomes, increased retention rates, and the creation of a more empowered, educated, and active generation. The education system of Assam is now firmly on a path toward reform, poised to reach unprecedented heights as it embraces the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

Why India's primary healthcare heroes deserve equal recognition

By: Siddharth Roy

National Doctors' Day, observed every year on July 1, is often seen as an occasion to thank doctors for their tireless service. While that gratitude is well deserved, the day should also encourage a deeper reflection on the kind of healthcare system India wishes to build. Behind every successful public health programme and every healthy community stand thousands of doctors who work quietly in cities, towns and villages, often away from public attention. Their contribution deserves to be recognised not only during times of crisis but every single day.

The observance of National Doctors' Day commemorates the birth and death anniversary of Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, one of India's finest physicians and the second Chief Minister of West Bengal. Instituted by the Government of India in 1991, the day honours a man whose life was defined by service, integrity and a vision that healthcare should be available to every citizen. Dr Roy's contributions extended beyond medicine into institution-building, medical education and public health administration, leaving behind a legacy that continues to inspire the country's medical fraternity.

In recent years, the significance of this observance has become even more profound. The COVID-19 pandemic reminded the nation that doctors remain the backbone of every healthcare system. They worked relentlessly under extraordinary circumstances, often with little certainty about their own safety. Many paid the ultimate price while

treating patients. Their courage reaffirmed that medicine is not merely a profession; it is an enduring commitment to humanity.

Yet discussions on healthcare frequently revolve around super-specialty hospitals, advanced medical technology and complex surgical procedures. These are undoubtedly important, but they represent only one part of India's healthcare story. The larger and often less visible story unfolds every day in Primary Health Centres (PHCs), Community

Health Centres and sub-centres spread across rural India. These institutions form the first link between people and organised healthcare.

For millions of families, especially those living in villages, the Primary Health Centre is the first destination when illness strikes. It is where children receive life-saving vaccinations, pregnant women undergo regular health check-ups, elderly patients manage chronic illnesses and emergency medical care becomes available close to home. These centres ensure that preventive, promotive and curative healthcare reaches people who might otherwise struggle to access medical services because of distance or financial constraints.

The role of PHCs becomes even more critical in remote and geographically difficult regions. Traveling to tertiary hospitals often involves considerable time and expense, making local healthcare facilities indispensable. Early diagnosis, treatment of common illnesses, ma-

ternal and child healthcare, immunisation drives and health awareness programmes conducted through PHCs significantly reduce preventable diseases and improve overall community health.

However, the effectiveness of these institutions ultimately depends on the people who serve within them. Doctors and healthcare workers posted in rural areas frequently work under demanding circumstances, managing large patient loads despite limited resources.



Their dedication rarely receives widespread recognition, yet they remain indispensable to the health of entire communities.

A notable example is Dr Shatabdee Roy, Medical Officer at G.B. Primary Health Centre in Kukurmara, Chaygaon, Assam. Serving patients from several nearby villages, she provides healthcare to families who depend almost entirely on the PHC for their medical needs. For many economically disadvantaged households, the centre offers timely, affordable and dependable treatment that would otherwise be

difficult to obtain.

Speaking about the role of grassroots healthcare, Dr Roy aptly says, "Primary Health Centres are the first point of contact between a community and the medical system, providing accessible, affordable and comprehensive preventive, promotive and curative care to local people." Her observation reflects the philosophy that has guided India's public health system for decades. Strong tertiary hospitals remain important, but no healthcare system can truly succeed unless primary healthcare is equally robust.

Doctors working in PHCs perform responsibilities that extend well beyond clinical consultations. They monitor maternal health, facilitate safe deliveries through referral systems, supervise immunisation programmes, identify communicable diseases, provide nutrition counselling, promote sanitation and educate communities about preventive healthcare. Their presence often builds confidence within communities that quality healthcare is available close to home.

As India moves towards becoming a developed nation, investment in primary healthcare must receive sustained policy attention. Better infrastructure, modern diagnostic facilities, telemedicine services and digital health technologies are essential. Equally important are adequate staffing, continuous medical education and improved working condi-

tions for doctors serving in rural and underserved areas. Retaining skilled professionals in such regions requires not only financial incentives but also meaningful opportunities for professional growth.

The relationship between doctors and patients also deserves careful nurturing. In recent years, misinformation, rising expectations and the commercialisation of healthcare have occasionally strained public trust. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of doctors continue to practise with honesty, empathy and professional integrity. Strengthening mutual respect and communication remains essential for delivering effective healthcare.

National Doctors' Day is therefore an occasion not merely to honour distinguished specialists or celebrated surgeons, but also to acknowledge the countless physicians working quietly in Primary Health Centres across India. Their contribution may not always attract public attention, but it is reflected in healthier villages, safer pregnancies, protected children and stronger communities.

Ultimately, India's healthcare future will depend as much on the strength of its grassroots medical network as on advances in medical science. By recognising the dedication of doctors serving at the community level, the nation also reaffirms a simple yet powerful principle: quality healthcare should never depend on geography or economic status. It must remain accessible to every citizen, and Primary Health Centres will continue to be the foundation upon which that vision rests.

Trial by Media: Who decides justice?

By: Didla Loukya Sree Reddy

Often in India, judges don't deliver judgments. The media does. The public thinks they do too. Such is the state when highly sensational news plagues the big screens of millions of Indians. Instead of presenting the viewers with facts and data, the presenters decide what is right and who is wrong.

When newsrooms stray in their work, people unconsciously start to stray in their perspectives too. But when catchy headlines identify a person or group as the "wrongdoer", who takes accountability when it is proven otherwise? The media that acted as a "moral preacher" or the public who were terribly "misled"? Or there is another famous option, forget about the alleged "criminal" once spoken about and shift to another headline and another "wrongdoer".

When media houses use their influential position to decide who is guilty, they are initiating a trial by media where they don't check facts, don't wait for judgments, and don't try to know the full story behind the case.

When an independent institution that is supposed to act as a watchdog starts acting like a bloodhound, the society that is supposed to stay strong together starts pointing fingers towards each other, and the media only adds fuel to the fire. And in the middle of this chaos, it breaks something quietly, the presumption of innocence, the backbone of the justice system.

Getting the facts wrong in a rush to cover the story fast is called misinformation. It happens often across all news outlets, where we should rightly blame the pressure on the ground journalists to speed up the process, leading to a distorted story. But what happens when the information is deliberately distorted? The transformation into disinformation occurs due to the ulterior motives hidden behind the cameras.

Media houses are funded by commercial enterprises, advertisers and many times by political parties to manipulate numbers and titles the way they want them to be. All such underplay ensures that the media runs on the thumb of money rather than on its duty to society. Recently, in 2024, the inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Uttar Pradesh went viral for both its significance and the spread of misinformation.

Professionalism and duty seem to be abandoned by media personnel as they openly chant slogans in media centres while putting out exclusive content that went on for weeks! According to a Newslandry report, the India Today group's internal prediction algorithm called January 22 the "largest single-day GRP ever recorded by any news channel." The media houses cut out special ad packages for companies that pay millions to advertise their brand due to such a large viewership,

which is usually done on election or cricket match days. The timing of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections is hardly coincidental with the wide coverage of such news, which seems to be working out really well for a particular party. Such partiality is hard to ignore when the evidence is right under your nose.

This has been the case that has played out devastatingly over the years across India. In the highly sensational case of the Arushi Talwar and Hemraj Banjade double murder in 2008, the media has gone overboard while reporting, accusing the parents brutally, stating it was an honour killing after they came to know about the illicit relationship between the domestic help and the 14-year-old child.

After careful examination, it was never established that there existed such a relationship. Instead of criticising the shoddy investigation of the police department and stating the true events, they started inculpating people without any remorse for what the parents had to go through, even after their acquittal. Of course, no reversal of reputation was done after such blatant accusations. The media moved on to the next one, and the public did too.

In 2015, the case of Yakub Abdul Razzaq Memon, who was the brother of Tiger Memon, one of the key masterminds of the 1993 Bombay serial blasts, became another prime example. He was a chartered accountant who provided crucial financial information and assistance to help carry out the blasts.

Media meddled endlessly in his case, pushing around the narrative of communal tension and labelling him as a "terrorist" long before his trials and appeals were heard. The legal process that lasted for almost 21 years was a testament to the depth of the justice system. But the media replaced the legal nuance with noise, producing theories that are detached from the facts of the case.

On a 2017 morning, the public woke up with dread after hearing the death of an eight-year-old, Pradyuman Thakur. He was found with his throat slit in the washroom of the Ryan International School, Gurugram. The police investigation is so fundamentally flawed that they fabricated a story about the bus conductor working in the same school, taped it with a sexual assault motive and nabbed him within hours of the murder.

The media outlets gobbled it up like hungry wolves, quickly putting out exaggerated headlines on prime time. But days later, when it was proven that an eleventh-grade student had committed it to delay the exams, no one followed up. In fact, no one reported on the days of custodial violence; the bus driver and other witnesses had to go through due to false allegations. Yet there is no media accountability.

Such glaring incidents completely shatter the foundational legal doctrine of the justice system, namely, innocent until proven guilty. It is deeply



embedded in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, which was established by the Supreme Court in Nandini Satpathy vs P.L. Dani (1978), and it was reinforced in Sidhartha Vashist vs State (NCT of Delhi) (2010), the Manu Sharma case, where the court explicitly flagged media coverage as a threat to the presumption of innocence.

The media houses often hide behind Article 19(1)(a), where they believe they are exercising their fundamental right, but it often conflicts with constitutional guarantees. Citizens have a right to be properly heard in courts, not on prime-time panels. While going against their duty, they do nothing but hinder the process of justice and meddle recklessly into the lives of people, leaving nothing but broken pieces to be picked up.

It is further aggravated by the lack of supervision of the regulatory bodies like the Press Council of India (PCI) and News Broadcasting Standards Authority (NBSA) on such matters. They exist as statutory and self-regulated authorities, respectively, on paper, but their inadequate implementation of rules in the real-world amounts to little more than optics.

Moreover, PCI can only control print media and is of no use as it cannot impose fines or penalties. NBSA is used to govern the private media channels, which also fail to live up to their purpose, as it is a self-regulatory body that is just like asking

an accused to deliver their own judgment.

The implicit comfort of thinking of someone as a bad person, as portrayed by the media, has something to do with our binary thinking. From an early age, we are steered towards differentiating things into black or white and good or bad. But the reality is different, circumstances vary, and most often, there is never a perfect right or perfect wrong. We exist in grey areas, and we are grey people. Whether knowingly or not, the media takes advantage of this tendency and can establish a firm hold over people with flashy headlines. Walter Lippmann, in his seminal work *Public Opinion* (1922), captured this tendency with unsettling precision:

"The subtlest and most pervasive of all influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception."

This is precisely why the legal system demands careful examination of evidence, suspects and procedure, as we, human beings, are vulnerable to preconceived notions that arise both from our biases and from unconscious influences. For this reason, judges need to weigh evidence conscientiously, and there are constant amendments and

reinterpretations of laws.

The media is called the fourth pillar of democracy for a good reason. It is a beacon of hope in a society that is riddled with power and influence. A righteous force that is supposed to resist money and politics instead joined hands with it to produce a society that gets influenced by a pre-written script narrated by a professional-looking presenter. The web of repercussions that follow from such a chaotic environment is a flawed justice to the people involved in the mess, including the public.

Besides, such an attitude produces suspicion towards independent institutions that are established for the people. If there exists such distrust, then it is a major hindrance to a democratic nation. Regulatory bodies turning a blind eye to the crones-making content enclosed with disinformation is a testament to the depth of the institutional capture by the media industry. Returning to our core question, who decides justice?

For certain, a few reforms here and there cannot alone tackle such a disastrous set of problems. It needs something more. Public literacy, strong legislation and awareness that is powerful enough to snap the carefully curated facade for people. Until then, the monster lurking behind the camera will continue to create broken households, mental agony and stained names. (Courtesy: Youth Ki Awaaz)

The role of Navigation systems in Iran's military success

By: Prateek Tripathi

Recent global conflicts have highlighted the growing importance of Position, Navigation, and Timing (PNT) systems and navigation warfare. In particular, Iran's continued success against the combined onslaught of both Israeli and American armed forces exemplifies the critical role of PNT systems in modern warfare. This has been borne out by the precision targeting of Iranian missiles and drones, alongside the widespread disruption to naval traffic caused by GPS jamming along the Strait of Hormuz. The proliferation and commercialisation of drones, PNT systems, and electronic warfare (EW) have had a profound impact on modern conflict, providing cost-effective asymmetric capabilities for nations that may otherwise not be the most technologically advanced or sophisticated.

Iran's success provides a concrete example of how relatively simple, inexpensive, and targeted solutions can offer a decisive advantage over decades of often bloated military investment.

The Iran conflict also solidifies the fact that mere investment and technological innovation do not necessarily provide a decisive advantage over cost-effective alternatives on the modern battlefield. Likewise, it underscores the criticality of PNT systems in warfare, a technology that underpins virtually all critical military and weapons systems. Iran's success provides a concrete example of how relatively simple, inexpensive, and targeted solutions can offer a decisive advantage over decades of often bloated military investment.

The Importance of Military Navigation Systems

PNT systems find ubiquitous applications across both civilian and military domains. However, they are particularly important in the latter, as military operations are heavily reliant on Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GNSS), such as the Global Positioning System (GPS), for navigation, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), communications, precision-guided munitions, missile targeting, and the navigation of drones and loitering munitions. For instance, the criticality of GPS navigation for both military and civilian naval vessels has been clearly demonstrated by the detrimental impact of widespread GPS jamming and spoofing in the Strait of Hormuz, which has effectively given Iran near-absolute control over the naval traffic it permits to pass.

During the India-Pakistan conflict in May 2025, access to BeiDou's military-grade Authorised Service played a major role in extending

China's "kill-chain" capabilities to Pakistan's military, thereby providing it with a critical advantage over India and serving as an effective counterweight in the absence of comparable aircraft and air defence systems.

In addition to GNSS, military navigation systems also utilise alternative PNT systems, such as ground-based Long Range Navigation (LORAN), signals of opportunity such as Long-Term Evolution (LTE) signals and commercial satellite systems, as well as onboard inertial navigation systems such as accelerometers and gyroscopes, which can provide fairly accurate navigation capabilities for relatively limited periods. The importance of PNT systems has been demonstrated in recent conflicts, even before the Iran war. For instance, PNT interference has played a critical role in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, affecting critical systems on both sides. Russian GPS jamming reportedly reduced the confirmed hit rate of American Excalibur shells from 55 percent in January 2023 to 6 percent in August 2023. On the other hand, Ukraine's ability to utilise commercial satellite systems such as Starlink has allowed it to maintain control over drone operations even in the absence of traditional navigation and communication facilities.

During the India-Pakistan conflict in May 2025, access to BeiDou's military-grade Authorised Service played a major role in extending China's "kill chain" capabilities to the Pakistani military, thereby providing it with a critical advantage over India and acting as a counterweight in the absence of comparable aircraft and air defence systems.

Iran's PNT Capabilities

Following extensive navigation disruption during the Twelve-Day War in June 2025, Iran decided to abandon the US-governed GPS in favour of the Chinese BeiDou Navigation Satellite System en masse. Far from being a spontaneous decision forged by escalating circumstances, this move was the culmination of a decade-long strategic effort by Tehran to establish technological sovereignty and gradually reduce its dependence on the West. Iran signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China to facilitate the integration of the BeiDou system into its broader navigation framework as early as 2015. Subsequently, the country was granted access to BeiDou's military-grade Authorised Service following the signing of the 25-year Iran-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2021, a privilege typically reserved for close Chinese allies and partners, such as Pakistan.

Far from being a spontaneous decision forged by escalating circum-

stances, this move was the culmination of a decade-long strategic effort by Tehran to establish technological sovereignty and gradually reduce its dependence on the West.

Compared with GPS, BeiDou's signals have been designed to withstand PNT interference and are more resilient to navigation warfare. For instance, BeiDou-3's B3A military signal utilises frequency-hopping and a Navigation Message Authentication mechanism, both of which render it more resistant to jamming and spoofing. Moreover, BeiDou's triple-frequency navigation architecture provides greater accuracy than GPS, enabling missiles such as the Zolfaghar to strike with greater precision. This capability has reportedly contributed to successful Iranian missile strikes against Israel, including an attack on a radar station near Haifa that penetrated Israel's sophisticated Iron Dome air defence system. It may also explain how an Iranian ballistic missile launched against the joint US-UK military base at Diego Garcia on 20 March 2026 was able to reach its intended target more than 4,000 km away, although the missile was reportedly intercepted. The BeiDou-3 system is also the only GNSS to provide Short-Message Communication capability, which functions as a two-way tactical communication network capable of transmitting data packets of up to 560 bits through satellite links across distances of up to 2,000 km. This enabled intelligence gathered by Chinese surveillance satellites to be transmitted directly to Iranian drones and missiles during the Twelve-Day War, thereby enhancing their precision through dynamic flight-path modifications controlled by pre-programmed onboard algorithms, which also enabled evasive manoeuvres to avoid interception.

In addition to BeiDou, it seems likely that Iran has also utilised Russia's Global Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS). A critical element underpinning Iran's military success has been the remarkable resilience and adaptability of its low-cost Shahed drones. However, Shahed drones fall under the category of "loitering munitions", meaning that they cannot be remotely piloted and are entirely reliant on navigation systems for operation and targeting. Evidence suggests that they utilise multiple GNSS systems, including GPS and GLONASS, alongside inertial navigation systems, to improve targeting precision. Furthermore, Shahed drones employ EW countermeasures such as Controlled Reception Pattern Antennas (CRPA) to counter jamming and spoofing. Tehran has also been developing its own satellite navigation system through the Local Position-

ing System Hoda since 2016, although it currently has limited capabilities and lacks national coverage. Moreover, institutions such as the University of Tehran and the Iran University of Science and Technology (IUST) are developing indigenous platforms and software to integrate PNT data from multiple GNSS receivers, including GPS, GLONASS, BeiDou, and Galileo, to mitigate signal interference and provide real-time corrections.

