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Russia raises N spectre

Putin puts nuclear forces on alert; EU closes airspace, vows to arm Ukraine

AP ■ KHARKIV KYIV/ BRUSSELS/ MOSCOW

In a dramatic escalation of East-West tensions over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin ordered Russian nuclear forces put on high alert Sunday in response to what he called "aggressive statements" by leading NATO powers.

In response to this, the European Union (EU) decided to close its airspace to Russian airlines, fund weapons purchase to Ukraine and ban some pro-Kremlin media outlet, European Commission officials said late on Sunday night. The measures, which Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said she expected to be endorsed, would mark the first time the 27-nation bloc finances the purchase and delivery of weapons and equipment to a country under attack.

"Another taboo has fallen. The taboo that the European Union was not providing arms in a war," said the EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell.

Earlier in the day, street fighting broke out in Ukraine's second-largest city and Russian



A child runs to a family member as they arrive after fleeing conflict in Ukraine, at the Medyka border crossing, in Poland, on Sunday

troops squeezed strategic ports in the country's south Sunday, advances that appeared to mark a new phase of Russia's invasion following a wave of attacks on airfields and fuel facilities elsewhere in the country. Following its gains on the ground, Russia sent a delegation to Belarus for peace talks with Ukraine, according to the Kremlin. Ukraine's president suggested other locations, saying his country was unwilling to meet in Belarus because it served as a staging ground for the invasion. Putin's latest order means he wants Russia's nuclear weapons prepared for increased readiness to launch and raises the threat that Moscow's invasion

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PM Modi holds high-level meet on crisis

New Delhi: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday evening held a high-level meeting on the Ukraine crisis. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and top Government officials were present at the meeting.

The meeting is reported to have reviewed India's efforts to bring back home its citizens stranded in Ukraine, which is ravaged by a Russian invasion.

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AI ferries 688 Indians back home

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

As many as 688 Indian nationals returned on Sunday from Ukraine on board three Air India evacuation flights from the Romanian capital Bucharest and Hungarian capital Budapest. So far, four evacuation flights have brought back a total of 907 Indian nationals from Ukraine. However, several Indian students in Ukraine who trudged 35km in freezing temperature to reach the border with Poland hoping for an escape from the ravaging war, are now stuck

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Ukraine drags Russia to ICJ

Kyiv: Ukraine has lodged a complaint against Russia at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague to get it to halt its invasion, President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Sunday.

"Russia must be held accountable for manipulating the notion of genocide to justify aggression," Zelensky declared in a tweet.

"We request an urgent decision ordering Russia to cease military activity now and expect trials to start next week," he said.

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4th Covid wave to hit in June, says IIT-K

'Severity will depend on new variant'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Just when India has started relaxing Covid-induced restrictions, a team of Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur, has warned that the fourth Covid wave might arrive in mid to late June. They said the surge is likely to continue for about 4 months — to be precise from around June 22 to be continued till October 24.

The IIT team has been quite accurate in their previous forecast about Covid-19 onset, with a deviation of only a few days

The severity, however, will depend on the emergence of the new variant, its nature, the vaccination status as well as administration of booster doses across the country, the IIT team said.

The statistical prediction was published on the preprint server MedRxiv on February 24. However, it is yet to be peer-reviewed. According to their paper, the curve will peak sometime around August 15 to 31 and decline thereafter.

Predictions by the



researchers — Sabara Parshad Rajeshbhai, Subhra Sankar Dhar and Shalabh of the department of mathematics and statistics of IIT-K — used a statistical model and said the fourth wave in India may arrive 936 days after the initial available date of the Covid-19 outbreak which was January 30, 2020.

"Therefore, the fourth wave (presumed) starts from June 22, reaching its peak on August 23 and ending on October 24," they said. The team used a methodology called "bootstrap" to compute the confidence interval of the time point of the peak of a fourth wave," it said.

According to the researchers, the method can also be used to forecast a fourth and other waves in other countries as well.

There is always a fair chance that a new variant of this virus may have an intense impact on the whole analysis. The intensity of the impact will depend on various factors like infectibility, fatality etc., the researchers said

Continued on page 2

US eases visa norms for Indian students and workers



PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The United States (US) has waived in-person interview requirements for many visa applicants, including students and workers, at its diplomatic missions in India through December 31 this year, a senior American diplomat has told Indian community leaders.

These applicants eligible for the waiver are students (F, M, and academic J visas), workers (H-1, H-2, H-3, and individual L visas), Culture and extraordinary ability (O, P, and Q visas).

"This is much-needed support to visa applicants. This would be very helpful to our friends and immediate family members and remove a lot of their concerns and remove inconveniences," Ajay Jain Bhutoria, South Asian Community Leader and US President Joe Biden's Advisor for Asian Americans, said after his meeting with Assistant Secretary of State for South Central Asia, Donal Lu.

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Har Pal Apke Saath

Will serve Varanasi till dying day: Modi

PM says felt happy when people 'prayed' for his death

PTI ■ VARANASI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday said it will be a privilege to serve people of Varanasi till his dying day, alluding to a remark by Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav that people come to the city in their final days.

Addressing BJP workers in his Lok Sabha constituency, Modi also alleged that opposition leaders take their parties as private property and they can never challenge the BJP, which is a party of workers. Without taking any name, Modi said, "When people prayed for my death in Kashi, I was very happy."

"I realised that neither Varanasi nor the people here

will leave me. It will be a privilege for me to die while serving people of Varanasi," Modi said alluding to the remark made by Yadav weeks ago.

On the day Modi inaugurated the Kashi Vishwanath corridor in Varanasi last December, Yadav had taunted him, saying people stay in Kashi "when the end is near".

Modi said for him party workers are a university, from which he learnt a lot of things.

"The dynasts who consider their parties as their private properties can never challenge the BJP, which is a party of its workers and works only for the development of the country," Modi said speaking at the event on the Sampurnanand Sanskrit university campus.

Modi also accused previous government of neglecting the pilgrim city and said criminals had a free in the state.

Terrorists used to "operate

without any fear" during the Samajwadi Party's rule in Uttar Pradesh, Modi alleged.

"Under the rule of dynasts, temples of Varanasi were looted by people and bombs used to explode at temple but nothing was done under the Samajwadi Party, which did everything to protect those accused of terrorism," he alleged.

Modi said the dynasts neglected Varanasi, which is now changing.

"After so many years, the Kashi Vishwanath temple has met the bank of river Ganga again. The double-engine government is taking UP to newer heights," said the PM.

Modi said UP had only 33 medical colleges before 2017 and now their number has gone up to 65. The BJP government has constructed over 10 lakh houses for the poor, he said.

The government gave free ration to 15 crore families, including the Dalits, backward classes and the general category people, he said.

Girls should marry after proper education: RSS women's wing

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A head of the annual meeting of the RSS' highest decision-making body, its women wing Rashtriya Sevika Samiti on Sunday said that girls should marry after getting proper education, but suggested that "imposing" a marriage age might not yield desired results.

The three-day meeting of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's Pratinidhi Sabha will start from March 11 where a host of issues are expected to be discussed including the proposed raising of the marriage age of females from 18 to 21 years.

During the Winter session of parliament in December, Union Women and Child Development Minister Smriti Irani introduced the bill proposing to raise the marriage age of females from 18 to 21 years, on a par with males.

But the bill was later referred to a parliamentary standing committee by Lok Sabha for wider discussions. Prime Minister Narendra

Modi and his government have projected the proposed legislation as an important step to provide equal opportunities to girls and boys in society.

Underlining that Rashtriya Sevika Samiti "opposes" child marriage, its prachar pramukh Sunila Sohwni said, "Girls should marry after proper upbringing and education so that they can become an able person."

When asked about the government's bill proposing to increase marriage age, Sohwni said the organisation has gathered feedback from society and there were different opinions both favouring and opposing it.