Conclusion: Adapting to the Changing Nature of Warfare

Recent conflicts provide a clear indication regarding the changing nature of warfare, marking a firm departure from predominantly terrestrial combat to aerial combat, enabled by advancements and decentralisation in drone technology, navigation systems, and EW capabilities. In the face of the increasing commercialisation of these technologies, air defence systems have not been able to keep up, as they require costly interceptors to counter relatively inexpensive drones such as the Shahed, providing a prominent example of the growing impact and effectiveness of asymmetric warfare capabilities.

The Iran conflict highlights the importance of recognising and addressing PNT vulnerabilities within a nation's long-term military doctrine, with particular emphasis on diversifying GNSS systems and developing domestic capabilities.

In this context, while the US has invested heavily in developing alternative military PNT capabilities such as the M-Code for over two decades, these efforts have yet to fully materialise due to repeated cost overruns and delays. Iran has followed in the footsteps of Ukraine, adapting successfully to the changing nature of warfare by utilising cost-effective solutions in the face of seemingly impossible odds. In particular, Iran provides a compelling example of how navigation warfare can turn the tide of war, even against technologically and economically superior adversaries.

The Iran conflict highlights the importance of recognising and addressing PNT vulnerabilities within a nation's long-term military doctrine, with particular emphasis on diversifying GNSS systems and developing domestic capabilities. Furthermore, it exemplifies the importance of building counterspace capabilities, particularly in electronic and navigation warfare. Consequently, adapting to novel warfare modalities through cost-effective and targeted strategies must assume greater priority than sheer investment or even technological innovation in a rapidly evolving global warfare environment. (Courtesy: ORF)

A verdict on failure, not a new ideology

By: Nilantha Ilangamuwa

Twelve hours before Colombians cast their ballots in the 21 June presidential run-off, President Gustavo Petro announced that security forces had killed Iván Idróbo, the FARC dissident commander known as "Marlon" — second-in-command to Néstor Vera, alias Iván Mordisco, and one of the most wanted men in the country's southwest. Petro called it the heaviest blow yet against armed criminal structures in western Colombia. The timing was almost too apt: a state still fighting, region by region, to hold ground that has never fully been its own, even as the political project that promised to win that ground through negotiation was about to lose power at the ballot box.

By the next morning, Colombia had chosen its next president: Abelardo de la Esparilla, a 47-year-old millionaire lawyer with no prior political experience, who narrowly defeated left-wing senator Iván Cepeda — 49.66% to 48.7%, a margin of roughly 250,000 votes out of more than 26 million cast, making him the most-voted candidate in Colombian history.

Supporters call him "El Tigre." Donald Trump, who endorsed him, called him a fighter "just like me." Commentators reached for the comparison: Colombians were already making themselves: Javier Milei in Argentina, Nayib Bukele in El Salvador — outsiders who won less by proposing policy than by promising to demolish a political class rather than reform it. It would be a mistake, though, to read the result as evidence that Colombia has adopted a new ideology. What the vote mainly expressed was fatigue with two projects that had each failed on their own terms. Petro's administration, the country's first left-wing government, had promised social transformation and a negotiated peace with Colombia's remaining armed groups; it struggled to turn that promise into functioning state authority.

The traditional right, for its part, spent two decades promising order without dismantling the land inequality, criminal economies and institutional weakness that keep conflict alive in Colombia's periphery. In the space between those disappointments, a candidate who promised to tear the whole system down — rather than repair it — found room to grow. This pattern is not unique to Colombia. Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador and Costa Rica have all swung toward right-wing outsiders in recent election cycles, each time punishing incumbents for insecurity and stagnation without solving either. The cast keeps changing; the stage, and the problems on it, largely does not. Colombia has lived a version of this cycle before. Álvaro Uribe won the presidency in 2002 on a hardline security platform that weakened the FARC insurgency and, for a time, restored confidence that the state could impose order. Urbismo outlasted his presidency through allies Juan Manuel Santos and Iván Duque, but it also carried the "false positives" scandal — soldiers killing civilians and dressing them as guerrilla casualties to inflate body counts — along with persistent allegations linking parts of the security establishment to paramilitary networks. This year's election exposed the limits of that inheritance.

Paloma Valencia, the Uribe-backed Democratic Centre candidate and his most direct political heir, was eliminated in the first round with just under 7% of the vote before endorsing De la Esparilla to consolidate the right. Voters who once trusted Urbismo wanted something angrier and further removed from Colombia's political establishment — and De la Esparilla did not try to revive that brand. He replaced it. His campaign succeeded partly because it was built for a different kind of politics: large rallies, evangelical church networks and a relentless social media operation organised around the tiger persona and short, emotionally charged content — the currency of a platform economy that rewards spectacle over argument. Cepeda, 63, a longtime human rights advocate who had led the polls from January until election day, ran on speeches and policy arguments, the traditional currency of Colombian politics. Where algorithms favour anger and simplicity, that older currency bought him less than it once would have.

That gap points to something the Colombian left underestimated: politics is rarely won by explanation alone. Voters living with extortion, stagnant wages and a daily sense that the state had ceded ground to armed groups wanted proof that someone could seize back control, not just a diagnosis of why control had slipped.

Much of that frustration traces back to Petro's signature policy, "Total Peace," which rested on a genuine insight — that Colombia's violence has always been entangled with poverty, land inequality and the absence of the state, not ideology alone. But several armed groups treated negotiations as room to expand rather than disarm, deepening their grip on drug trafficking, illegal mining and extortion while talks dragged on. Communities promised peace often experienced the opposite: a state seemingly negotiating while criminal structures grew up around them. This is the trap both of Colombia's political traditions keep falling into.

The left correctly diagnoses the social roots of violence but struggles to assert authority; the right promises authority but avoids the inequality and institutional decay that let armed groups regenerate. What results, from both sides, is the management of crisis rather than its resolution. De la Esparilla now inherits that trap, backed by an informal network of like-minded leaders across the region who built power on similar frustration. The danger is that anger, however satisfying as a campaign message, is not itself a governing strategy.

Punishing the guilty plays well as a promise; it does not build the institutions, fiscal credibility or administrative competence that outlast a single term. His mandate, meanwhile, is a narrow one. Congress remains divided, and Petro, even after formally recognising the outcome, continued to allege fraud and foreign interference in the vote count.

De la Esparilla takes office on 7 August with more votes behind him than any Colombian president before him — and less unity than that number suggests. Winning, it turns out, was the easy part. Whether he becomes the leader who finally builds a state capable of holding its own ground, or simply the next performer in a theatre that keeps replacing its cast while leaving the script unchanged, is the question Colombia will spend the next four years answering. (Courtesy: The Pioneer)

Major Russian attack kills 20 in Kyiv

Ukrainian strikes batter Moscow's oil sector

KYIV, July 2: Russia hammered Kyiv in an 11-hour drone and missile attack overnight into Thursday morning, killing at least 20 civilians in the city and injuring scores more in what Moscow said was retaliation for Ukrainian strikes on Russian oil facilities.

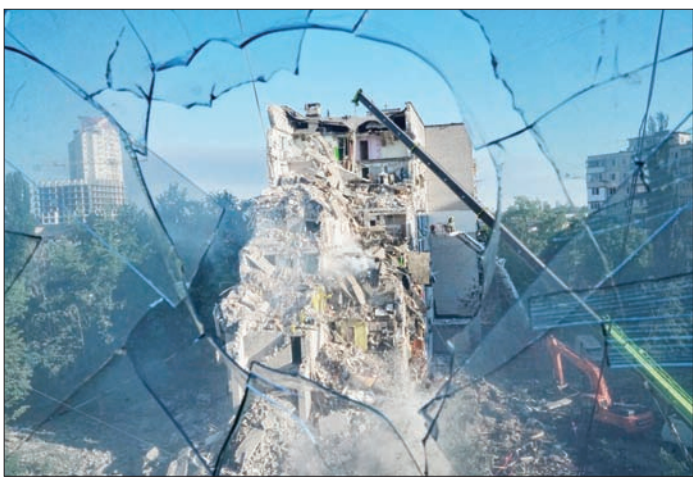
Loud explosions shook the Ukrainian capital for hours during the night, with many people sheltering in subway stations after authorities issued air raid warnings. Emergency crews were still digging through the rubble of collapsed and charred apartment buildings in search of victims as dawn broke.

Russia's Defence Ministry said in a statement that the deadly bombardment was in response to Ukraine's long-range strikes that have caused severe fuel shortages and put pressure on President Vladimir Putin.

Ukraine's increasingly frequent and large-scale attacks — described by Zelenskyy as a 40-day blitz — have especially targeted oil refineries, causing a fuel crisis that has frustrated Russians, more than four years after Moscow's full-scale invasion of its neighbour.

Ukrainian officials say they are trying to force Putin to the negotiating table, but so far Moscow's response has been to hit back.

Diplomatic efforts to end the war, most recently by the Trump administration, haven't produced results. Putin thinks that time is on his side, that Western support will peter out and that Ukraine's resistance will eventually collapse under pressure from strategic bombing. Western



analysts say.

The attack killed 20 people in Kyiv, according to Kyiv city administration head Tymur Tkachenko. More than 90 others were injured, according to Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko.

Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiba said it was a "night of horror" in the capital.

Damage was recorded in 30 locations across the city, mainly residential buildings and civilian infrastructure, according to Tymur Tkachenko, head of the Kyiv City Military Administration. Some 20 residential buildings were damaged, Interior Minister Ihor Klymenko said.

Flashes from exploding drones and missiles lit up the night, and loud booms echoed through Kyiv. Tracers from air defense fire streaked through the air as a huge pall of black smoke rose into the

civilians have been killed in the war, according to the United Nations.

Sybiba said in April that domestic production meets up to 75% of Ukraine's military needs and accounts for up to 95% of long-range strikes against Russia. The location of the factories making those weapons is secret.

Elsewhere, in Ukraine's central Dnipropetrovsk region a Russian guided bomb strike killed a 7-year-old girl and wounded four other people, including an 11-year-old girl, all members of the same family, regional head Oleksandr Hanzha said.

The attack used "high-precision long-range weapons" and drones on "military industry facilities and fuel and energy complexes in Kyiv and the Kyiv region, as well as military airfield infrastructure in four other regions of Ukraine," the Russian Defence Ministry's statement said. It published a list of targets it said the barrage hit, mostly plants manufacturing and assembling Ukrainian drones, missiles and components.

Russia fired 74 missiles, 24 of them ballistic, and 496 drones of various types in the attack, Ukraine's air force said.

Ukraine's air defences have improved throughout the war, especially in countering Russian drones. But ballistic missiles are harder to stop, and Ukrainian officials have repeatedly pleaded with partner countries to supply more Patriot missile systems that offer the best protection.

Russia's General Staff chief Gen. Valery Gerasimov reported the results of the "massive retaliatory strike" to Putin, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said.

The bombardment was "exclusively against military or military-linked targets," Peskov said.

Russia's aerial attacks on Ukraine have repeatedly hit civilian areas. More than 16,000 Ukrainian

civilians have been killed in the war, according to the United Nations.

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Sybiba urged countries not to delay decisions on supplying air defence systems and missiles.

He rejected any Russian attempts to justify the strikes as retaliation for Ukraine's long-range attacks, saying Ukraine was exercising its right to self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter while Russia remained the aggressor.

Sybiba said on X that the death toll may rise as rescue teams continue their work.

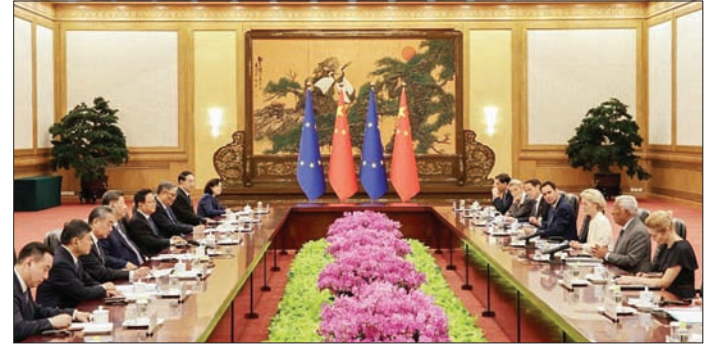
Ukrainian forces struck one of Russia's largest oil refineries overnight in the Nizhny Novgorod region east of Moscow, starting a fire, Ukraine's General Staff said.

Also, Ukrainian forces struck a railway bridge over the Siverskyi Donets River in the Russian-occupied Luhansk region, it said. The bridge was used by Russian forces to transport personnel, weapons and military supplies, according to the General Staff.

Ukraine's recent success with drone strikes that keep Russian troops pinned down on the front line, disrupt Russian supply lines in the rear and damage oil facilities have brought a significant change in the war, Western analysts say.

"Russia's spring-summer 2026 offensive has failed to achieve operationally significant gains thus far, and Russian forces' rate of advance in June 2026 (was) a fraction of the rate of advance that Russian forces achieved in June 2025," the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank, said in an assessment late Wednesday. (AP)

Beijing says China-EU trade talks set in fall, to be held regularly each year



HONG KONG, July 2: China and the European Union will hold ministerial-level trade talks once or twice a year, China's Commerce Ministry said Thursday, as the two sides work to increase and rebalance trade.

The EU faces growing pressure to reduce its trade deficit with China, which widened to about 360 billion euros (USD 410 billion) last year, nearly 1 billion euros a day. Chinese cars and batteries are among items increasingly exported to Europe.

Under the newly agreed upon China-EU trade and investment consultation mechanism, Beijing has also invited the EU's trade commissioner, Maroš Šefčovič, to visit China this autumn, ministry spokesperson He Yadong told reporters.

He said the two sides intend to boost their collaboration in areas like artificial intelligence and the transition to renewable energy.

Beijing's remarks followed a meeting between Šefčovič and Wang Wentao, China's commerce minister, on Monday in Brussels. Šefčovič said after the meeting he

would be travelling to Beijing in the fall.

As the trade gap between China and the EU widens, Europe needs to "defend our industrial base and keep pushing for a level playing field globally," Šefčovič said. He has set an October deadline for meaningful results on trade rebalancing.

On Wednesday, new EU measures for protecting the European steel industry and limiting e-commerce small parcels took effect, essentially targeting Chinese firms and imports.

Yuyuantian, a Chinese state media-linked social media account, said in a post last week that China has expressed willingness to increase its imports from the EU but the EU "needs to relax its export controls on high-tech products" from China and not weaponise trade and economic issues.

In June, leaders of the G7 nations issued a joint declaration to build up their supply chains for critical minerals, key for many high-tech and defence sectors, as they aimed at reducing reliance on China. (AP)

9 Thai monks killed in road mishap

BANGKOK, July 2: An 11-year-old boy crashed a pickup truck into a group of monks on a pilgrimage walk in northeastern Thailand on Thursday, killing nine, officials said. A total of 35 monks from Mukdahan province, about 600 km northeast of the capital Bangkok, were on the pilgrimage. Five monks were killed at the site, while four others died at a hospital. Thirteen were hospitalised with three in critical condition, according to the provincial administration.

The group started the 260-km walk to Ubon Ratchathani province about 30 minutes before the crash. Security camera footage shared by a local rescue group, Ruam Jai Mukdahan Rescue Association, shows the monks walking in a single line on the side of a road before the truck crashes into them.

The boy is in custody and will be questioned when state child protection officers arrive, police said.

The cause of the accident is under investigation, but police said the monks described seeing the vehicle swerving before it slid off the road and crashed into the group. (AP)

Nepal wants to maintain a balanced relations with neighbours, says foreign minister

KATHMANDU, July 2: Nepal wants to maintain a balanced relationship with all friendly countries, including neighbours India and China, stress on economic diplomacy and pursue a new style based on national interest, Minister for Foreign Affairs Shisir Khanal said Thursday.

Talking about his recent visit to India, which was the first high-level contact between the two countries after the formation of the new government in Nepal in March, Khanal said the visit may be termed as a "special one."

During his visit to India from June 5-7, Khanal held wide-ranging talks with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and also met National Security Advisor Ajit Doval.

"We have placed economic collaboration as the focal point during the discussions. As bilateral mechanisms have become active and operational as a result of my recent official visit to India. The visit may be termed as a special one," Khanal told the National News Agency of Nepal.

Result oriented discussions were held on a wide range of issues including trade, energy, con-

nectivity, investment and border management during my visit, he pointed out.

Both the sides have expressed their commitments to resolve the border issues and misunderstandings that have surfaced over the past few years, he added.

His trip to New Delhi came against the backdrop of a raging controversy triggered by Nepalese Prime Minister Balendra Shah's remarks in May on the boundary row between the two sides. Shah had suggested the involvement of China and the UK to resolve the issue; New Delhi had categorically rejected any third party involvement to resolve the row.

After his India trip, Khanal visited Beijing on a four-day visit from June 14, during which he held comprehensive and in-depth talks with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi and other senior political leaders.

On Thursday, Khanal asserted that the new government in Nepal wants to establish cordial friendly relations with all the neighbours as well as development partners. (PTI)

A terrorist, is a terrorist: India calls for collective action to root out murderous ideology

UNITED NATIONS, July 2: Asserting that a "terrorist is a terrorist", India has called on the international community to work collectively to root out the "murderous ideology" without finding any grievance to justify terrorism.

"India has been a victim of cross-border terrorism for decades. Our people have paid the price of terrorism in lives lost, families scarred, and societies shattered. This experience has shaped India's approach: there can be no justification for terrorism."

"Irrespective of any grievance, political cause or strategic calculation, terrorism in all its forms and manifestations must be condemned unequivocally," India's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Harish Parvathani has said.

Addressing the UN General Assembly on the adoption of the Ninth Review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS), on Wednesday, Parvathani said the international community must reject double standards in counter-terrorism.

He emphasised that there is an obligation to hold perpetrators, organisers, financiers and sponsors of terrorism accountable and bring them to justice.

Member states should ensure full cooperation in this regard, he said.

"A terrorist is a terrorist!! We must work hand in hand to root out the murderous ideology without finding any grievance to justify terrorism," he said.

India said counter-terrorism should not be hollowed out by false equivalences or politicised narratives.

"We must address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, but we must never confuse context with justification. We must uphold human rights and the rule of law, but we must also recognise that the first human right is the right to life, and terrorism is the most direct assault on this human right."