"According to the feedback gathered by us from our workers and society, there were both types of views regarding raising the marriage age of girls."

"It has been observed that imposing something on society on social issues such as marriage age of females might not yield desired results. Such issues are better to be dealt with public awareness and

holding wider discussions," Sohwni told PTI.

On the question of the BJP-led central government's approach, Sohwni termed it as "appropriate" and said the government has been holding wider discussions on this issue.

Sohwni said the Samiti has also shared its views with the parliamentary standing committee examining the issue.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Sports and Women and Child Development, chaired by senior BJP leader Vinay Sahasrabudde, has invited suggestions from the public on the issue.

The bill was drafted on the basis of the suggestions of a task force headed by former Samata Party president Jaya Jaitly.

The task force was assigned by the ministry to look into the correlation between the age of marriage with issues of women's nutrition, the prevalence of anemia, infant mortality rate and other social indices.

Guj Cong promises electricity concessions, jobs, gas cylinder price cap if voted to power

PTI ■ DWARKA

The Gujarat Congress on Sunday promised to provide electricity free of cost or at concessional rates to domestic users, a cap on domestic gas cylinder price at Rs 500, and creation of 10 lakh jobs annually if voted to power in the state Assembly polls scheduled to be held later this year.

The opposition party also promised Rs 4 lakh assistance and a government job to the kin of COVID-19 victims and said it would free farmers from debt, cut their power bills by half and provide direct assistance of Rs 70,000 per year under the 'Nyay Yojana' to needy families. The Congress promised to re-introduce the 2004 pension scheme, start the 'Mahatma Gandhi Education Complex' model to 'liberate parents from exploitation through commercialisation of education' as well as a "timely recruitment calendar" to fill more than five lakh government vacancies.

Releasing the party's 'Dwarka Sankalp Patra' (resolution) on the last day of its three-day conclave organised at

Dwarka, state unit president Jagdish Thakor said people were left with no option but to go in for change as the BJP government was witnessing policy paralysis.

"The administration has also been BJP-ised, and it is used more for political purposes than for the welfare of the people. The BJP government has not lived up to the expectations of the people. Its promises have proved to be false. The condition of the people has deteriorated instead of improving," he told a gathering.

"The Congress will ensure nobody has to pay more than Rs 500 per gas cylinder. Provision will be made to provide electricity on free or concessional basis depending on the residential electricity bill," Thakor said. The 'sankalp patra' also spoke of minimum wages to Anganwadi, ASHA and mid-day meal workers, permanent jobs to those who have remained on contractual basis for 10 years and more, subsidy of Rs 5 per litre to milk producers, and "Tiranga Clinic" at the ward level in urban areas for "service, diagnosis, treatment".

Denied entry into Poland, Slovakia: Stranded Indians

PTI ■ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Caught between a rock and a hard place is the situation of many Indian nationals, including Malayalis, trapped in Ukraine as they are allegedly not being allowed through at the Polish and Slovakian borders and have no place to go in view of the Russian offensive.

Turned away at the Polish and Slovakian borders, after travelling hundreds of kilometres from their respective colleges and standing in long queues for hours, prompted many students, in desperation, to resort to making video calls to media outlets to let the Indian authorities know the problems they are suffering.

Their desperate messages appear to have reached some

ears too as Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan shot off a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi inviting his attention to this problem.

The Kerala CM also raised the issue in his discussion with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar who, according to the CMO, assured that there are Indian officials at the borders who can deal with the problem of Indians not being allowed through. However, one set of students, who are stuck at the Slovakian border for several hours now, in their video call to a news channel said that Indians were being turned away and Ukrainian women and children were being given priority there.

The students, many of them women, claimed that the

border authorities were not letting them through as they have not received any communication from the Indian Embassy about allowing Indian nationals through.

Earlier in the day, a student had shared visuals of alleged Ukrainian army personnel assaulting Indian students at the Polish border and preventing them from going through.

Subsequently, several video messages of stranded Indian students complaining about being not allowed through at the Polish borders, went viral.

Meanwhile, Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee president and MP K Sudhakaran also wrote to Jaishankar drawing his attention to the request by around 250 students from National Medical University

in Odessa, Ukraine, seeking the Indian Mission's intervention to secure permission to cross the checkpoint in Moldova enroute to Romania for boarding an Air India evacuation flight.

"The students have arranged buses to reach the Moldovan border and I would appreciate it if you would kindly look into the matter with utmost priority," Sudhakaran has said in his letter. In the evening, Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla held a press meet where he said that he spoke with the Ukrainian Ambassador on the border issue and he came to know that the Ukrainian Immigration authorities have been informed about the problem and they are working on it.

States that don't appoint MGNREGA ombudsperson won't get funds

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

From the next fiscal, the Centre will not give funds for employment guarantee scheme MGNREGS to states that do not appoint ombudspersons in 80 per cent of their districts where the scheme has been applied, a top government official said on Sunday.

As per details available with the Union Rural Development Ministry, states such as BJP-ruled Gujarat, Arunachal Pradesh and Goa, and TRS-ruled Telangana, and union territories such as Puducherry, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli do not a single ombudsperson for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MDNREGS).

Similarly, there are states

that have appointed ombudspersons in very few districts such as Congress-ruled Rajasthan, where only four out of the 33 districts under the scheme have ombudspersons. In TMC-ruled West Bengal, ombudspersons have been appointed in four out of 23 districts under the scheme.

The situation is similar in Haryana and Punjab. Both have 22 districts each under the scheme, but only four such districts in Haryana and seven in Punjab have ombudspersons, as per data available with the ministry. "Ideally, states should appoint ombudspersons in all their districts under the MGNREGS. The states which don't appoint ombudspersons in at least 80 per cent of the total districts under MGNREGS, which is the minimum threshold limit,

would not get funds from the next financial year for the implementation of the employment guarantee scheme," Secretary, Rural Development, Nagendra Nath Sinha told PTI.

Launching the Ombudsperson app for MGNREGS on Thursday, Union Rural Development Minister Giriraj Singh had expressed concerns over non-appointment of ombudspersons in various districts, and said it has been noticed that persons belonging to political parties were appointed at many places.

"The ministry would not release funds to those states which don't appoint ombudspersons as per the provision of the MGNREGS," Singh told PTI.

The minister also requested all states and union territories to cooperate with the central government in making

MGNREGA more transparent by using the Ombudsperson app.

According to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), states are mandated to appoint an ombudsperson for each district for receiving grievances, enquiring and passing awards as per guidelines of the Union Rural Development Ministry, which is the nodal ministry for implementation of the employment guarantee programme.

MGNREGA is aimed at enhancing livelihood security of households in rural areas of the country by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

ATS to soon start investigation into RSS headquarters recce bid case

PTI ■ NAGPUR

The Nagpur unit of the Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) will soon launch the investigation into the alleged bid to conduct reconnaissance of the RSS headquarters here in Maharashtra by a member of

terror outfit Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), a senior police officer said on Sunday.

The Nagpur unit of the ATS had received directives from its Mumbai-based head office on the orders of former Maharashtra DGP Sanjay Pandey, he told PTI.

ATS officials are likely to request the Nagpur police on Monday to seek documents related to this case.

The ATS Nagpur is likely to take custody of the suspected JEM operative Raees Ahmed Sheikh Asadulla Sheikh, a resident of Jammu and Kashmir, to expedite the investigation, he said.

Police had said that the JeM operative had made an unsuccessful attempt to carry out reconnaissance of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) headquarters in July 2021.

Ukraine drags...

From page 1

The ICJ, which is based in the Netherlands capital The Hague, does not have a mandate to bring criminal charges against individual Russian leaders behind the four-day-old invasion. But it is the world's top court for resolving legal complaints between states over alleged breaches of international law. It is the supreme judicial institution of the UN.

Russia raises N spectre....