India also stressed that countering terror financing must remain central to the international community's collective efforts.

"The international community must improve financial intelligence sharing, strengthen implementation of Financial Action Task Force standards, and ensure that no jurisdiction remains a safe conduit for terror financing."

Noting that misuse of new and emerging technologies by terrorists demands urgent attention, India said it is "disheartening" that negotiations of this review of the GCTS were not able to reach an acceptable landing point on the crucial issue of ensuring that terrorists are denied the technological tools for their nefarious acts.

India said the adoption of this review comes at an important moment, as 20 years ago, Member States had come together to adopt the GCTS.

"In doing so, the international community affirmed that terrorism is a threat to humanity, and it can only be defeated through international cooperation," he said.

India had called for the adoption of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT) a decade before GCTS was first adopted in 2006.

Parvathani noted that the absence of a universally agreed legal framework continues to hobble collective action against terrorism.

This legal instrument is essential to close normative gaps, strengthen prosecution and extradition, and deny terrorists and their sponsors access to safe havens, funds and arms.

"Nearly three decades of delay have hindered our collective efforts to combat terrorism. The time has come to demonstrate political will to conclude the CCIT," he said.

Underscoring that India has consistently contributed to global counter-terrorism efforts and hosted major international discussions, including the Delhi Declaration on countering the use of new and emerging technologies for terrorist purposes and the No Money for Terror Conferences.

India voiced its criticism over the lack of mention of the landmark Delhi Declaration in the GCTS in 2023, saying this "reflects the unfortunate situation of how this Assembly is held hostage to petty bean counting! It is doubly unfortunate when the international community continues to tolerate this behaviour."

India also reiterated its position that it condemns all acts motivated by prejudice directed against any faith or any other attribute, such as ethnicity, nationality, geography, or race.

"As this is the United Nations, a multilateral forum of universal membership, our lens too should be universal. While we condemn all acts motivated by Islamophobia, Christianophobia and antisemitism, this august body must acknowledge that such phobias extend to other faiths as well," he said.

Parvathani stressed that there are great perils for lacking international cooperation in countering terrorism.

"Only if we have the political will to counter it in all its manifestations; Only if there are no double standards; Only if there is no distinction between good or bad terrorists."

"Only if there is transparency and objectivity in the way sanctions regimes function to secure listings of genuine and evidence-based objective listing proposals; Only if exclusivist frameworks, new terminologies and false priorities are thwarted, could the menace of terrorism be successfully combated by us together," he said. (PTI)

Micron announces USD 250 million investment in Trump Accounts



WASHINGTON, July 2: Sanjay Mehrotra-led Micron Technologies announced a USD 250 million investment in the Trump Accounts programme, a long-term savings initiative for children, a move that was welcomed by President Donald Trump.

Mehrotra, the CEO of Micron, said as part of this initiative, the company is launching an employee matching benefit for contributions up to USD 1,000 per child under 18.

Additionally, Micron will provide a community benefit of a one-time USD 250 seed deposit for children with Trump Accounts where the company operates in Idaho, New York, Virginia, California, Colorado, Minnesota and Texas.

"This incredible gesture, made by Micron's fantastic CEO, Sanjay Mehrotra, will make many children extremely happy someday in the not too distant future," Trump said on Truth Social on Wednesday.

He called it "the BIGGEST CORPORATE Investment of its kind."

A Trump account can be opened for any American child under 18 with a Social Security number.

Individuals, employers and others can deposit money into the accounts, which grow tax-free, like individual retirement accounts. The accounts will be available starting July 4.

Micron said it expected to reach up to one million children with its investment.

"At Micron, we believe investing in people is as important as investing in technology," Mehrotra said.

Most of the funding will benefit children and families in communities where Micron operates, expanding long-term financial opportunities for the next generation.

The programme complements Micron's previously announced investment of over USD 200 billion in US memory manufacturing and R&D, creating over 90,000 jobs across the country.

In addition to this initiative, Micron is investing hundreds of millions of dollars across the US to expand access to semiconductor careers through K-12 STEM education, semiconductor curriculum development, AI education, community college and university partnerships, registered apprenticeships and other workforce programmes, a company statement said.

Trump said the Micron investment will help jumpstart the American Dream for these children as the US celebrates the 250th anniversary of its independence.

"This MASSIVE Investment will help MILLIONS of American children and families get a strong start in life, and give them REAL Financial Security. Micron is investing directly in the American Worker and Family! This is exactly what the fabulously successful TRUMP ACCOUNTS were created to do — Give every American Child a headstart, and a real chance to succeed," the president said.

"My Policies are WORKING, and working 'BIG.' Our Country is doing far better than any country, anywhere in the World, and Companies like Micron are proving it every single day," Trump said. (PTI)

PM Sharif to visit Iran today to attend Khamenei's funeral

ISLAMABAD, July 2: Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and his top ministers will visit Iran on Friday to participate in the funeral of late supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was assassinated in US-Israeli strikes in February, the Foreign Office announced on Thursday.

"The prime minister will convey condolences on behalf of the people and government of Pakistan to the Iranian leadership and the bereaved families while reaffirming solidarity with the brotherly nation in their hour of profound grief," Foreign Office spokesperson Tahir Andrabi said.

Deputy PM and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, cabinet members and senior officials will accompany the premier on his visit.

From Tehran, PM Sharif would travel to Turkey at the invitation of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Andrabi said.

He would "hold discussions on the entire gamut of bilateral relations with a special focus on giving impetus to bilateral trade and investment cooperation between the two brotherly countries," Andrabi said.

"The leadership meeting will also reflect on issues concerning regional peace and security," he added.

The prime minister will also address a business conference hosted by Pakistan to "spotlight Pakistan's trade and investment potential in priority areas, including SEZs (special economic zones), energy, trade, IT and privatisation sectors", Andrabi said.

Earlier, PM Sharif had said on the eve of the visit by the Iranian president last week that he would attend the funeral of the late supreme leader. (PTI)

UK formally apologises for state's role in forcing unwed mothers to give up babies for adoption

LONDON, July 2: Prime Minister Keir Starmer formally apologised Thursday for the British state's role in separating tens of thousands of unmarried mothers from their babies, a practice that lasted for decades until the 1970s.

He said in Parliament that "we are deeply and profoundly sorry" for what he called a "stain on our history."

An estimated 185,000 babies of unmarried mothers were adopted in England and Wales between 1949 and 1976. Campaigners have fought for years for acknowledgment that women were pressured, deceived and threatened into giving up their babies.

Starmer, who is in the final weeks of his premiership, said women were "coerced, bullied or misled into feeling that they had no choice but to have their children taken away from them."

"Children grew up believing they were unwanted" and mothers were

told "their babies would be better off without them," he said.

"To every one of those affected we say a deep and heartfelt sorry," Starmer said.

Britain is one of several countries reckoning with the legacy of social norms, religious practices and government policies that heaped shame on unwed mothers, hid them away in institutions while pregnant and took their children to be adopted by married couples.

Ann Keen, a former UK health minister whose baby was taken for adoption in 1966 when she was 17, said she was looking forward to "being released from my shame."

"We need this apology, because we have always been accused of giving up our babies, and we didn't give them up," she told the BBC. "We've now got the opportunity to really put this wrong right."

In 2022, Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights said the British state should apologise for



"the pain and suffering caused by public institutions and state employees that railroaded mothers into unwanted adoptions."

The semi-autonomous governments in Scotland and Wales issued apologies the following year, but the Conservative UK government at the

time declined to follow suit.

The apology from Starmer's Labour Party government comes two weeks after the Church of England said sorry for its role in forced adoptions.

Archbishop of Canterbury Sarah Mullally said that "we are profoundly

sorry for the pain, trauma and stigma experienced — and still carried — by many people because of historical adoption practices in homes affiliated to the Church of England."

Other countries have been facing up to a similar history.

In 2013, Australia's then-prime minister, Julia Gillard, delivered a landmark national apology for the country's history of forced adoptions and the "lifelong legacy of pain and suffering" it had caused.

Ireland has been reckoning with the legacy of mother-and-baby homes run by the Catholic Church, in which tens of thousands of women were housed in often degrading conditions. An inquiry found in 2021 that 9,000 children had died in 18 mother-and-baby homes during the 20th century.

Prime Minister Micheál Martin apologised for the "profound and generational wrong" visited upon mothers and their babies who ended up in the institutions. (AP)

Sikkim BJP chief meets Shah, raises concerns over security, reservation, industrial incentives

GANGTOK, July 2: BJP's Sikkim unit president D R Thapa has called on Union Home Minister Amit Shah in New Delhi and raised a host of issues, including border security, disaster relief and industrial incentives, a party statement said on Thursday.

He also raised concerns over the Limboo-Tamang assembly seat reservation issue and the state's development.

Accompanied by Sikkim BJP general secretary Arjun Rai, Thapa met the union home minister on Wednesday.

Thapa urged Shah to strengthen intelligence coordination, cyber surveillance and vigilance against extremists and anti-national activists in the strategically sensitive Himalayan state, following the recent arrest linked to an online self-radicalisation case.

A 19-year-old man was arrested here on the charge of spreading the ideology of the Islamic State terror outfit through social media.

The BJP delegation also pressed for an early constitutional resolution to the long-pending Limboo-Tamang assembly seat reservation issue and sought Scheduled Tribe status for 12 tribal communities.



The Limboo-Tamang seat reservation is a long-standing demand for guaranteed political representation for the Limboo and Tamang Scheduled Tribe communities in the 32-member assembly.

Highlighting the widespread damage caused

by incessant rain across the state, Thapa sought enhanced central assistance for relief, restoration, rehabilitation and the creation of disaster-resilient infrastructure to tackle recurring natural calamities.

The delegation appealed to the Centre to extend the budgetary support scheme beyond 2027, warning that the withdrawal of tax-linked industrial incentives could force industries to leave Sikkim, putting local jobs at risk.

The BJP said, "The state president apprised the home minister of several issues concerning Sikkim's security, constitutional aspirations, disaster management, industrial development and organisational growth."

Shah assured the delegation that all matters would be examined seriously and necessary attention would be given in the larger interest of the people of Sikkim and the state's security and development.

The delegation also briefed Shah on the BJP's expanding organisational base in Sikkim and reiterated the party's commitment to the state's development, security and prosperity under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. (PTI)

Nagaland launches VB-G RAM G scheme to strengthen rural livelihoods



KOHIMA, July 2: The Nagaland government on Thursday launched the VB-G RAM G scheme, which seeks to provide eligible rural households with 125 days of guaranteed wage employment.

The Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G), a flagship rural employment initiative, was rolled out at a state-level programme in Kohima by the Department of Rural Development.

Rural Development commissioner and secretary Thavaseelan K, delivering the keynote address, said the launch marked a significant milestone in strengthening rural livelihoods and advancing the vision of 'Viksit Bharat' and 'Viksit Nagaland' through empowered villages, resilient communities and sustainable economic growth.

He noted that the scheme, which came into effect on July 1, reflects a renewed approach to rural development.

Highlighting Nagaland's strengths, he said the state has immense potential in agriculture, horticulture, handicrafts, handloom, bamboo and other rural enterprises.

By combining traditional knowledge with modern

technology, innovation and stronger market linkages, the mission aims to create sustainable livelihood opportunities, he said.

Thavaseelan said VB-G RAM G places strong emphasis on digital governance, with technology-driven measures such as GIS mapping and geo-tagging of public assets, e-KYC, and the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS) for real-time field data collection and transparent monitoring of development works.

He also stressed the importance of participatory planning, saying village development boards, village councils, self-help groups and local communities would play a central role in identifying priorities, preparing development plans and monitoring outcomes.

Explaining the scheme's focus areas, Thavaseelan said it is built around four major categories of work: water security through irrigation, groundwater recharge, water conservation and watershed development; core rural infrastructure, including roads and connectivity; livelihood infrastructure such as storage facilities, markets and productive community assets; and climate resilience, aimed at mitigating the impact of extreme weather events while strengthening the adaptive capacity of rural communities.

Calling on SHGs and rural development stakeholders to actively participate in the mission, he urged district officials, block development officers, village development boards, village councils and community institutions to implement the scheme with commitment and collective collaboration.

Expressing confidence in the initiative, Thavaseelan said the scheme would significantly strengthen rural development in Nagaland by creating durable community assets, generating sustainable livelihood opportunities and improving the quality of life in rural areas. (PTI)

BJP trying to use SIR to remain in power indefinitely: Ex-Tripura CM Manik Sarkar



AGARTALA, July 2: Veteran CPI (M) leader and former Tripura Chief Minister Manik Sarkar on Thursday alleged that the BJP was trying to prepare electoral rolls of its choice by using Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the voters list to remain in power indefinitely.

Addressing a programme at Chailenta in Dhalai district, he alleged that the BJP's prime target is to disenfranchise Muslims, labourers and poor by using SIR.

"This has been proven in Bihar, West Bengal and Assam too. They want to delete those valid voters whom they doubt will vote against the saffron party. Their prime target is to disenfranchise Muslim, labourers and poor by using SIR as a tool," he said.

Claiming that the BJP wants to install fascist rule in the country, the former chief minister said they want to seize the voting rights of the people who are on their doubtful list.

"In Tripura too, they are hatching a conspiracy to disenfranchise valid electors who are on their doubtful list. If voting rights are seized, democracy will fall in the country, which is what the BJP is planning," he said.

Sarkar also claimed the BJP would have faced defeat in Tripura in the 2023 Assembly elections had the Tipra Motha Party (TMP) not secretly supported the saffron party.

"The people, frustrated by the saffron party's misrule, were determined to vote in the 2023 Assembly election, but it was not possible because of Tipra Motha's clandestine understanding with the BJP," he said.

The CPI(M) politburo member also lashed out at the RSS and VHP for trying to engineer division between Hindus and Muslims after the BJP came to power in the bordering state in 2018.

Sarkar called upon the people to take the path of protest and agitation to resist the BJP from taking anti-people policies, as the state has been struggling on various fronts from job to law and order and corruption. (PTI)

NFR extends Santragachi to Naharlagun Special

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 2: Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has extended the services of the Santragachi-Naharlagun Special train for five additional trips in each direction to accommodate the increased passenger demand during the peak travel season.

According to an official release, Train No 08047/08048 (Santragachi-Naharlagun-Santragachi) Special will continue operating with its existing schedule, stoppages and coach composition from July 3 to August 1. Train No 08047 (Santragachi-Naharlagun) will depart from Santragachi every Friday at 6 pm from July 3 to July 31 and reach Naharlagun at 8.50 pm the following day.

In the return direction, Train No 08048 (Naharlagun-Santragachi) will leave Naharlagun every Saturday at 11.55 pm from July 4 to August 1 and arrive at Santragachi at 4.15 am on Monday.

NFR said the extension is expected to provide additional travel options and reduce waiting lists for passengers travelling between West Bengal, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

Railway officials have advised passengers to check the train schedule, stoppages and timings through the IRCTC website or official notifications issued by Northeast Frontier Railway before commencing their journey.

Mizoram CM says corruption obstacle to good governance, calls for efforts to curb menace



AIZAWL, July 2: Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma on Thursday said that corruption is a major obstacle to good governance and the state's overall development.

Releasing the first annual report of the state's Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) in a function here, Lalduhoma called for collective efforts to curb corruption.

The chief minister stated that combating corruption cannot be left to a single agency, but rather requires the collective participation of both citizens and government employees.

Lalduhoma said the state government has strengthened both the ACB and the Mizoram Lokayukta, the state's anti-corruption ombudsman, to enhance measures to fight against corruption.

He expressed hope that the officers and staff of both institutions would continue to improve their professional capabilities to combat corruption.

The CM said that the report would serve as a reminder to government employees of the need to discharge their duties with integrity, accountability, and to uphold transparency and financial propriety in public administration.

According to the annual report, the ACB received 17 corruption-related complaints during 2025-26, of which 15 were taken up for preliminary enquiry, leading to the registration of six regular cases.

The ACB completed 14 preliminary enquiries, including cases carried over from previous years, and disposed of seven regular cases during the period, it said.

The report also said that between 2010 and 2026, the ACB secured the conviction of 112 people in 35 corruption cases that were charge-sheeted and tried by the Special Court under the Prevention of Corruption Act. (PTI)

Two militants arrested in Manipur

IMPHAL, July 2: Security forces arrested two militants belonging to proscribed outfits in Manipur's Imphal West district for their alleged involvement in extortion activities and illegal transportation of arms, police said on Thursday.

A 55-year-old member of the banned People's Liberation Army, who was accused of being involved in the transportation of arms and ammunition, was apprehended from the Tabungkhok area under the Patsoi Police Station limits on Wednesday, a police statement said.

A 26-year-old cadre of the proscribed NRFM was arrested from Sagoltonga Makha Leikai in the same police station area on Tuesday, it said.

Security forces have been conducting search operations and area domination in the fringe and vulnerable localities across Manipur since ethnic violence broke out three years ago.

More than 260 people have been killed and thousands rendered homeless in ethnic strife between Meiteis and Kuki-Zo groups. (PTI)

Midnight blaze destroys eight houses in Arunachal's capital

ITANAGAR, July 2: A fire triggered by a suspected electrical short circuit destroyed eight houses and left several families homeless here shortly after midnight on Thursday, officials said.

Although no casualties were reported, the blaze reduced residential and rental property at Pappu Nallah area to ashes and caused losses worth lakhs of rupees.

The fire broke out at Puroik Colony around 12.20 am, following which three fire tenders and 11 firefighters were deployed to the spot.

After an operation lasting over three hours, the flames were brought under control, preventing further spread to adjoining structures, officials added. Officials said preliminary findings indicate that the blaze may have originated from an electrical short circuit in a rented house, based on the tenant's statement.

The exact cause, however, will be established after completion of the investigation.

Officials said the first fire tender reached the site within minutes of receiving the distress call, while two additional tenders joined the operation.

Later in the day, Itanagar MLA Techu Kaso, accompanied by officials of the Itanagar Capital Region district administration and the Ward No 13 corporator, visited the fire-ravaged locality to assess the damage.