From page 1

of Ukraine and the West's response to it could boil over into nuclear warfare. Amid the worrying development, the office of Ukraine's President said a delegation would meet with Russian officials as Moscow's troops drew closer to Kyiv. Putin, in giving the nuclear alert directive, cited not only the alleged statements by NATO members but the hard-hitting financial sanctions imposed by the West against Russia, including the Russian leader himself.

Speaking at a meeting with his top officials, Putin told his Defense Minister and the Chief of the Military's General Staff to put the nuclear deterrent

forces in a "special regime of combat duty."

"Western countries aren't only taking unfriendly actions against our country in the economic sphere, but top officials from leading NATO members made aggressive statements regarding our country," Putin said in televised comments.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Putin was resorting to a pattern he used in the weeks before launching the invasion of Ukraine, "which is to manufacture threats that don't exist in order to justify further aggression. The global community and American people should look at it through that prism. We've seen him do this time and time again." She told

ABC's "This Week" that Russia has not been under threat from NATO or Ukraine.

Putin threatened in the days before Russia's invasion to retaliate harshly against any nations that intervened directly in the conflict in Ukraine, and he specifically raised the specter of his country's status as a nuclear power. The US Ambassador to the United Nations responded to the news from Moscow while appearing on a Sunday news programme.

"President Putin is continuing to escalate this war in a manner that is totally unacceptable," Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said. "And we have to continue to condemn his actions in the most strong, strongest possible way."

4th Covid wave from....

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Apart from this fact, the effect of vaccinations - first, second or booster dosage---may impact on the possibility of infection, degree of infection, and various issues related to the fourth wave, they added.

The researchers started working on the fourth wave prediction motivated by the accuracy of the third wave forecast done using a mixture of Gaussian distribution based on the data on Zimbabwe.

Another recent study has shown that the next Covid variant can emerge in two different ways. Also, there is no guarantee that the new variant will be less severe than the previously identified ones, they pointed out.

US eases visa norms...

From page 1

Bhutoria raised the issue of visas during his meeting with Lu in Silicon Valley in the US state of California on Friday.

Lu informed that through December 31, of this year, the US Department of State is authorised to waive in-person interview requirements for certain applicants and their qualifying derivatives in various non-immigrant visa classifications.

To be eligible for the expanded interview waiver programme, applicants seeking these visa classifications must have previously been issued any category of US visa; have never been refused a US visa and have no indication of ineligibility or potential visa ineligibility.

They also need to be a resident or national of the country in which they are applying; among other, the State Department said.

The US embassy in New Delhi and its consulates in Chennai, Hyderabad, Kolkata and Mumbai will release more than 20,000 additional waiver (dropbox) appointments for Spring 2022 to allow qualified applicants to make use of the new interview waiver authority, according to a notice posted on the website of the US Embassy in New Delhi.

During the meeting, Bhutoria discussed with Lu to increase people-to-people relationships between the US and India. He stressed the importance of both the US and India working closely together in South Central Asia.

AI ferries 688 Indians...

From page 1

Union Foreign Secretary Harsh V Shringla on Sunday announced six more special flights to be sent between February 28 and March 2 to bring back stranded Indian nationals from Ukraine. Shringla called in both ambassadors of Russia and Ukraine separately and conveyed his concerns on the safety of Indian citizens. India has named the evacuation mission as 'Operation Ganga'.

Meanwhile, taking to Twitter, the Indian Embassy in Kyiv asked the Indian diaspora to move away from conflict zones to the Western region as Ukraine Railways is organising emergency trains at no cost, first come first basis from Kyiv.

Referring to intense fighting in Kharkiv, Sum, and Kyiv, the embassy urged Indians in these cities and other curfew-bound regions not to venture towards railway stations until such curbs are lifted and considerable civilian movement is renewed.