Immediate relief was extended to the affected families and tenants, while the MLA instructed the district administration to undertake a detailed assessment of the losses to facilitate compensation for eligible victims under the prescribed government norms. (PTI)

'Report livestock deaths within 24 hrs for relief'

HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, July 2: The Wokha district administration on Thursday asked livestock owners to report the death of animals due to any disaster within 24 hours to the nearest veterinary centre or administrative authority to claim relief under the state disaster response fund (SDRF).

Outlining the guidelines for reporting and notifying livestock deaths to claim relief, Wokha DC K Mhathung Tsanglao, in a circular, said the death of animals due to disaster must be reported within 24 hours to the authorities concerned for further action. It said upon receiving the report, the district veterinary officer or field staff will conduct spot verification and assess the situation within three days of the incident.

As per the guidelines, geo tagged photographs of the entire carcass, taken by the owner, must be submitted to the concerned authority and a post mortem examination should be conducted by a qualified veterinarian wherever possible.

NU scholar attends UN indigenous youth conference

HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, July 2: Nagaland University research scholar Repakaba Tzudir has represented the university at the United Nations World Indigenous Youth Conference 2026 held in Kathmandu recently.

The conference was co-organised by the Youth Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (YFIN), Nepal and the National Youth Council (NYC), Nepal under the theme, "Our Roots, Our Rights, Our Leadership: Collective Indigenous Movement for Self-Determination" bringing together nearly 150 Indigenous youth leaders, activists, academics and community representatives from across Asia.

Tzudir from the sociology department of the Lumami campus of the varsity attended the conference as an international delegate and indigenous scholar along with fellow participants from Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal and various parts of India.

Family launches eco-friendly mosquito control drive in memory of social worker

1,000 guppy fish released in Agartala water bodies to curb mosquito breeding

HT Correspondent

AGARTALA, July 2: In a unique initiative combining environmental conservation with public health awareness, the family of late social worker Shankar Gour has launched an eco-friendly mosquito control campaign in Agartala in his memory.

Shankar Gour, a former Secretary of the Red Lotus Club, was known for his commitment to social service.

Continuing his legacy, his son Sourav Gour and other family members have undertaken the initiative to promote natural methods of controlling mosquito-borne diseases.

As part of the campaign, around 1,000 guppy fish (*Poecilia reticulata*), known for feeding on mosquito larvae, have been released into drains and stagnant water bodies in Palace Compound, Jagannath Bari Road and Shakuntala Road.

According to the organisers, an adult guppy fish can consume between 50 and 100 mosquito larvae daily, making it an effective and environmentally friendly alternative to chemical insecticides.



The initiative aims to help control the spread of mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue, malaria and chikungunya through a sustainable biological approach.

The programme was attended by Agartala Press Club president and senior journalist Pranab Sarkar as the chief guest.

Commending the initiative, he said public health campaigns such as mosquito

control were as important as blood donation drives in protecting lives and stressed the need for greater public awareness and preventive measures.

The Gour family said they would continue and expand similar eco-friendly public welfare initiatives in the future to honour the ideals and social service legacy of late Shankar Gour.

ASSAM POWER GENERATION CORPORATION LIMITED

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Extension Notice

SHORT TENDER NOTICE NO. APGCL/KLHEP/GM/Tech-10(E)/2026-27/21(E-02) Dated: 02/07/2026

The tender invited vide Notice No.: APGCL/MSHEP/GM/Tech-10(E)/2026-27/21 dtd. 20/05/2026 has been extended as follows: -

"Overhauling of 03 nos. of 4000 KVA 3.3/33 KV Generator Transformer at MSHEP-I & 03 nos. of 2000 KVA 3.3/33 KV Generator Transformer at MSHEP-II."

Financial Involvement: Rs. 13,57,590.00 (Rupees Thirteen Lakhs Fifty-Seven Thousand Five Hundred Ninety) only

Tender Paper Issue (Start Date) : From 10:00 hrs. of 02-07-2026
Tender Paper Issue (Closing Date): Up to 13:00 hrs. of 08-07-2026
Tender receiving : Up to 12:00 hrs. of 09-07-2026
Tender Opening : At 15:00 hrs. on 09-07-2026

Details tender documents may be obtained from the O/O The General Manager, KLHEP, APGCL, Lengery, West Karbi Anglong, Assam during working hours. The tender inviting authority reserves the right to accept or reject any bid/tender and to cancel the bidding process and reject all bids at any time prior to contract award.

Sd/-
General Manager KLHEP, APGCL

GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM
OFFICE OF THE MANAGER, GOVT. CATTLE
DEMONSTRATION FARM, MANJA, KARBI ANGLONG

AUCTION NOTICE

This is for general information to all concerned that the auction sale of few unproductive animals of Cattle Demonstration Farm, Manja will be held on 7th of July, 2026 from 10: 00 A.M in the morning at the farm premises.

The interested bidders are hereby requested to be present at the time of auction. The successful bidders will have to deposit the full amount of auction money in cash on the spot and the animal should be lifted on the same day.

Sd/-
Manager
Govt. Cattle Demonstration Farm
Manja, Karbi Anglong.

Mamata camp questions poll body's decision to grant audience TMC feud: Rebel faction meets EC

NEW DELHI, July 2: The Ritabrata Banerjee-led rebel faction of the Trinamool Congress on Thursday said the full bench of the Election Commission gave it a "patient hearing" on its claim over the poll panel would respond shortly.

Meanwhile, the Mamata Banerjee-led camp questioned the Election Commission's decision to grant an audience to the rebel faction, alleging that the meeting violated the poll body's own procedures.

Speaking to reporters after meeting Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar and the two Election Commissioners, Ritabrata Banerjee said the delegation had formally placed its case before the poll panel after informing it about the faction's special organisational session held in Kolkata on June 22.

"The All India Trinamool Congress had a special session in Kolkata on June 22. Immediately after the session, we formally informed the Election Commission about it in writing. We also met the Election Commission in Kolkata and sought an appointment with the Election Commission of India," he said.

"We are thankful that the full bench -- the Chief Election Commissioner and the other Election Commissioners -- gave us a patient



hearing today. We have made our points and once again thank the Election Commission for hearing us patiently. We are hopeful that the Election Commission will get back to us very shortly," he added.

Ritabrata Banerjee declined to disclose the documents submitted to the poll panel, but asserted that they "abided by all rules" while conducting the June 22 organisational session.

"I will not disclose what documents we have given, but our session took place abiding by all rules. We are very hopeful the Election Commission will contact us shortly," he said. The rebel leader also reiterated the faction's claim that it represented the "real" Trinamool Congress.

"We are the real TMC. More than two-thirds of the MLAs are

with us. Corporators and municipal councillors are also with us," he said. He added that informing the Election Commission after holding an organisational session was part of the prescribed procedure and that the faction had already completed the process.

The meeting with the poll panel marked the latest development in the escalating battle for control of the Trinamool Congress, with the Ritabrata Banerjee camp seeking recognition as the legitimate organisational and legislative wing of the party.

The rebel faction had last week submitted documents to the office of the Chief Electoral Officer in Kolkata and separately communicated with the Election Commission, claiming to represent the original Trinamool Congress. It

has staked a claim over the party's name, twin-flower election symbol and organisational structure, contending that it enjoys the support of a majority of the party's legislators and office-bearers.

However, the Mamata Banerjee-led faction has questioned the disidents' authority to represent the party before the Election Commission, maintaining that they are not authorised signatories of the Trinamool Congress.

The Mamata Banerjee camp also questioned the Election Commission's decision to grant an audience to the rebel faction, alleging that the meeting violated the poll body's own procedures.

Senior TMC leaders Saugata Roy and Sagarika Ghose claimed that only authorised signatories of a recognised political party could seek an appointment with the commission and said the party had not requested any such meeting.

"The Election Commission had informed all political parties that only authorised signatories can seek a meeting. The AITC did not ask for a meeting. On what basis did the Election Commission grant an appointment to a person expelled by the TMC?" Roy asked.

Ghose alleged that the commission was acting at the behest of the BJP and Union Home Minister Amit Shah. (PTI)

Wangchuk's sugar drops to 60 Dipke launches 'chai pe charcha with cockroaches'

NEW DELHI, July 2: Activist Sonam Wangchuk's blood sugar level dropped to 60, and his blood pressure remained low on the fifth day of his hunger strike at Delhi Jantar Mantar on Thursday, while Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) founder Abhijeet Dipke announced a "Chai Pe Charcha with Cockroaches" initiative to gather feedback from protesters on expanding the ongoing agitation, which entered its thirteenth day.

Sharing Wangchuk's health update on X, Dipke said Wangchuk's condition was worsening and warned that the government would be responsible if anything happened to him.

"Sonam Wangchuk's health is continuously deteriorating. His sugar level has dropped to 60 and blood pressure is also very low. If anything happens to Sonam sir, the government will be responsible for it," Dipke said in a post on X.

He also reiterated his demand for Pradhan's resignation. Dipke held an interaction with protesters titled "Chai Pe Charcha with Cockroaches", saying it was aimed at taking feedback on "how we can make this movement better and bigger".

Six students associated with the All India Students' Association (AISA) also continued their indef-



CJP PROTEST DAY 13

inite hunger strike from a separate stage at the protest site.

A day earlier, AISA had said the health of the fasting students was deteriorating, claiming JNUSU Joint Secretary Danish's blood sugar level had fallen to 61 mg/dL, while Aameen and Deepak Kumar Verma had also been advised by doctors not to continue their fast because of health concerns.

CPI(ML) Liberation General Secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya is scheduled to visit the protest site later in the day to extend solidarity with the agitation.

The protest has drawn support from several political leaders and civil society members over the past

few days. Among those who have visited the site are CPI(M) General Secretary M A Baby, senior CPI(M) leader Brinda Karat, CPI General Secretary D Raja, social activist Yogendra Yadav, Supreme Court lawyer Prashant Bhushan, CPI leader Annie Raja, transparency activist Anjali Bhardwaj and TMC MP Sagarika Ghose.

The CJP protest began on June 20 over alleged irregularities in the examination system, including NEET. Dipke has said the agitation will also raise other accountability-related issues, including electoral matters such as the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. (PTI)

BJP accuses Priyanka Gandhi, husband of attempt to grab land in Uttarakhand

NEW DELHI, July 2: The BJP on Thursday claimed that Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and her husband Robert Vadra were involved in an alleged attempt to grab a four-acre land parcel in Uttarakhand, where a 90-year-old woman was being threatened to vacate the property.

There was no immediate reaction from the Congress. Priyanka Gandhi Vadra or Robert Vadra.

Addressing a press conference here, BJP national spokesperson Pradeep Bhandari alleged that the Gandhi-Vadra family's real business is not politics but "grabbing people's land".

He said Robert Vadra's sister Saira Vadra is trying to take possession of a four-acre land at Kichha in Udham Singh Nagar district of Uttarakhand; the original land lease is in the name of late Kulsam Khan, and the property is currently occupied by her 90-year-old sister, Nasreen Khan.

Bhandari said Congress MLA from Kichha, Tilak Raj Behar, arrived at the property with around 100 supporters late on Wednesday night and threatened Nasreen Khan with dire consequences if she did not vacate the land.

Congress leaders intimidate the occupant when legal routes fail, he alleged.

"When they realise that Saira Vadra cannot get possession of the land through the legal route, they intimidate the occupant. She (Saira Vadra) becomes the front, while Priyanka Vadra and Robert Vadra are behind her," the BJP leader claimed. (PTI)

J&K BJP demands stringent punishment for all accused in Sarla Bhat kidnapping, killing case

SRINAGAR, July 2: The Jammu and Kashmir unit of the BJP on Thursday demanded that all accused in the kidnapping and killing of young Kashmiri Pandit nurse Sarla Bhat in April 1990 should be put on trial and given stringent punishment to ensure complete justice.

Addressing a press conference here, J-K BJP's chief spokesperson Sunil Sethi said Bhat was Kashmir's daughter and she represented Kashmir's composite culture.

"She, her family, the community and the whole of Kashmir had to wait for 36 years for justice. The justice is not complete; it is incomplete.

"Her killer is in Pakistan. The justice will be complete when he is brought here and put on trial," he said.

The J-K State Investigation Agency (SIA) on Monday filed an over 700-page chargesheet naming banned JKLF chief Yasin Malik as the key accused in the kidnapping and brutal killing of Bhat by terrorists in April 1990. The agency described it as a "historic milestone" in the pursuit of justice for victims of terrorism.

The SIA, which reopened the case after it was handed over in 2024, submitted the chargesheet before the designated NIA court here, 36 years after Bhat, working as a nurse at Sher-e-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences (SKIMS) Soura, was found dead in downtown Srinagar, several kilometres away, a day after she went missing.

Sethi said the whole Kashmiri society should stand up and help

the prosecution in the case.

"We appeal to the government and the prosecuting agencies to plead the case strongly so that the killers get a stringent punishment. Those who are still out of the reach of law should be caught sooner, put on trial and given stringent punishment," he added.

The BJP chief spokesperson said justice in the case will ensure that in future, a homogenous society will be established once again in Kashmir where people from all religions will live together.

"If the Kashmiri society does not think of Bhat as her daughter, then it is a huge failure for Kashmir. The whole country, the world, is looking at Kashmir -- the society should come forward openly," he said. (PTI)

MP 'land scam': Cong demands white paper from state govt, calls for probe under ex-SC judge



NEW DELHI, July 2: Amid an alleged "land scam" in Madhya Pradesh, the Congress said on Thursday that the state government should issue a white paper, a probe under the supervision of a retired Supreme Court judge should be carried out and that Chief Minister Mohan Yadav must resign.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said evidence of the land "scam" allegedly perpetrated by Yadav in Ujjain came to light about 10 days ago but Prime Minister Narendra Modi, along with the entire top leadership of the BJP-RSS, is maintaining a deep silence on the matter.

"Their silence is signalling a collusion," Ramesh said in a post in Hindi on X.

A report published in the "Indian Express" claimed that Yadav's family members and their real estate firms acquired at least 137 plots spanning 168 acres in Ujjain for ₹ 45 crore in two years since December 2023 -- mostly in areas benefitting from road projects and land-use changes that his government announced.

Madhya Pradesh BJP president Hemant Khandelwal and senior ministers have dismissed the land-scam allegations against Yadav as "baseless", claiming that the Congress always tries to undermine chief ministers from the Other Backward Classes (OBC).

Congress leader Praveen Pathak said his party would launch a campaign against the alleged "looting" of donations at the Ram temple in Ayodhya and the "looting" of land in Ujjain.

"We had always heard that political parties run on donations. For the first time, we have seen a party actually misappropriating donations. Those who spoke of 'Ram Rajya' have embezzled Ram temple donations," Pathak said at the Congress's 24, Akbar Road headquarters here.

He said even 10 days after the "land-scam" allegations surfaced against Yadav, there has been no response from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leadership or the Madhya Pradesh government.

Taking a dig at the saffron party, Pathak said, "We have all heard that a leader should be grounded, but BJP folks have misunderstood this concept. Mohan Yadav did not connect with the ground, but certainly got connected with several plots of land."

The Congress leader said the opposition party has decided to launch a campaign against "scams and looting" spanning from Ujjain to Ayodhya.

As part of the initiative, party leaders will hold press conferences and an online portal will be launched where people will be able to register complaints related to various government departments. (PTI)

'Mantri Pradhan's continuation in office blot on democracy: Cong

NEW DELHI, July 2: The Congress on Thursday criticised the government over reported issues with UGC-NET Sociology and English question papers, saying Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's continuation in office is a "blot on our democracy" as well as reflection of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "cynical political calculations".

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramsh said it required the might of the armed forces and the whole of the government at every level to conduct the re-NEET on June 21, 2026.

It reflected the complete failure of the Modi government to conduct exams without such unprecedented mobilisation, Ramesh said on X.

When it comes to exams that are handled by the National Testing Agency (NTA) itself, the track record continues to be atrocious, he said.

"Questions in the UGC-NET English Exam were wholesale lifted from past papers without any changes and the UGC-NET Sociology question paper was chock-full of spelling, translation, and



grammar errors," Ramesh said and shared a screenshot of media reports.

"The NTA is not fit for purpose. The Mantri Pradhan, on whose watch the NTA was supposed to be reformed and strengthened, has been exposed as incompetent and callous," Ramesh alleged.

"His continuation in office is a blot on our democracy and a reflection of the Pradhan Mantri's cynical political calculations," the Congress leader said.

According to candidates, Ritzer was "Putzer", social was "oval", Parsons was "Parsow", Ghurye was "Ghunye", A R Desai was "A K Desai", Nussbaum was

"Nusbaut" in the National Eligibility Test (NET) Sociology question paper.

Candidates, who appeared for the UGC NET Sociology paper on June 30, alleged that the question paper was riddled with several spelling mistakes, grammatical errors, and poorly worded questions.

There was no response from the NTA on the claims.

A candidate also claimed that 67 out of 150 questions in the English paper were identical to questions asked in the 2024 exam.

Even the sequence of the answer options was reportedly unchanged, raising concerns over the quality of the question paper and the examination's integrity, the candidate said.

UGC-NET is conducted to determine the eligibility of candidates for the posts of Assistant Professor and admission to PhD programmes. The examination consists of two papers: Paper I, which includes 50 questions on teaching aptitude, reasoning ability, and general awareness, and Paper II, which contains 100 subject-related multiple-choice questions. (PTI)

EC announces bypolls to 3 assembly seats in Bihar, MP and Gujarat on July 30

NEW DELHI, July 2: The Election Commission on Thursday announced the schedule for bypolls to three assembly constituencies in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, with polling slated for July 30.

The bypolls will be held in Bankipur in Bihar, Datia in Madhya Pradesh and Manjalpur in Gujarat, the Commission said.

The vacancies arose following the resignation of BJP president Nitin Nabin as an MLA in Bihar, the disqualification of Madhya Pradesh Congress legislator Rajendra Bharti after his conviction in a fraud case, and the death of Gujarat BJP MLA Yogeshbhai Narandas Patel.

According to the schedule, the gazette notification for the bypolls will be issued on July 6, while July 13 is the last date for filing nominations. Scrutiny of nomination papers will be held on July 14 and the last date for withdrawal of candidature is July 16.

Counting will be held on August 3.