The first evacuation flight carrying 219 Indians from Bucharest landed in Mumbai on Saturday evening. The second flight with 250 nationals arrived in Delhi in the early

hours of Sunday. Air India's third evacuation flight, AI1940, departed from Budapest with 240 Indian nationals and landed at the Delhi airport around 9.20 am on Sunday. The fourth evacuation flight carrying 198 Indian nationals from Bucharest landed in Delhi in the evening. Following the closure of Ukrainian airspace, India is facilitating the evacuation of stranded Indians from Ukraine through its land border crossings with Romania, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

"I've shared the locations where Indian citizens are concentrated. Both ambassadors took note of our concerns and assured us of the safety of Indian citizens," Shringla said. The Foreign Secretary said border crossing to Hungary and Romania is functioning. However, he said, the exit point to Poland is clogged due to lakhs of foreign nationals trying to escape from that point.

Those who are near the borders of Hungary and Romania are guided towards their border points in phases, he added. "We estimated that about 15,000 citizens were left in Ukraine," the Foreign Secretary said.

PM Modi holds....

From page 1

India on Sunday evacuated 688 more nationals from Ukraine on three Air India flights

Modi presided over the meeting immediately upon his return from Uttar Pradesh, where he addressed rallies as part of the BJP's campaign for the state assembly polls.

A large number of Indians,

mostly students, are stranded in Ukraine following Russia's attack on the country. India has begun evacuating them, and over 900 people have been brought back since Saturday.

Modi has also spoken to Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky, with India calling for dialogue to defuse the crisis.

'Low check dams improving drain water quality'

Delhi Govt executing plans to treat largest polluters of Yamuna

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Government's initiatives to construct weirs (low check dams) on major drains have substantially helped to clean the drains by improving their biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) level and decreasing the amount of other pollutants as well. The project was launched by Water Minister Satyendar Jain to improve the quality of the water in the drains falling into the Yamuna.

In line with the ongoing activities for cleaning Yamuna, the Irrigation and Flood Control Department of the Delhi Government is executing their plans to treat the largest



polluters of the Yamuna, i.e. Najafgarh and supplementary drain on the river stretch with focus on solving the problem of pollution from drains directly into the Yamuna.

Minister of the Irrigation and Flood Control Department, Jain said, "Cleaning the contributing drains of Yamuna will directly lead us towards cleaning the river. Construction of temporary weirs is proving to be an

impactful approach to reduce the amount of pollutants contaminating the contributing drains of Yamuna. Following the same, the Delhi government has successfully initiated the work to improve the water quality of the Najafgarh Drain and Supplementary Drain.

The initiative tends to polish the Najafgarh drain that enters Delhi at Dhansa, runs about 57 km before falling into the Yamuna, and the sup-

plementary drain, which takes off from near Kakrola Regulator and outfalls into the Najafgarh Drain. A weir is a small barrier built across a stream or river that helps to raise the water level slightly on the upstream side.

Weirs allow water to pool behind them while allowing water to flow steadily over top of the weir. Weirs are erected in the mid-flow of the drain to increase the retention of flowing water. Currently, DJB treats the wastewater of the drains falling into both the Najafgarh as well as the Supplementary drain, only by trapping it through its Interceptor Sewer Project (ISP).

Apart from this, measures that are being carried out by the Irrigation and Flood Control department include, desilting of the drains, installation of trash barriers, floating boom to trap floating solid materials, removal of municipal solid

waste (MSW) and construction and demolition (C&D) waste from the drains, removal of hyacinth, garbage, patera, and other weeds, Raising and repairing of boundary walls to prevent dumping in drain land, erection of wire mesh jalis at bridges, installation of warning boards and fixing of jalis at the mouth of inlets.

Under this project, construction of 11 weirs has been completed on Supplementary Drain and 3 weirs have been completed on the Najafgarh Drain, while work on 10 weirs is in progress. The recently constructed weirs have already started to show positive results, and thus the project is bound to turn out tremendously successful in the long run.

After implementing the measures, the Irrigation and Flood Control Department submitted a test report about the impact of these initiatives. The test report of the drain

water collected near Rithala STP, Rohini Sector 11 Weir, Rohini Sector 16 Weir, and Rohini Sector 15 Weir shows that there is a drastic reduction in suspended solids after the construction of the temporary weirs and the total suspended solids went down from 166 mg/L in Rithala to just 49 mg/L in Rohini Sector 15.

Subsequently, the government to boost this process administratively, the Yamuna Cleaning Cell (YCC) was constituted in November last year, under the direction of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, to ensure better coordination and an integrated approach to achieve the objective of Yamuna Cleaning.

The cell is responsible for the execution of the Yamuna Cleaning Action Plan. The decision taken by the Cell is executed by the members of the respective departments to ensure time-bound action.

After Class 1 student develops Covid symptoms, pvt school switches to online classes

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A private school in north Delhi decided to switch to online classes after a first grade student developed mild Covid-like symptoms following which all students and parents were advised to take precautionary measures, the school administration said on Sunday.

The student had on Thursday attended the school at Model Town, but his parents informed the administration on Saturday that he had developed Covid-like symptoms like headache and pain, it said.

As a precautionary measure, the school administration decided not to conduct offline classes for students from nursery to class 5 on Monday. The affected student attended

school on Thursday and was absent the next day. After his parents told us about the situation on Saturday, we informed rest of the parents and asked them to take precautionary measures and also inform the school administration in such cases. "All the students and teachers at the school are safe. There is nothing to worry, but still we decided to go for online classes for a day," the school principal said.

He added that although they sanitise the school premises and take all necessary measures to prevent the spread of the infection, but still wanted to be more cautious about the health and safety of children. The offline classes for students of nursery to class 5 will resume from Wednesday, the principal added.

Poor people have been denied Feb ration: BJP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) said lakh of poor families have not received their ration for February month due to "lackadaisical" attitude of the Delhi Government.

Delhi BJP Spokesperson Praveen Shankar Kapoor said that Delhi's ration distribution system has been crippling for over a year but the last three months have been extremely disappointing for beneficiaries.

As the Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has been entangled in electoral politics in five poll-bound states for the last three months and due to it, poor people in Delhi have been denied their February ration by it of normal PDS or of PMs free ration quota. Ration is not reaching to the poor in Delhi on time as Arvind Kejriwal Government has constantly failed to pick its ration quota from central

godowns on time that is 10 days before start of month, he said. "Centre issued Delhi Government the ration for February on 20th January but the Kejriwal Government occupied in state elections had no trucks to lift it.

The Kejriwal Government has failed to float tenders for trucks to pick and deliver ration supplies for the last over a year. Every month they pick and distribute ration to dealers by managing trucks privately," he said.

Delhi BJP Spokesperson has said that lakh of poor labour class people are every month forced to buy expensive ration.

"Though all poor are unhappy but those registered under One Nation One Ration Card scheme as the ration in their parent state has been distributed and here they aren't getting it. The fear their ration card might be cancelled for not taking ration regularly," he added.

AAP accuses BJP-ruled MCD of not making audit reports public

To cover-up its corruption: AAP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Aam Aadmi Party accused the BJP-ruled MCD to have refused to make its annual audit reports public for the last four years to cover-up its corruption.

AAP Senior Leader and MCD in-charge Durgesh Pathak said that the BJP has not made a single MCD audit report public ever since it was caught doing corruption to the tune of Rs 6,000 crores.

In 2017-18, the auditor had raised objections on payments of Rs 3,153 crores by North MCD, Rs 1,252 by East MCD and Rs 1,696 crores by South MCD. "If we add up this

amount for the last four years, it points towards a scam of 30-35 thousand crores under the BJP," he said. Talking about the audit, he said, "In his 2017-18 audit, the auditor raised objections in payments to the tune of Rs 3153 crore under the North MCD. In the East MCD, he raised objections on payments worth 1252 crore and in south MCD, 1696 crores, he said.

"In simple terms, the auditor found corruption and scams of almost 6,000 crores in the MCD in 2017-18. If such reports come out each year, there will be more such revelations.