The Model Code of Conduct has come into force with immediate effect in the districts where the whole or part of the assembly constituencies going to the polls are situated, the commission said. (PTI)

TMC's Saugata Roy seeks safety of MPs



NEW DELHI, July 2: Senior Trinamool Congress (TMC) leader Saugata Roy on Thursday said he has written to Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, seeking his intervention to ensure the safety of members of Parliament, after party MP Mahua Moitra was allegedly attacked during a visit to her constituency in West Bengal's Nadia district.

Addressing a press conference here, Roy alleged that Moitra came under attack when she visited her constituency, but refused to leave the area immediately and stayed on until the situation eased.

"She immediately reported the matter to the director general of police, but police remained silent spectators," Roy al-

leged. He said he wrote to the speaker on Thursday, urging him to take steps to ensure the safety of MPs in their own constituencies.

"I have written to the speaker to ensure the safety of MPs in their own constituencies. I hope the speaker takes action," he said.

The veteran TMC leader said he tried to speak to Birla over the phone on Wednesday but could not get through. Instead, he said, he spoke to a Lok Sabha official attached to the speaker's office.

Roy further said he had recently written to Union Home Minister Amit Shah, expressing concern over alleged attacks on TMC workers in West Bengal.

Moitra alleged on Wednesday that Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) workers hurled eggs at her during a protest outside TMC MLA Alifa Ahmed's residence in Nadia district.

Moitra had gone to Palashi in Kaliganj to attend a TMC meeting at Ahmed's residence when a group of protesters allegedly gathered outside and shouted slogans of "go back" and "chor". The protesters also allegedly hurled eggs at her. (PTI)

PM Modi marching towards 'environmental disaster' in Great Nicobar: Congress

NEW DELHI, July 2: Congress leader Jairam Ramesh on Thursday accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of continuing with his onward march to "environmental disaster" in Great Nicobar, and said the nation's "ecological conscience is on trial".

Upping the ante against the Great Nicobar Island Project, the former environment minister shared on X his extensive public engagement over the past few years on the venture and its devastating impacts on the unique biodiversity-rich ecosystem.

"There has been interest in accessing my extensive public engagement over the past few years on the Great Nicobar Island Project and its devastating impacts on that unique biodiversity-rich ecosystem. Here is an anthology of (i) most of the social media posts; (ii) a couple of brief interventions in Parliament; and most importantly (iii) letters to various Union Ministers and their replies as well," Ramesh said, sharing the public engagements.

There will undoubtedly be more such public engagements as the prime minister

"continues the onward march to environmental disaster" in Great Nicobar, even as five different petitions filed by public-spirited and concerned citizens and civil society groups are in the Calcutta High Court, Ramesh said.

He then went on to list the petitions, including the challenge premised on violations of the Eco Sensitive Zone Notification regarding Campbell Bay National Park, the challenge premised on violations of the Eco Sensitive Zone Notification regarding Galathea National Park and the challenge premised on violations of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 and its Rules, 2008.

Ramesh also listed the challenge in the high court premised on violations of the Coastal Zone Regulation Notification, 2019 and the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, and the challenge on various grounds of the order of the National Green Tribunal dated February 16, 2026.

"The nation's ecological conscience is on trial," Ramesh said.

Last week, Ramesh, who has been raising concerns over the Great Nicobar Island (GNI) project, wrote a letter to Union



minister Sarbanand Sonowal, seeking clarifications on the development of a transshipment port under the project.

Ramesh has written multiple letters to Environment Minister Bhupendra Patel, Tribal Affairs Minister Jual Oram and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, raising questions over the project and highlighting the "ecological havoc" it would result in.

The Congress leader, in his letters to Yadav, has highlighted the demonstrably "dubious nature" of the environmental

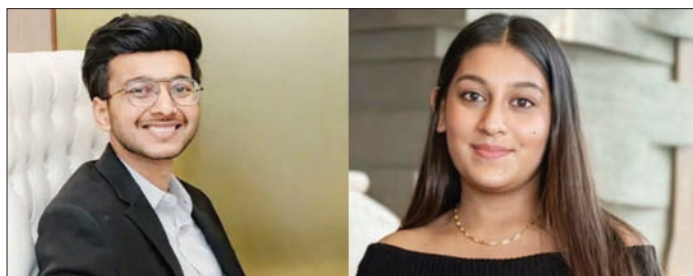
impact assessment of the project in its totality.

The Congress has attacked the government over the project, saying the transshipment port on Galathea Bay is a recipe for ecological havoc and would lead to large-scale destruction of coral colonies.

Ramesh has also written two letters to the Defence Minister over the project and urged him to reconsider the rejection of the full expansion of the INS Baaz runway. (PTI)

Siya taken to Pune site where Ketan's murder plot was rehearsed

Cops seek nod for polygraph tests



PUNE, July 2: Police on Thursday morning took Siya Goyal to a location in Pune where she and Chetan Chaudhary had allegedly rehearsed how to push her fiancé and realtor Ketan Agarwal off a cliff at Lohagad Fort, officials said.

Pune police has also moved court seeking permission to conduct polygraph tests on Goyal and her alleged lover Chaudhary, an official said. A polygraph test, also called a 'lie detector test', measures physiological responses like blood pressure, pulse, respiration and sweat when questions pertaining to the incident are answered.

Clothes allegedly worn by Goyal on June 18, the day of the incident, have been recovered during a search at her residence in Market Yard area of Pune, he added.

Goyal (20) and Chaudhary (22) are accused of pushing 25-year-old Agarwal to his death from a cliff at Lohagad Fort in Pune district on June 18. Agarwal and Goyal were set to marry in November this year.

Following the alleged murder, Goyal and Chaudhary were arrested and have been remanded in police custody till July 3.

"Investigation has revealed that Siya and Chetan had rehearsed at a hillock-like space near a club in Lullanagar how to push Ketan off the cliff at Lohagad Fort. Today, Siya was taken to the spot, where she identified the place where they had allegedly carried out the rehearsal," a Pune Rural Police official said.

The alleged rehearsal took place in May and probe is on to find out the exact date and other details, the official informed.

"We have also collected substantial amount of technical and digital data, which is currently being analysed and cross-verified," he added.

During the house panchama, the police recovered the clothes Goyal had allegedly worn on the day of the incident at Lohagad Fort, the official said.

The official said an application has been moved in the Vadgaon Maval court seeking permission for polygraph tests on Goyal and Chaudhary.

"The court will first issue notices to the accused and record their consent before any further process. The procedure is yet to be completed," the official told PTI.

According to police, Goyal and Chaudhary allegedly eliminated Agarwal as he was turning out to be an obstacle in their relationship.

The Pune Rural police on Wednesday recreated the crime scene with co-accused Chaudhary, who allegedly played a role in the conspiracy to murder Agarwal. They conducted a similar crime scene reconstruction with Goyal on Sunday, during which a dummy was pushed off the cliff in her presence.

According to the police, Ketan Agarwal's father Vishal Agarwal mentioned in his complaint that his son had repeatedly voiced concerns about Goyal's closeness to Chaudhary, saying she often mentioned the latter's name in their conversations.

Goyal had earlier sabotaged their planned pre-wedding trip to Bali, Indonesia, the police said. (PTI)

Maharashtra puts new RTI Rules on hold after Hazare's agitation threat

MUMBAI, July 2: The Maharashtra Right to Information Rules, 2026, which proposed several changes, including a higher RTI application fee and mandatory identity proof, have been stayed following Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis' directive on Thursday, sources said.

Activist Anna Hazare had opposed the new rules, which also had a restriction that each application should deal with only one subject, and threatened to launch an indefinite hunger strike from July 5 if the amendments to the RTI rules were not withdrawn.

CM Fadnavis asked the Chief Commissioner of RTI to stay the new notified rules, the sources said.

According to a notification issued by the General Administration Department and published in the official gazette on June 12, the new rules came into force immediately upon publication.

Under the revised rules, applicants seeking information under the Right to Information Act, 2005, will have to pay an application fee of ₹ 30.

Charges for information have

been fixed at ₹ 5 per A4 page, ₹ 5 per scanned or digital page, while inspection of records will be free for the first hour and will cost ₹ 50 per hour thereafter. Persons below the poverty line (BPL) will be exempt from the application fee, although charges will apply for information exceeding 50 pages.

The rules also provide that an RTI application should ordinarily be confined to a single subject and generally not exceed 150 words. Where multiple subjects are included, the Public Information Officer (PIO) may process only the first subject and advise the applicant to file separate applications for the remaining issues.

Another significant change is that applicants must submit a self-attested copy of a photo identity document establishing Indian citizenship along with the RTI application. Applications without such proof may be returned for compliance.

The rules state that if the requested information is already available on the official website of the government or the public authority concerned, the PIO may di-

rect the applicant to access it online instead of supplying copies. They also clarify that personal information unrelated to public activity or public interest will ordinarily be exempt from disclosure unless a larger public interest is established.

The notification further prescribes a fee of ₹ 50 for filing a first appeal before the First Appellate Authority and ₹ 100 for filing a second appeal before the Maharashtra State Information Commission, along with supporting documents. Hearings may be conducted physically or through video conferencing.

The rules also place responsibility on heads of public authorities to ensure proactive disclosure of information under Section 4 of the RTI Act, warning that failure to comply may attract disciplinary action under applicable service rules.

Hazare had urged the government to withdraw the notified Maharashtra Right to Information Rules, 2026, alleging that they dilute the spirit of the RTI Act and make it more difficult for citizens to access information. (PTI)

RAM TEMPLE DONATION ROW

Notice served to accused's wife over unauthorised construction in her name

AYODHYA (UP), July 2: The Ayodhya Development Authority (ADA) has served a notice to the wife of Ram temple donation thief accused Lavkush Mishra over the alleged unauthorised construction of a house under her name, as the police intensified their investigation into the alleged embezzlement case, official and police sources said on Thursday.

According to ADA sources, the house under construction is located in Banvirpur village in Sohawal tehsil. The land was purchased in the name of Lavkush Mishra's wife, Supriya Mishra, and the construction was undertaken without obtaining the mandatory approval from the development authority.

Police sources said investigators also searched Lavkush Mishra's residence on Wednesday and questioned his family members as part



of the ongoing probe.

Investigators may tighten the legal proceedings against accused Avinash Shukla, from whose possession the highest cash recovery in the case has been made so far, police sources indicated.

According to police sources, cash recoveries made during the

investigation include ₹ 20.39 lakh from Avinash Shukla, ₹ 18.07 lakh from Karunesh Pandey, ₹ 16.82 lakh from Anukalp Mishra, ₹ 14.25 lakh from Lavkush Mishra, ₹ 7.32 lakh from Ramashankar Mishra and ₹ 1 lakh from Ramashankar Yadav alias Timnu.

The police have also recovered

around 11 grams of gold, about 375 grams of silver and USD 1,121 during the investigation.

In a significant recovery, investigators seized a donation box labelled "Ramrajya Kosh" bearing a Paytm QR code from a yoga centre in Ayodhya where Avinash Shukla had been staying for nearly a decade, police sources said.

The alleged embezzlement of Ram temple donations came to light on June 7.

Later, an FIR was registered on June 25 following a preliminary report by a Special Investigation Team (SIT), which was constituted by the UP government.

Eight persons associated with the temple's donation-counting process have been arrested in the case, and the investigation is continuing. (PTI)

Nine more cerebral malaria cases detected in Jharkhand, count rises to 150

RANCHI, July 2: Nine more people tested positive for cerebral malaria in Potka block of Jharkhand's East Singhbhum district, taking the total count of such cases in the area to 150 in the last one week, officials said on Thursday.

The growing number of cases prompted the state government to direct all district administrations to develop a comprehensive action plan to combat the vector-borne disease, they said.

"A total of 3,000 samples have been tested in the Potka block since June 24.

Around 150 people, including nine found positive on Wednesday, have been detected with cerebral malaria," district health department officer Dr Mrityunjay Dhavaria said.

Cerebral malaria is a life-threatening neurological complication of Plasmodium Falciparum infection, resulting in coma and severe brain damage. (PTI)

Eight labourers mostly from Bihar killed as rock collapses at stone quarry in Bengaluru

BENGALURU, July 2: Eight workers mostly from Bihar were killed after a massive granite rock collapsed at a stone quarry in Bengaluru South Taluk on Thursday, police said.

According to police, the tragedy occurred in the early morning at Madapattana, bordering Bengaluru Urban and Bengaluru South district. The victims, all daily-wage labourers employed at a stone crusher site, were trapped beneath the fallen boulders and died on the spot, according to police.

Police said the accident occurred while the workers were engaged in quarrying operations.

The injured were shifted to a private hospital for treatment.

Chief Minister D K Shivakumar expressed his grief over the incident.

The collapse of a crusher wall in Madapattana of Bengaluru South Taluk has caused the death of seven workers, bringing immense sorrow, he said in a post on 'X'.

He said, "It is the duty of quarry owners to ensure the life safety and security of workers engaged in

quarry operations. The government will take appropriate action against quarries that violate regulations."

According to Yashwanthpur MLA S T Somashekar, the eighth labourer died in the hospital.

He charged that he had been complaining about "illegal quarrying" for the past many years and raised the issue in the Karnataka Assembly. Somashekar said some time ago, a leopard was killed due to the blast carried out by the quarry owners.

"In this illegalities, police, forest department and mining department officials are involved who should be booked and tried. It is a serious matter that eight people have died," the MLA told reporters.

He also expressed his apprehensions that the bigwigs involved in the case may escape.

He demanded the state government that the accused should not escape from the clutches of the law.

According to those working on the spot, the toll may go up as the condition of some of the injured was critical. They said some of

them may even lose their limbs permanently.

The exact number of those injured was still being verified, though initial reports indicated that several workers sustained injuries.

Rescue personnel and police rushed to the spot and launched operations following the collapse.

The area was cordoned off as officials began clearing debris and searching for any other workers who may have been trapped.

One of the labourers said there were about 18 workers from Bihar and North Karnataka at the site.

A huge rock fell from about 40 feet on the workers.

The severity of the accident could be gauged from the fact that loading vehicles were completely mangled. A tractor on the site broke into pieces.

It is learnt that the deceased were mostly from Bihar and efforts were underway to inform their families.

A pall of gloom descended in the area due to the wails of the family members and friends of the victims and injured. (PTI)

Man dies after falling into manhole in Mumbai; four civic officials suspended

MUMBAI, July 2: A 55-year-old man died after falling into an open manhole in Mumbai amid heavy rains on Thursday, prompting the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) to suspend four civic officials and form a high-level probe committee, officials said.

The incident, which drew sharp reactions from various leaders over Mumbai's monsoon preparedness, occurred in the Chandivali area in the western suburbs, they said. It is the second rain-related death reported in the city this week.

Mayor Ritu Tawde, who visited the spot, has announced an ex gratia of Rs 10 lakh for the family of the deceased, the BMC said in a release, adding that the contractor has been blacklisted.

According to BMC officials, three contractual workers had removed the manhole cover to install a protective grill on a manhole on a sewer line along Khairani Road when the man, who was allegedly talking on his mobile phone, accidentally fell into the opening.

Fire brigade and civic disaster management teams conducted a search and operation and the man's body was recovered later, he said.

Footage from a CCTV camera installed in the area showed the



man, later identified as Aslam Ishaq Shaikh, walking past a tempo and suddenly disappearing. It also showed workers at the spot peering into the open manhole located in the Kurla-Sakinaka area.

Officials said the workers lowered a ladder into the manhole to search for him, but found only his umbrella and slippers. Due to the strong flow of water, it was initially not possible to determine the direction in which he had been swept, officials said, citing preliminary information.

The man was later located some distance from where he had fallen, they said. "A fireman equipped with breaching apparatus de-

sended into the underground line and the man was pulled out," an official said.

He was rushed to the civic-run Rajavadi Hospital, where doctors declared him dead, the BMC official said.

Four civic officials from the Lward have been suspended. They have been identified as Assistant Commissioner Dhanaji Herlekar, Assistant/Sub-Engineer (Maintenance) Deepak Chougule, Junior Engineer (Maintenance) Abhijit Chougule and Assistant Engineer (Sewerage Operations) Uttam Patil, the release said.

Prima facie, the contractor had failed to ensure adequate safety

CIC says NHAI not placing contract-related info in public domain

NEW DELHI, July 2: Underlining that the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) is not placing contract agreement-related information in the public domain, the CIC has advised the authority to proactively disclose highway contracts, safety plans and other key project documents to promote transparency and accountability.

Issuing an advisory under Section 25(5) of the RTI Act, Information Commissioner Jaya Varma Sinha said the "NHAI is not placing contract agreement-related information on their website in the public domain".

The Central Information Commission (CIC) observed that "contractual agreements and safety plans directly impact public safety, transparency, and accountability in infrastructure projects".

It noted that "withholding such information under the guise of exemptions is inconsistent with the spirit of the RTI Act".

According to the order, proactive disclosure would "enhance transparency in public procurement and execution of highway projects", "ensure accountability of contractors and NHAI in adhering to safety norms", and "empower citizens to monitor compliance with safety standards and contractual obligations".

The advisory came while disposing of a second appeal filed by an RTI applicant seeking certified copies of documents related to the construction of flyovers at Shivpuri Bypass Crossing and Medical College Crossing in Jhansi.

The applicant had sought copies of the contract agreement, correspondence exchanged during project execution, approved safety plans and related communications. The commission found that while the then CPIO had correctly provided the Letter of Award, the denial of copies of the contract agreement and approved safety plans under Section 8(1)(d) of the RTI Act was "evasive".

It held that the exemption had been "wrongly applied" and was "contrary to the provisions of the RTI Act, 2005", directing the CPIO to furnish the information.

The commission also reminded NHAI of its obligation under Section 4 of the RTI Act to proactively disclose information. (PTI)

measures at the site, the release said. The contractor has been blacklisted, it added.

Municipal Commissioner Ashwini Bhide has constituted a high-level inquiry committee headed by the Additional Municipal Commissioner (Western Suburbs) to probe into the manhole death and recommend measures to prevent such accidents in future. The panel has been asked to submit its report within seven days, the release said.

The civic body has directed all departments to ensure barricading around manhole work sites and ordered a 100 per cent inspection of all manholes across Mumbai within the next eight days.

The BMC said Shaikh was talking on his mobile phone when he approached the work site. Workers reportedly tried to alert him, but he lost his balance and fell into the manhole, it said.

Deputy Mayor Sanjay Ghadi said the civic body will file a case against the contractor, holding him responsible for "homicide". Kishori Pednekar, Shiv Sena (UBT) member and opposition leader in the BMC, said it was shocking that such an incident could occur on a busy arterial road while civic work was in progress. (PTI)

Strike by doctors at several govt hospitals enters 2nd day, health services affected

BHUBANESWAR, July 2: Doctors at various state-run hospitals in Odisha observed an indefinite strike for the second successive day on Thursday over 10-point demands, including transparency in the transfer policy and cadre restructuring, affecting services at the health facilities.

Around 8,000 doctors under the banner of the Odisha Medical Services Association launched the cease-work agitation at district headquarters hospitals and health facilities at sub-divisions and in rural areas on Wednesday, coinciding with National Doctors' Day.

However, doctors at the medical colleges are providing patient care services while wearing black badges, an OMSA official said.

The contractual doctors also continued their services in many health-care facilities, he said.

The major demands of the agitating doctors include cadre restructuring, KBK (Kalahandi-Balangir-Koraput) exit policy, transparency in transfer policy, insurance, incentives, and dynamic assured career progression (DACP) benefits in line with the central government health scheme (CGHS).

There is a three-year mandatory service agreement for doctors in the Kalahandi-Balangir-Koraput (KBK) area. However, the doctors' forum alleged that they are not transferred even after completion of the three years.

"As the government has ignored our genuine demands, including DACP at par with the CGHS, security and health insurance for doctors, we were forced to go on an indefinite strike," Odisha Medical Services Association president Kishore Chandra Mishra said.

If the government does not consider the demands, the protest will continue, and the authorities will be responsible for the disruption in the healthcare services, he said. (PTI)



LUCKNOW, July 2: Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath will inaugurate the three-day Uttar Pradesh Aam Mahotsav-2026 at the Indira Gandhi Pratishthan here on Friday when more than 800 varieties of mangoes are set to be displayed, the state government said.

The festival will be held from July 3 to 5 and will feature over 800 mango varieties across seven categories and 56 classes, Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Horticulture, Agricultural Marketing, Agricultural Foreign Trade and Agricultural Export Dinesh Pratap Singh said at a press conference.

A Mango Buyer-Seller Conference will also be organised for the first time at Jan Bhavan in Lucknow on July 4 to provide orchardists direct access to buyers and exporters, he said.

Representatives of horticulture departments, progressive orchardists and exporters from Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra will participate in the event along with those from Uttar Pradesh, Singh said.

He said mango saplings displayed at the festival would also be available for sale and appealed to visitors to plant at least one sapling.

The minister said a mango-eating competition for children, a contest featuring mango-based dishes and workshops on advanced cultivation technology, post-har-

vest management, pest and disease control, and marketing would be among the highlights of the festival.

Singh said Uttar Pradesh continues to be the country's largest mango-producing state, with cultivation spread over 3.27 lakh hectares and an annual production of around 61.96 lakh metric tonnes, accounting for nearly 26.22 per cent of India's total mango output.

He said popular varieties such as Dussehari, Langra, Chausa, Gaurjeet, Lucknow Safeda, Rataul and Amrapali are grown extensively in the Lucknow, Saharanpur, Meerut, Moradabad, Varanasi, Ayodhya and Prayagraj divisions.

Citing data from the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA), Singh said exports of mangoes and mango pulp from

Uttar Pradesh rose sharply to 3,563 metric tonnes worth ₹ 12.67 crore in 2025-26 from 404 metric tonnes worth ₹ 2.63 crore in the previous financial year.

According to the minister, mangoes from the state are exported to countries including the United Kingdom, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Singapore, Kuwait, New Zealand, Belgium, Japan, Italy, Qatar and Russia, and exports are expected to continue during the festival.

Singh said modern mango pack houses have been established in Lucknow, Saharanpur, Varanasi and Amroha for pre-processing and treatment of mangoes in line with international protocols. He added that a fruit testing and treatment centre being developed near Noida International Airport in Jewar is expected to further boost horticultural exports. (PTI)



'Maa Behen' team on flipping the femme fatal trope: Had fun exploring trio of dysfunctional women

(they feel) she has some bad intentions on everyone.. Even the audience feels at that point that something's wrong," Dixit said.

"But later on, of course, you come to know that it's the eye of the beholder, like they say. I loved the fact that it was done in a fun way and not in a realistic way. And then you get to know that she's just a woman trying to survive."

Triveni, known for women-led dramas like "Tumhari Sulu", "Jalsa" and the series "Daldal", credited Tolani for creating the distinct world of "Maa Behen".

"I have this greed that we have such great stories and actors who are hungry whether it is Shafeli (Shah), Vidya (Balan), Madhuri ma'am, Bhumi (Pednekar) or Triptii (Dimri) The idea was to make an engaging film, entertaining film, that keeps you guessing. By saying that you are making a women-centric film, we are limiting. But, I want to work with more fantastic actors and I am proud that most of them are women," he said.

Asked about the way she projects female rage in the movie through these three women, Tolani said, "We all carry so much anger within and it is bound to boil up. I cannot just beat up people, so I use my pen to tell stories like this," she added.

Ravi Kishan, who has been on a roll with the success of "Laapata Ladies" and "Mama Legal Hai", said his character of Aadarsh Gupta is a shady but respected personality in the society. And it was very important for him to reflect the duality of that face, he added.

"In fact, women are just loving Gupta ji's character. I thought they should not like me, but they're just loving it because they are not looking at this character individually, they're not looking at me, they're looking at the society, like how he wants the house and how he has an eye on these people. And they are coming up with their own stories of how they suffered," Kishan said.

Dixit said she enjoyed the rhythm of the language used in "Maa Behen", which has a distinct flavour of the Purvanchal region.

"Even if you fight in that language, it appears sweet to the ears. It doesn't sound harsh because of the language and its rhythm... Language itself was one of the characters in this movie. But Suresh said a very good thing. He said, 'Don't get entangled in this', but as long as you keep the lyrical rhythm of the language, we are fine," she added.

The actor said she is enjoying this phase where she gets to play different characters, be it "The Fame Game", "Maja Ma", "Mrs Deshpande" or "Maa Behen".

"Directors and writers write according to their own standards. And create these real life, relatable characters for the screen. And I think it's wonderful for actors like me, who are always hungry to do something new, something great, and something that says something."

"When I did 'Mrs. Deshpande', it was a very austere kind of a film. It was a film with a lot of patience. But in this, I could go wild, go crazy. And the characters were also a little crazy who live life on their own terms. I just gave myself to this role because it was written so beautifully and directed amazingly," Dixit said, praising streamers like Netflix for driving the change. (PTI)

KEEP ME AWAY FROM ALL THIS, I'M AN ARTIST: DILJIT ON CJP PROTESTS AT JANTAR MANTAR

Punjabi superstar Diljit Dosanjh has distanced himself from the ongoing protest by the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) at Jantar Mantar here, saying he is an artiste, not a politician.

The "Main Vaapas Aaunga" actor on Wednesday evening held a Instagram live session where he answered the many queries of his fans.

Asked whether he would join the CJP's protest over the alleged irregularities in exams and the NEET paper-leak controversy, Diljit said "Keep me away from all this... Bro, I'm an artist. I'm no politician, I don't know what you think I am."

He then quoted a popular phrase from the Guru Granth Sahib -- "Nanak dukhiya sab sansar, so sukhiya jis naam aadhaara", which means everyone in the world is dealing with sadness, only those who rely on God are happy.

"Look, everything can never be right. Everything in this world can never be right... So, those who are protesting, congratulations to them, and for whom the protest is happening, congratulations to them also, as I don't know anything," he added.

In 2020, Diljit made headlines after he came out in support of farmers' protest against the contentious farm bills, which were later repealed by the central government. In May this year, the actor had ruled out a foray into politics after a civil society group had publicly appealed him to enter the political arena.

"My job is to entertain people. I'm very happy in my field. Thank you so much," he had posted on X.

The CJP, which started as a digital satirical outfit, has been protesting at Jantar Mantar since June 20. They have demanded the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over the NEET paper-leak controversy. The outfit's founder, Abhijeet Dipke, has said the agitation would not remain limited to education-related issues and that other accountability issues, including electoral matters such as Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, would also be raised. (PTI)



What happens when three dysfunctional women try to cover up a crime and while doing so come to understand each other better? That was the idea that the writer-director duo of Pooja Tolani and Suresh Triveni wanted to explore in "Maa Behen".

The black comedy, starring Madhuri Dixit, Triptii Dimri and Dharna Durga, has been a constant in Netflix's list of top 10 titles after it premiered on the platform last month.

Set in a fictional, middle-class housing society called Adarsh Colony, the movie follows Rekha, a single mother, and her two estranged daughters, Jaya and Sushma, whose lives spiral into chaos after they discover a dead body in Rekha's kitchen. Tolani said she enjoyed writing about the eccentric trio of women and exploring how a small town is both unsettled by and deeply invested in their household.

"We started with this idea that it would be a comic film about a crime that these dysfunctional three women, who were crazy and unhinged, are trying to cover up. And somewhere along the way, they will come together and how they come together is by joining a sisterhood of sorts. So, I think as we developed the material, it started to kind of become evident that we need to first have fun with how people look at them and then flip the narrative," Tolani told PTI in an interview.

Dixit said she had a lot of fun playing the titular "Maa" in the story, who is unlike the way mothers are represented in Indian cinema. Rekha loves her sleeveless blouses, colourful saris and a rose in hair and gets more male attention than her two daughters. Then when the perspective changes, her character also changes.

"I think these are two different personalities. One is what people are seeing through the eyes and what she actually is. How people perceive her is this woman who is always flirting around... She wears a sleeveless blouse. So,

ADARSH GOURAV SAYS HE EMBRACES ANONYMITY: 'NOT BEING RECOGNISED IS ACTUALLY NORMAL'



Actor Adarsh Gourav says he feels happy that he is not a recognisable face in public despite a filmography of many critical hits and finds the anonymity quite normal.

Gourav has stepped into documentary storytelling with "Voices of the Land", a new series that explores the rich cultural heritage of India's northeastern region.

And it was a place where people didn't recognise the actor, who has proved his versatility as an artiste with varied performances in movies such as "The White Tiger", "Mom", "Kho Gaye Hum Kahan", "Superboys of Malegaon" and series "Guns & Gulaab". "They were told that I was an actor, and I'm sure some of them Googled me later. They were like, 'Okay, he's done this film and that film,'" Gourav told PTI in an interview.

Asked if the anonymity was refreshing for him, the actor said, "I find that anonymity every day. I'm not that recognisable. The kind

of films that I've done have largely been niche films. They aren't huge commercial films that release on 5,000 screens across the country."

He said it is difficult for actors, who are either stars or rising stars, to remain anonymous in public.

"For me, not being recognised is actually normal. So not being recognised in the Northeast felt like normal life. The day everybody starts recognising me—that's when things will start feeling abnormal," he said.

"Voices of the Land" will see Gourav journey across the Northeast as he connects with indigenous communities through their music, folklore, rituals, oral histories, and everyday lives.

Gourav said he has a "very low threshold for cities" and the docuseries offered him a chance to distance himself from the hustle and bustle of urban life.

"I just wanted to get out of the rut of the city and get away from anything related to

urban life. I start feeling saturated very quickly. If I don't run away to a place that has a lot of nature every few weeks, I start feeling burnt out," he said.

Another reason for doing the show was to experience a kind of tribal lifestyle that people have only read about in books and interact with people who are still "so protected from the way city people think".

"The way we function on a day-to-day basis is so completely out of sync with what people were originally like when they lived in forests and jungles. I really resonate with that because I grew up around a lot of nature when I was young in Jamshedpur."

"For me, this was about reconnecting with myself, reliving a childhood fantasy, and then, of course, getting to know different tribes, their history, their culture and everything connected with their way of life. Actually living with them, asking them questions and simply observing them—it was such a wholesome experience."

The 31-year-old actor said he grew up watching travel content and always had a fantasy to be a part of a travel show.

"I even remember writing to Nat Geo when I was in college because I wanted to intern with them. So it's been something that I've always wanted to do. I guess life just presented that opportunity to me in the form of this show. It was such a brilliant chance to explore a relatively unexplored side of India."

Gourav said he had visited the Northeast twice before, but working on the project allowed him to experience the region in an entirely different way.

"I was in Assam in 2020 volunteering with the Wildlife Trust of India. I was actually working with rhinos and their rehabilitation. Then, in 2024, I travelled there with my partner, and I absolutely fell in love with Meghalaya. (PTI)

'Dhurandhar 2', 'Border 2' and 'Main Vaapas Aaunga' among first-half 2026 success stories

"Dhurandhar The Revenge", "Border 2" and then "Main Vaapas Aaunga". From one end of border politics angst to the other, the first six months of 2026 have shown that audiences are drawn to spectacle and high octane nationalism but also to quieter storytelling.

More than two dozen films released in theatres in the first half of the year. But three stood out -- "Dhurandhar: The Revenge", the second instalment in Aditya Dhar's espionage saga, grossed over Rs 1,800 crore worldwide, "Border 2" came up second with Rs 450 crore and then there was "Bhooth Bangla" which earned Rs 270 crore.

Apart from them, only Shahid Kapoor-led "O'Romeo" and "Cocktail 2" crossed the Rs 100 crore milestone.

In June came Intiaz Ali's partition saga "Main Vaapas Aaunga", so different in tonality from "Dhurandhar: The Revenge", which lived up to the massive expectations generated by the first film in December 2025, and "Border 2", a sequel to the 1997 hit "Border". Pakistan is the leitmotif in all films but the stories and the treatment differ widely. "We've got three legitimate super hits: 'Dhurandhar 2', 'Border 2', and 'Bhooth Bangla'... The numbers we see are Rs 3,000 crore but these numbers have come from three to four films and it could have been six to eight films. So, we've fewer successful films but we've satisfactory box-office numbers," trade analyst Girish Wankhede told PTI.

He said the period was "satisfactory but not extraordinary" with the silver lining being that successful films did bigger business.

Several highly anticipated titles, including Sri-ram Raghavan's "Ikkis", Varun Dhawan's "Hai

Jawan Toh Ishq Hona Hai", Ayushmann Khurrana's "Pati Patni Aur Woh Do", Karan Johar's production "Chand Mera Dil", underperformed, according to Wankhede.

"These highly anticipated films were expected to perform well, but they didn't," he said. Kamal Gianchandani, chief business planning & strategy, PVR INOX Limited, added that films, big and small, with "big heart" got garnered love from people.

He gave the example of "Main Vaapas Aaunga", which opened to positive reviews on June 12 but had a slow start at the box office.

However, strong word of mouth helped it gather momentum in its second week, prompting exhibitors and distributors to increase the number of shows across the country.

"Content is the king and the response to 'Main Vaapas Aaunga' is an example of that... If it is just scale and no content, then maybe people will come for the first weekend but the excitement will reduce after that," Gianchandani told PTI.

"If the film has content and scale, that's the ultimate thing. A movie like 'Dhurandhar' opened big and it kept getting bigger. But even if the content is there and the scale is small, even then people turn up in theatres because people want to be entertained, they want to cut off from their day-to-day life," he said.

According to Gianchandani, the first six months of 2026 saw a 10 to 12 per cent rise in admissions and a 16 to 17 per cent increase in overall box office collection compared to the same period last year.

Bihar-based exhibitor and distributor Vishek Chauhan said the overall trend indicates strong audience intent, provided the content resonates

with them. "The first six months have been pretty decent... So the good thing is that audiences are coming out in huge numbers, people are clearly giving us



signals that they want to watch movies in theatres. If you give them the content, they are in the mood to enjoy right now," Chauhan told PTI.

He also noted that the theatrical momentum was impacted by the temporary slowdown during the IPL season and election period. The conflict in West Asia also led to postponement of many films, he added.

"We had a slightly dull period between April and May because of the IPL and the elections which were being held across the country. Also, filmmakers cancelled the release of films like,

'Toxic' and Salman Khan's 'Maatrubhumi', which disrupted the calendar for the whole release schedule," Chauhan noted.

South Indian movies reflected a similar pattern of a few big successes amid a high volume of underperformers, with nearly 70 per cent of releases failing to make an impact, according to Chennai-based trade analyst Ramesh Bala.

Telugu movies such as Chiranjeevi's "Mana Shankara Vara Prasad Garu" and Ram Charan's "Peddi" both amassed over Rs 300 crores at the box office. In Tamil cinema, "Karuppu" starring Suriya garnered over Rs 300 crore.

In Malayalam, the coming-of-age comedy "Vaazha 2" and Mohanlal's "Drishyam 3" did business of over Rs. 240 crore, he said.

"Usually, in the first six months about 100 films would've been released here, out of which two or three would be blockbusters, five to six would be hit films and the rest would perform average or below average. But films that have not succeeded would be close to 70 per cent across all four south languages.

"Also, 'Maa Inti Bangaaram' in Telugu and 'Blast', a female action movie in Tamil, have done well," Bala told PTI.

Ruban Mathivanan, managing director at GK Cinemas in Chennai, said it was a "mixed" period for theatre owners in the South with quite a few

big-ticket releases failing to lure audiences in large numbers. "Pongal releases like Sivakarthekeyan's 'Parasakthi', Karthi's 'Vaa Vaathiyaar' performed. 'Peddi' underperformed. Rather than doing Pan-India subjects, they should do rooted films that become big hits. For instance, Ram Charan's 'Rangasthalam' was a properly rooted Telugu commercial film and it was a blockbuster.

"If you notice, all Telugu heroes give one big hit and then want to go to Pan-India. Even if Prabhas does one proper Telugu film without worrying about pan-India (trappings), he can get a big opening at the box office," Mathivanan told PTI.

Looking ahead, industry experts remain optimistic about the second half of 2026, with a strong release slate like YRF's "Alpha", Ajay Devgn's "Dhamaal 4", Salman Khan's "Maatrubhumi", Nitesh Tiwari-directed "Ramayana", Shah Rukh Khan's "King".

They are also betting big and Hollywood movies like Christopher Nolan's "The Odyssey" and Tom Holland-starrer "Spider-Man: Brand New Day" as well as next Marvel tentpole "Avengers: Doomsday".

"The line-up is pretty exciting. The audiences are willing to come when the product is coming. So, the onus really lies upon the production and the creative side to make engaging enough products for the audiences to come and watch them in a theatre close by," Chauhan said.

In 2025, the first half was dominated by the success of Vicky Kaushal-led historical drama "Chhava" that earned over Rs 600 crore. The overall collection during this period hovered around Rs 1,900 crore during the same period last year. (PTI)

Serena Williams wins praise from fellow pros at Wimbledon after 1st singles match in nearly 4 years

LONDON, July 2: There were still serves beyond 120 mph. Plenty of heavy groundstrokes landing within inches of the baseline, too.

Serena Williams won plenty of praise about her game from her fellow players at Wimbledon a day after her first singles match in nearly four years.

The 44-year-old Williams was beaten 6-3, 6-7 (6), 6-3 by 20-year-old Maya Joint of Australia in the first round on Tuesday but showed she could be competitive after being away for so long.

Coco Gauff ended her dinner early to find somewhere to watch Williams.

"I think Serena's level was insane," Gauff said Wednesday. "It proves even more how she's the GOAT despite age and all that. I don't know how she can play that level not playing for four years. I was already nervous not playing two weeks before this tournament. I couldn't imagine four years."

"I just love her. I love her fight. And the serve is unbelievable," Gauff added after her second-round win. "You just look at her and you think, 'This is like 10 years ago.' It's really insane. I think it was cool for the sport."

The 87th-ranked Joint was in the top 30 earlier this year.

"Maya played top-10, top-5 tennis. Obviously she's a great player," Gauff said. "She seems like an even, chill girl. I do think if anyone was ready for the moment, it would be her."

Williams announced on Wednesday that she tweaked her right knee toward the end of the first set but said she still hopes to play doubles with sister Venus later in the week.

Serena, a 23-time Grand Slam singles champion who won seven of her titles at Wimbledon, did not ask for medical treatment during the match and did not meet with media afterward.

"Serena tweaked her right knee at the end of the first set and was therefore excused from her



media obligations by the Wimbledon and WTA medical teams," said Jill Smoller, Williams' agent. "She left site that night unaided and is doing everything she can to be ready for her doubles match later this week."

Williams confirmed the injury on Instagram and added, "It felt so good to be back on the grass (at) Wimbledon. I'm incredibly thankful for the

wild card — and even more grateful my daughters got to see that it's never too late to chase something you love.

"Congratulations to Maya Joint on a great match, and thank you to everyone who showed up and showed me so much love. That feeling will never get old," Williams added.

Serena received wild card invitations from Wimbledon organizers to play both singles and doubles with Venus.

Serena has said that having her two daughters off from school inspired her comeback and it marked the first time that her youngest daughter, Adira, who is almost 3, saw her play singles. Adira sat next to her 8-year-old sister, Olympia in the front row of Serena's players' box.

Alexis Ohanian, Williams' husband, wrote on social media: "Our little family is so proud of you (at)serenawilliams — even though it wasn't the outcome you wanted, you're an inspiration. We love you!" He added that the kids "are also happy

they got to stay up a bit past their bedtime."

Four-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka also paid tribute on social media: "I really wonder if Serena and Venus know how much they mean to us," Osaka posted.

Then after winning her second-round match, Osaka discussed watching Serena play.

"The montages that they had before the match started made me really emotional because I feel like I've watched her growing up," Osaka said. "Now I feel like I'm grown up and I get the privilege of watching her again. So it was really cool."

Fellow American Tommy Paul watched, too.

"It's pretty impressive at her age," Paul said. "She was striking the ball pretty well, returning pretty well. I thought she was going to go after it a little bit more. ... I think it would have helped her a lot to have maybe a match of singles before coming out to Wimbledon. But she's Serena. She can do whatever she wants." (AP)

Srikanth retires; Aakarshi, Tanya enter 2nd round in Canada Open

MARKHAM (CANADA), July 2: Kidambi Srikanth retired early from his opening match due to fitness issues even as Tanya Hemnath and Aakarshi Kashyap emerged as the only Indian shuttlers to progress to the women's singles second round at the Canada Open Super 300 event badminton tournament here.

The 33-year-old Srikanth, who registered a runner-up finish at the US Open Super 300 last Sunday, was lagging 10-11 against Paris Olympic bronze medalist Lee Zii Jia of Malaysia in the men's singles opening round when he decided to throw in the towel after consulting with coach B Sai Praneeth.

Aakarshi saw off Anna Tatrano of France 21-14, 21-12 to set up a meeting with fourth seed Beiweng Zhang of the USA, while Tanya prevailed 21-16 21-18 over USA's Disha Gupta in another match. She will face Japan's Riko Gunji next.

It was otherwise a dismal show for India as seven out of nine shut-



tlers failed to cross the opening hurdle on Wednesday.

Fifth seed Devika Sihag, who claimed her maiden BWF World Tour Super 300 title at the Thai-

land Masters in Bangkok earlier this year, lost 14-21 15-21 to Chinese Taipei's Tung Ciou-Tong in the opening round.

Rakshitha Ramraj, winner of

this year's Vietnam International Challenge, went down fighting 15-21, 21-14, 21-15 against Canada's Rachel Chan, while Shriyanshi Valishetty, who won her maiden BWF Super 100 title at the AI Ain Masters in Abu Dhabi earlier this year, lost 9-21 18-21 against Chinese Taipei's Huang Ching Pi.

Anmol Kharr played out of her skin before going down 6-21, 26-24, 13-21 against home favourite and top seed Michelle Li.

In men's singles, Saneeth Dayanand and Sankar Subramanian, also fell by the wayside in the opening round.

While Saneeth, a silver medalist at the Saint Denis Reunion Open, lost 7-21 11-21 against third seed Yudai Okimoto of Japan, Sankar's fight ended with a 21-19, 15-21, 15-21 loss to Korea's Yoo Tae-bin.

Achutaditya Rao Doddavarapu and Arjun Reddy Pochana, the only Indian men's doubles pair competing in Canada, also bowed out early in the tournament. (PTI)

No Olympic team status to Greenland and Faroe Islands

LAUSANNE (SWITZERLAND), July 2: Greenland and the Faroe Islands will not be recognized as separate and independent Olympic teams despite a request from Denmark's parliament, the IOC said Wednesday. The Olympic Charter has for 30 years defined a country that can have an official team as "an independent state recognized by the international community."

Greenland and the Faroe Islands — which are semi-autonomous territories in the kingdom of Denmark — do not meet that standard, the International Olympic Committee said in a statement.

"This position has been explained and communicated very clearly to the concerned parties on numerous occasions over the past years," the IOC said.

The formal request by the Danish parliament was made two weeks ago and published Tuesday.

It came weeks after Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen formed a new coalition government. In the election campaign, she pledged support for Greenland against U.S. President Donald Trump's wish to acquire the island. (AP)

Algeria coach to go up against his former team Switzerland in WC knockout round



NEW YORK, July 2: Swiss forward Breel Embolo credits Algeria coach Vladimir Petkovic with raising up Switzerland's national team during his seven years at the helm.

Embolo and the Swiss will play against Algeria and their former coach on Thursday in Vancouver, British Columbia, when the two teams meet in the round of 32 at the World Cup.

Petkovic coached Switzerland from July 2014 to 2021. He led the team to the round of 16 at the 2018 World Cup in Russia, then took Switzerland to the quarterfinals of the European Championships for the first time in 2020.

Embolo, who earned his first senior national team call-up in 2015, was named to the 2018 World Cup squad by Petkovic.

"Yeah, he's a coach that knows me very well," Embolo said "I'm not the only one. I think he knows a lot of players. But personally speaking, no, nothing's going to change on my front. I'm going to play the football I'm used to playing, taking into consideration not only the qualities of the Algerian squad, but also their weak spots. We're going to work together as a group, and we're going to try and get in there 100% because we believe that if we play to our strengths, we've got what it takes to get through to the next round."

"And then obviously I'll go and say hi to him after the match." The feeling was mutual.

"The world of football has become universal. Everyone knows each other. There are no real secrets left in the game," Petkovic said. "I don't think it's a huge advantage to know someone or someone else, just as I know the players, the players know me, and it's a huge pleasure to come up against them. It'll be lovely to meet and greet them, but after that, the players will go out there on the pitch, and I'm certainly expecting a tough game, and in order to win a match we need to

give 120% against a very decent Swiss inside." Algeria, back at the World Cup for the first time since 2014, was looking for a first knockout round victory. At the Brazil World Cup, Algeria advanced out of the group stage, but fell in the first match against eventual champions Germany.

Switzerland reached the round of 16 at the past three World Cups, but with a smaller field of 32 teams. This year's tournament featured 48 teams.

Algeria is coming off a thrilling 3-3 draw with Austria on Saturday in Kansas City. Algeria took the lead in stoppage time only for Austria to answer on the final play of the game for the final margin. The result sent both teams through to the knockout round and eliminated Iran.

The Swiss got goals from Rubén Vargas and Johan Mambo to beat Canada 2-1 in Vancouver last Wednesday and win Group B. The Canadians had been hoping for a win or a draw so they would play their round-of-32 match on home soil.

Instead, Switzerland got the return trip to Vancouver. The team got a week off, during which time they returned to their training base in San Diego. Even Switzerland coach Murat Yakin has a connection to his 62-year-old Bosnian counterpart, serving as an intern under him with the Swiss club Young Boys years ago. Petkovic was hired as Algeria's coach in February 2024 following a stint with French club Bordeaux.

"I really appreciate the way he works, the way he treats the players, and also the way he lets the players play," Yakin said. "The players know him, he knows most of the players. It can be an advantage and a disadvantage, but five years have passed since, and our style of football has changed and evolved. He helped the team to qualify for many tournaments, so thanks to him, and I'm very happy to see him tomorrow." (AP)

Moriyasu expected to stay on after World Cup exit

TOKYO, July 2: Hajime Moriyasu was expected to confirm on Thursday he was staying as head coach of the Japan men's soccer team, but instead he said he needed time to relax and review the World Cup results before deciding his future.

"I think I'll take a bit of a break now and then I'll need to properly reflect on the tournament," Moriyasu told a press conference, with Japan Football Association officials also attending. "That's all that's been decided so far."

He was upbeat, though, about the future of the sport in the country.

"Japanese soccer, built up over history, is more than capable of holding its own on the world stage," Moriyasu said. "I am convinced that if we continue this growth we will certainly be able to become world champions."

Moriyasu guided his team to the round of 32 at the World Cup before falling 2-1 this week to five-time champion Brazil.

Japan has consistently progressed in the last two decades but has yet to win a match in the knockout stages at the World Cup.

Moriyasu took over after the 2018 World Cup in Russia. He guided Japan to the knockout stage in the 2022 edition in Qatar, losing to Croatia on penalties. Japan FA president Tsuneyasu Miyamoto also told the news conference that the association needed time for a brief. He had suggested earlier to local media that the JFA wanted Moriyasu to stay on.

Some reports suggest he will get a one-year extension for the Asian Cup in Saudi Arabia early in 2027. Qatar is the defending champion and Japan will be among the favorites to win the continent's top soccer prize. (AP)

Lamine Yamal healthy enough to play full matches for Spain in knockout rounds, De La Fuente says

INGLEWOOD (US), July 2: Lamine Yamal is now healthy enough to play a full World Cup match for Spain if needed, coach Luis De La Fuente said Wednesday.

The 18-year-old Barcelona winger scored just one goal while playing only 141 minutes across Spain's three group matches, making him arguably the only world superstar who hasn't excelled in this star-dominated World Cup. Yamal's minutes have been limited by Spain to optimize his recovery from his hamstring tear on April 22.

When De La Fuente spoke to reporters at SoFi Stadium before the start of knockout play, he indicated that Yamal's recovery is all but complete as La Roja prepares to face Austria in a round of 32 match on Thursday.

"Lamine can play whatever we ask him to play," De La Fuente said through an interpreter. "We've been quite prudent with him, as we do in managing the recovery of all our players, respecting their timelines and also following the evolution of the matches. Lamine is doing very well now and, above all, you can all see how much he wants to play."

De La Fuente then grinned and added: "So we'll see if he plays tomorrow."

Yamal had 24 goals and 17 assists across all competitions for Barca despite missing the final six matches of the La Liga season with his hamstring injury. After coming on



as a late substitute in Spain's surprising scoreless draw with Cape Verde to open this tournament, Yamal scored his first World Cup goal 10 minutes into his first start against Saudi Arabia, and he followed up by playing 76 minutes against Uruguay.

Yamal has made it clear he is eager to demonstrate his talent alongside the other top players who are all enjoying spectacular World Cups, from Lionel Messi and Kylian Mbappé to Harry Kane, Erling Haaland and Vinícius Júnior.

Spain had more good injury news Wednesday heading into its opportunity to

win its first knockout-round match at the World Cup since 2010, when it won the title.

Yerémy Pino has made a "miraculous" recovery after apparently spraining his left shoulder in Spain's win over Uruguay, De La Fuente said. The Crystal Palace winger is available against Austria.

Winger Victor Muñoz also is available after the Liverpool signee missed the group stage with an unspecified muscular injury.

"Victor is in good shape, but he has not competed for a long time," De La Fuente said. "Depending on the match, we will see if I can include him or not."

Nico Williams is not expected to play against Austria, but De La Fuente said the Athletic Bilbao winger's groin injury has improved enough that he could be available if Spain reaches the round of 16.

Spain lost its first knockout match in each of the past two World Cups, and it failed to even get out of group play in 2014. But the current group has ample reason to believe a new era is starting in this tournament — if it can keep its best players on the field.

De La Fuente has led Spain to 2024 in the 2023 Nations League and the 2024 European Championships while losing only two of La Roja's 45 total matches in his tenure.

Spain has yet to allow a goal in this World Cup, posting three consecutive clean sheets. (AP)

Knight Riders Cricket Ground makes MLC debut ahead of LA Olympics

LOS ANGELES, July 2: The Knight Riders Cricket Ground in Pomona, the venue slated to host cricket at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, hosted its first-ever competitive match when Los Angeles Knight Riders took on Washington Freedom in Major League Cricket.

Washington Freedom spoiled the hosts' home debut with a six-wicket victory in the 16th match of the tournament on Wednesday.

The newly-built venue, developed by the Knight Riders Group, is the first dedicated home ground for the Los Angeles Knight Riders franchise and one of the few purpose-built cricket stadiums in the United States.

The International Cricket Council posted on X: "The Knight Riders Cricket Ground hosts the first home game of the Los Angeles Knight Riders in the Major League Cricket. All the best to both teams and watch out for the scenic backdrop. Isn't she a beauty?"

Built to international standards, the venue features eight wickets on the main square, ICC-standard playing dimensions and six floodlight towers standing 120 feet tall.

Knight Riders Group co-owner Shah Rukh Khan described the opening of the venue as a landmark moment.

"What started as a dream has become a reality today. Bringing cricket, the second most-watched sport in the world, to Los Angeles is a landmark moment for all of us," he stated in a release.

"Through this long-term partnership between Fairplex and Knight Riders, we are creating much more than a cricket venue. We are building a space that celebrates community, togetherness, energy and entertainment." (PTI)

T20s here to stay, not so sure about ODIs: R Ashwin

'It'd be good to have England have more of a presence in the league. Hopefully, once it's established, obviously, it's starting in about eight weeks' time, everybody will see how great this competition is going to be, the quality, the players, the standard'

NEW DELHI, July 2: European T20 Premier League (ETPL) is a necessary addition in the existing assortment of franchise-based tournaments as the format is here to stay unlike ODIs, said Indian spin bowling legend Ravichandran Ashwin on Thursday.

Ashwin will captain the Dublin Guardians franchise in the ETPL.

India's second highest wicket-taker in Test cricket said that with cricket returning to the Olympics in 2028, ETPL will act as a catalyst in making the sport global.

"Look, I think there's an Olympics that's going to happen in a couple of years. And if cricket as a game is pretty serious about making it a global affair, the teams in this league will play a very crucial part in enabling that," said Ashwin in his response to a PTI query.

Ashwin feels the only way to globalise the game is via the T20 format.

"Our job will be purely on T20 cricket and how it can get better. And if the game has to become global and it has to become an Olympic sport, the shorter the game, the more viable it is."

"And that's how it's going to become much bigger. And you will see a better sample size of players, which is also very critical for several of these leagues which run



through the year. T20 as a sport is here to stay. I'm not too sure about ODI cricket," said Ashwin.

Ashwin is also excited about the prospect of his franchise and the league contributing to the growth of cricket in Ireland.

"So, as far as I'm concerned, this is a really, really exciting prospect where we not

only believe that we can pick a team and do well in this tournament and also make it a really good place for these players to come in and get better and also have a lasting impact on the tournament," Ashwin said.

"We owe it to the Dublin franchise and also Irish cricket in many ways, try and enable them, try and probably provide them with the right amount of exposure and opportunities," said the legendary off-spinner.

For Ashwin, the league is more about the Scottish, the Irish and the Dutch players getting to showcase their talent in a high quality environment.

"We want to make it about them. And that's something that we were very clear the first day Rahul (Dravid as team owner) and I spoke about it."

"And we will stay very true to that particular formula. And we will put up a culture where cricket is played in a fashion that everyone wants to grow at least by one person every single day."

Ashwin also spoke about how adaptation is key to any sport and how conditions can even out contests as one saw in the recent series where India lost 0-2 to Ireland.

"You should be able to adapt. The name of the game is adaptation, which is why what happened recently between India and Ireland

in that T20 series is a classic example of how conditions can eliminate a lot of aspects of the game that have been developed as a root cause of T20 as a sport."

Would love to see England players in ETPL: Waugh

For Amsterdam Flames co-owner Steve Waugh, while the aim is to develop the untapped talent in the European region, he did admit that getting the current England T20 stars to take part in ETPL during coming years will provide a big boost to the tournament.

"Well, it wasn't my choice for that (top English players not being part). And yeah, it'd be nice to have English players there, perhaps sometime in the future," said Waugh.

"But we're looking at developing players in Europe that haven't had the big opportunities in the past. They really haven't been able to showcase their skills. And this is what this tournament's about."

"It'd be good to have England have more of a presence in the league. Hopefully, once it's established, obviously, it's starting in about eight weeks' time, everybody will see how great this competition is going to be, the quality, the players, the standard." Waugh signed off. (PTI)

Balogun gets US's go-ahead goal against Bosnia and then red card

SANTA CLARA (US), July 2: Folarin Balogun's night in the World Cup's round of 32 was a roller coaster of emotions.

It began with his third goal of the tournament to put the United States in the lead against Bosnia-Herzegovina and ended prematurely when he was given a red card early in the second half that will force him to miss the next game.

"It's so unfortunate honestly," teammate Christian Pulisic said following Wednesday's 2-0 win. "It just seems so harsh for us to get that. He's done so much for us, and now we got his back. If he has to miss the next game, it's just ridiculous for something like that."

Balogun celebrated a goal with the NBA's LeBron James — twice — but the first time he put the ball in the net the goal was disallowed for offside.

He received a red card from Brazilian referee Raphael Claus for stepping on Tarik Muharemovic's right ankle. Claus didn't initially signal a card but showed Balogun red after a video review.

"It never was intentional," U.S. coach Mauricio Pochettino said. "It's never a red card. Never. ... If the intention is to damage the opponent, OK, I understand. But that never was. It was a normal action in football that you are fighting for the ball and your feet land."



Balogun became the third player to score and be sent off in a World Cup knockout game after Brazil's Ronaldinho in a 2002 quarterfinal against England and France's Zinedine Zidane in the 2006 final against Italy.

"Pretty cool record, huh," teammate Chris Richards said.

Balogun has to serve an automatic one-game suspension for Monday's round of 16 game against Belgium. There is no appeal process for a red card suspension unless FIFA assesses a penalty of more than one game.

Teammate Weston McKennie called the lack of an appeal process "bogus" and disagreed with the

call made after the video review.

"Obviously the ref made a decision that he made, but I think it's questionable," McKennie said. "I think there's been many other players like that throughout the tournament on other players that a card wasn't given at all. It's disappointing."

Balogun was consoled on the field by Pulisic and Bosnian defender Sead Kolasinac following the decision and did come back out to celebrate with his teammates after the game. He even shook hands with the officials despite the call that went against him.

Now the U.S. likely will turn to Ricardo Pepi or Haji Wright for the

game against Belgium.

"It's a tough decision to make," Wright said about the call. "In the heat of the moment I think the stills (photos) look worse than it did live. But I'm always ready and prepared to do my best for the team."

After Balogun's goal was disallowed for offside in the 31st minute, he put the U.S. ahead in the 45th minute as Malik Tillman's pass was deflected into his path by Bosnia's Stjepan Radeljic with a sliding clearance attempt.

The ball deflected off a foot of Muharemovic and bounced in front of Balogun, who with his left foot sent the ball between goalkeeper Nikola Vasilj and the far post for his third goal of the tournament and his 12th international goal.

James, a 41-year-old who is the NBA's career scoring leader, designed the celebration to quiet a hostile opposing crowd. For his part, James also celebrated on social media.

Balogun matched Landon Donovan in 2010 for the second-most goals by an American in a World Cup, behind only Bert Patenaude's four in the initial tournament in 1930.

Balogun received the Americans' fifth World Cup red card after Eric Wynalda against Czechoslovakia in 1990, Fernando Clavijo against Brazil in 1994, and Pablo Mastroeni and Eddie Pope against Italy in 2006. (AP)

Belgium beats Senegal 3-2 in extra time at World Cup

SEATTLE, July 2: Belgium overturned a two-goal deficit and scored from the penalty spot deep into extra time to beat Senegal 3-2 on Wednesday in the biggest comeback of the World Cup so far.

Senegal held a 2-0 lead with just 5 minutes of regulation time remaining but late goals by Romelu Lukaku and Youri Tielemans pushed the round of 32 match into extra time.

Tielemans completed Belgium's comeback by converting a penalty in the 125th minute of the game — the latest goal in World Cup history.

"Being part of this comeback is a proud moment because I scored the last two goals to give the team the win today. I'm very proud of that to be able to help the team to score goals and bring us over the line," Tielemans said.

He was fouled with only seconds to go and with a penalty shootout looming, and the referee awarded the spot kick after a video review, ignoring protests from the Senegal team.

"I do not want to interpret the decision. We all have different interpretations when it comes to awarding a penalty," Senegal coach Pape Thiaw said. "I'd rather not comment, not interpreting the referee's decision."

The win for Belgium marked the second time in the last 11 World Cups that a team trailed by two or more goals in the knockout round and advanced. Belgium also did so in a 3-2 victory over Japan in the round of 16 at the 2018 tournament.

"Senegal deserved to win," Belgium coach Rudi Garcia said. "But, I am happy it was us."

Many of the key players from the Belgium team that finished in third place in Russia in 2018 were instrumental to Wednesday's victory. Lukaku, who leads his nation in goals scored, came off the bench to get Belgium back into the match by scoring in the 86th minute,

setting the scene for Tielemans to force extra time.

"It is a cruel loss, as we were good in the game," Thiaw said. "We had the advantage. We were leading 2-0. However a football match is not an 85-minute one. Belgium came back, and we were not able to deal with that ... We must congratulate Belgium as they progress."

Belgium is back in the round of 16 for the third time in four tournaments. The team reached the quarterfinals in 2014 and the semifinals in 2018 but failed to get out of the group stage four years ago in Qatar.

The Belgians will next face the United States on Monday in Seattle.

Senegal long appeared to be heading toward the round of 16. Habib Diarra scored in the first half and Ismaila Sarr made it 2-0 at the start of the second. It was his fourth goal of the

World Cup, and one of the most beautiful of the tournament. Sarr made a perfect first touch off his chest on a long ball from Moussa Niakhaté and then sent his shot past Belgium goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois.

Courtois, who was playing in his fourth World Cup, then made three key saves to keep Senegal from increasing its lead.

Senegal defender Krépin Diatta said Belgium should not have been allowed to get back into the game.

"It shouldn't have happened. You have to defend your box and you have to be the boss of your box," he said. "We suffered, but we have to go on. It's a pity."

Lukaku said Belgium showed character with its late comeback.

"This Senegal side is one of the best teams in the tournament," he said. "Technically, physically and tactically, it was really tough. But when we stepped up the intensity of our pressing, when we were there for the second ball, our team spirit shone through and we won the match." (AP)



PCB signs agreement with SACF



ISLAMABAD, July 2: The Pakistan Cricket Board on Thursday inked an agreement with Saudi Arabia to build a modern cricket stadium in Jeddah.

The agreement was signed by the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Mohsin Naqvi and Saudi Arabian Cricket Federation (SACF) chief Saud bin Mishal bin Mohammad Al Saud.

"For the first time in history, a strategic agreement has been signed between the PCB and the SACF for the construction of a modern cricket stadium in Jeddah," the PCB said in a statement on 'X'.

"The PCB will build a cricket stadium as per international standards and with state-of-the-art facilities. All the facilities will be according to the standards of the International Cricket Council (ICC)."

The statement further said that the two boards would jointly work on infrastructure development, technical expertise, stadium planning and operational standards.

It said the project would play a key role in enabling Saudi Arabia to host international cricket matches and big events, adding the project would also support the Gulf country's 2030 vision.

"The project is a milestone for the promotion of cricket in Saudi Arabia," Naqvi, who is currently in Saudi Arabia, was quoted as saying.

"The partnership will bring the cricket community together and become a lasting legacy," he said. (PTI)

India remains worst offender in AIU's June list of global dope cheats

NEW DELHI, July 2: India remained the worst offender in Athletics Integrity Unit's (AIU) global list of dope offenders, accounting for the highest number of 162 names, once again highlighting the huge magnitude of the problem that plagues the country's sporting landscape.

Kenya took the second spot with 148 names in the list, followed by Russia with over 60 cases.

The list includes persons serving bans for doping offences. It also includes persons who have committed non-doping violations such as tampering, evading testing, trafficking, or missing whereabouts, which carry the same penalties as a doping offence.

The Athletics Integrity Unit is an independent anti-doping watchdog established by World Athletics. It has jurisdiction over international level athletes and their support staff.

India first surpassed Kenya in April this year and it remained unchanged in June as well.

In April, India was also designated as a country with "extremely high" risk of doping by World Athletics after topping the list of doping offenders for the past two years.

In a decision taken recently by the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) Board, Athletics Federation of India (AFI) has been re-categorised from



Category B to Category A under Rule 15 of the World Athletics' Anti-Doping Rules.

"Unfortunately, the quality of the domestic anti-doping programme is simply not proportionate to the doping risk," AIU Chair David Howman had said in a release.

India has ranked in the top two for the most Anti-Doping Rule Violations (ADRVs) in athletics between 2022 and 2025.

According to AIU, India recorded 48 ADRVs (ranked 2nd) in 2022, 63 (ranked 2nd) in 2023, 71 (ranked 1st) in 2024 and 30 ADRVs (ranked 1st) in 2025.

Under the World Athletics Anti-Doping

Rules, the AIU Board categorises all Member Federations according to their doping risk to the sport. Category 'A' Member Federations, representing the highest risk, are subject to more stringent requirements, including extensive testing of their national team athletes.

Category 'B' Member Federations represent a medium doping risk while Category 'C' Member Federations represent a low doping risk.

After every three years, the AIU Board determines the category of each Member Federation by taking into account doping history of athletes, and athlete support personnel, among other aspects.

The AIU, however, may change a Member Federation's assigned category at any time within the three years.

A Category 'A' Member Federation has to ensure that there is an effective, annual testing programme maintained and implemented within their jurisdiction that complies with the International Standard for Testing and Investigations.

The Testing Programme must ensure that athletes of the national team in any World Athletics Series Event, Olympic Games or World Athletics Ultimate Championship, and who are not already on the International Registered Testing Pool, have been adequately tested. (PTI)

As India prepares for 11 big events in next 6 months, ministry promises spotless infra

NEW DELHI, July 2: With the country gearing up to host 11 international events in the next six months, including the world championships of badminton, the Sports Ministry has assured that top-notch facilities would be in place to ensure that all past criticism of playing conditions is suitably addressed.

The world championship of badminton is due to be held at the Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium in the national capital from August 17. The venue had been lambasted for poor hygiene and maintenance standards by foreign players when it hosted the India Open in January this year.

"The endeavour is to ensure that facilities are top notch. The minister is keeping a watch on the preparations. We are working towards changing the negative mindset and perceptions," a Sports Ministry source said.

After the India Open fiasco, which dented the country's image, the ministry had stepped to establish protocols for upkeep of Sports Authority of India infrastructure, including quarterly review of the venues by the minister.

Before the world event, the national capital will also be hosting the Commonwealth Table Tennis Championships in which 35 countries, including Australia, England, Canada, and South Africa are expected to participate from July 28 to August 4.

Elsewhere, Bhubaneswar would be hosting the Indian Open of athletics, which is World Athletics Silver level event in August.

Aspiring to become an Olympic host in 2036, India, between January 2025 and June 2026, hosted 36 international sporting competitions across more than 15 cities.

India have also secured the hosting rights for 19 international sporting competitions to be held during 2027 and 2028 and National Sports Federations (NSFs) are being encouraged to bid for international championships.

Mandaviya to hold meeting with NSFs

With the nation also building towards the Los Angeles Olympics, Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya will be holding a stock-taking meet with representatives of the National Sports Federations next week where they will be asked to present their overseas exposure plans for Los Angeles Olympics hopefuls. (PTI)

Ambedkar Stadium to host 45-team Oriental Cup from July 7 to 16

NEW DELHI, July 2: The fourth edition of the Oriental Cup will be held here at Dr Ambedkar Stadium from July 7 to 16, with more than 45 school teams from across Delhi-NCR set to compete. The inter-school football tournament is expected to feature over 1,500 student-athletes with more than 50 matches to be played across the boys' Under-17 and girls' Under-19 categories.

The organisers also announced scholarships worth ₹ 2.5 lakh for 10 outstanding players, aimed at encouraging youngsters to continue pursuing football beyond the tournament. The overall prize pool has also been more than doubled compared to previous editions. Fareed Bakshi, founder, said the organisers were focused on making the tournament one of the country's premier school football competitions. "Our long-term vision is to become India's leading inter-school football tournament. Our immediate focus is to deliver our strongest edition yet, but over time we intend to expand to several states across the country," Bakshi told PTI.

Bakshi said preparations for the tournament were in the final stages, with the organisers looking to further increase participation before the competition begins.

"We already have more than 45 teams and are hoping to reach the 50-team mark before the tournament begins. We are also partnering with football influencers in Delhi to increase awareness of the Oriental Cup," he added. (PTI)

Praggnanandhaa joint second after opening day of Grand Chess Tour Croatia



ZAGREB (CROATIA) July 2: Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa began his campaign in the Zagreb leg of the Grand Chess Tour with a victory over top seed Vincent Keymer of Germany before drawing his next two games to finish the opening day of the rapid section in joint second place.

Praggnanandhaa held France's Maxime Vachier-Lagrave and compatriot and world champion D Gukesh in hard-fought draws to end the day on four points, here on Wednesday.

Alireza Firouzja of France emerged sole leader on five points after winning his first two games and drawing with Anish Giri of the Netherlands in the third round.

With each rapid win worth two points, Firouzja moved ahead of Praggnanandhaa, Giri, Vachier-Lagrave and Keymer, who recovered from his opening-round defeat with two victories.

After winning the Norway chess classic ahead of Magnus Carlsen, Praggnanandhaa went on an attacking spree against Keymer in what will be hailed as a masterclass in the future.

The fury of white pieces was there for everyone to see as Praggnanandhaa launched his forces right at the opponent

king and cashed in on the full two points in a mere 26 moves. In the second round of the day, the Indian ace drew with Vachier-Lagrave who had started off with a finely crafted victory over World champion Gukesh.

For Gukesh the rhythm came back immediately after losing to his French counterpart as he made light work of Ivan Saric of Croatia in the second round. The youngest ever world champion is set to defend his title in the forthcoming match against Javokhir Sindarov of Uzbekistan.

While he was outplayed in the opener, Gukesh showcased his skills as the master craftsman while defending an attack against his king in the second round.

Gukesh is next in line along with Deac Bogdan-Daniel of Romania on three points and these two are a full point ahead of Nodirbek Abduturov of Uzbekistan. Jorden Van Foreest of the Netherlands is on one point, while Saric is yet to open his account.

The nine rounds of rapid will be followed by an 18-round blitz marathon and the winner will be decided with cumulative points in both sections.

After this there are two more events left to be held at Saint Louis, USA in the Grand Chess Tour.

Standings (After Rd-3, Rapid)

1. Firouzja Alireza (Fra, 5) 2-5; Maxime Vachier-Lagrave (Fra); R Praggnanandhaa (Ind); Anish Giri (Ned); Vincent Keymer (Ger) 4 each; 6-7: D Gukesh (Ind) Deac Bogdan-Daniel (Rou) 3 each; 8. Nodirbek Abdusattorov (Uzb, 2); 9. Jorden van Foreest (Ned, 1); 10. Ivan Saric (Cro, 0). (PTI)

Asian Games is not exposure trip, asserts Mandaviya

Ministry set to back omitted Anush

NEW DELHI, July 2: Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya on Thursday asserted that Asian Games is not "an exposure tour" and the athlete contingent size would be capped at 600 to ensure that only those who can deliver head to Japan for the September 19 to October 4 showpiece.

In an interaction with the media here, Mandaviya made it clear that "travellers looking to make up the numbers" won't be cleared for inclusion in the final contingent for Aichi-Nagoya.

"Let me make one thing clear that Asian Games is not an exposure tour, it is a platform for athletes to make the country proud with their best perform-

ance. So, as I have repeatedly stated, only those who can deliver will travel," he said.

"Exposure can be gained elsewhere. It doesn't have to be the Asian Games. Anyone looking to secure jobs through participation certificates will not be cleared. The Games are about performance and we will ensure that," he asserted while addressing queries on whether athletes from poorly-performing disciplines should be considered, though he refrained from taking names.

In its selection criteria unveiled in 2025, the ministry had made it clear that only those with "realistic chance of winning a medal" would be considered for multi-sport events, including the Asian Games, through selection trials that would be videographed and overseen by



independent observers.

In addition, it had also stated that only the top six in continental rankings would be eligible. The cut-off means that the Indian football team would not be travelling to the Games this time due to their

plummeting rankings.

"We have communicated this to everyone that those NSFs (National Sports Federations) which are recognised by their International Federations, can send their recommendations to the Indian Olympic Association (IOA). The names will be scrutinised by the Sports Authority of India (SAI) and eventually approved by the ministry," Mandaviya said.

"We have tried to address the earlier practice of federations acting on a whim," he added.

Hope for Anush Agarwalla?

Among the most prominent selection controversies ahead of the Asiad is Equestrian Anush Agarwalla's legal challenge against his omission. A well-placed source said the Sports Ministry will back his inclusion despite the legal

setback he faced recently.

Agarwalla's petition, along with that of Sudipti Hajela, that challenged the Equestrian Federation of India's ad-hoc committee's decision to leave him out was rejected by a single judge bench of Delhi High Court. But it is being heard by a Division Bench.

The court rejected their objections to the calculation of Minimum Eligibility Requirements (MERs), the interpretation of the selection criteria, the absence of additional selection trials and allegations of bias in the selection committee.

However, the ministry is likely to back his case.

"His non-selection has been reviewed and the ministry believes he deserves a chance," the source said.

The Ministry also made it clear that

lists published by NSFs after conducting trials "represents only the federation's recommended/selected list arising out of its internal selection process."

"Such a list does not constitute the final Government-approved Indian contingent," the ministry source said.

"...only those athletes, coaches and support staff whose names are included in the Sanction Order issued by MYAS (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports) shall be treated as members of the official Indian contingent for the Asian Games," he added.

Another athlete who questioned her omission was table tennis star Manika Batra but she withdrew her threat of a legal challenge despite maintaining that the national federations had flouted its own constitution by leaving her out for lack of domestic participation. (PTI)