After 2017-18, they stopped publishing these audit reports. This clearly points towards a huge coverup exercise on their scams. The BJP is scared of this falling out in the open so they're not publishing these audit reports," he said.

BJP won't let Kejriwal turn Capital into liquor city, says Adesh Gupta

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP president Adesh Gupta on Sunday flagged off a bike rally against liquor policy introduced by the Delhi Government.

Hundreds of youth participated in the bike rally and raised slogans against liquor policy. The bike rally reached Patel Nagar via Prasad Nagar, Anand Parvat, Thansingh Nagar from Faridnagar to Patel Nagar. In rally, youths protested with hoardings named "Quit studies, drink alcohol" and "Mohalla theka near your house, your son Kejriwal".

Gupta appealed to workers that Kejriwal is engaged in making Delhi a liquor city, but BJP will never allow this. "The BJP has started work of sealing illegal liquor contracts with help of corporation and it will continue till illegal liquor contracts are stopped in Delhi," he

said. "Liquor shops have been opened everywhere, including near schools and temples as well as residential colonies. We will get all these illegally opened shops sealed," Gupta asserted.

Under new excise policy of Delhi government implemented in November last year, over 580 liquor shops have been opened by private firms. The Excise department has allotted 849 licenses for retail liquor sale to private parties through the tender process.

The Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled municipal corporations have sealed several liquor shops for alleged violations of Delhi Master Plan provisions. The Excise department recently allowed licensees for shifting their shops if they fell in non-confirming areas in a ward to authorised commercial areas within a given zone. The licences were issued by dividing city into 32 zones.

Sonu Dariyapur gang member arrested

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Special Cell of Delhi Police has arrested a 25-year-old man, who is member of Sonu Dariyapur gang and was wanted in a 2021 case of attempt murder.

The accused has been identified as Prince alias Sunny and he was involved in an attempt to murder case of Mohan Garden police station which falls under Dwarka jurisdiction. A reward of Rs 20,000 was declared on his arrest, police said.

According to police, on August 29, 2021, accused Prince along with his father Amit Tuli and mother Taruna Tuli had a quarrel with complainants during which accused Prince fired a gun shot on the victim and

injured him critically. "During investigation, both the accused Amit Tuli and Taruna Tuli were arrested by the local police but accused Prince evaded his arrest and was on run for more than six months, said Rajeev Rajan Singh, Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP), Special Cell.

"The arrest was made on February 25 this year when police got a tip off that Prince was coming to meet his associates in Najafgarh," said the DCP.

"When interrogated, he confessed his involvement in the offence and disclosed that he is a member of Sonu Dariyapur gang. He along with his associates was also previously involved in 2019 case of attempt to murder in Outer Delhi's Bawana," said the DCP.

3 held for supplying arms, ammo, stolen motorcycles to gang members



STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

With the arrest of three men, the Delhi Police on Sunday claimed to have busted a gang of "notorious" sharpshooters and arms supplier of "Gogi Gang" in the national Capital.

Police said the accused used to allegedly supply arms and stolen vehicles to other gang members on the direction of their bosses who are currently lodged in jail here.

The accused has been identified as Sajjan (24), Prashant (25) and Ravi Bhardwaj (28), who were nabbed by the police team of Kanjhawala in Rohini.

Police has recovered nine pistols, five extra magazines, 35 live cartridges and two stolen two wheelers from them. This has been termed as a big catch of illegal arms, ammunition and stolen vehicles, which were being illegally trafficked to gang members for committing crime in future.

Keeping in view the rise of usage of illegal arms and ammunitions in the incidents of snatching and robberies in the area of Kanjhawala police station, extensive drive of apprehension of criminals was initiated in their area through checking, police added.

According to Pranav Tayal, the Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP), Rohini district, on Saturday, police got specific inputs about delivery of illegal arms and ammunitions as well as stolen two wheelers by gang members of "Gogi Gang" and aide of Deepak Dabas.

"Accordingly, we sent our team to the spot and cordoned the road where three culprits were apprehended by our team, while they were going to deliver the illegal arms, ammunitions and stolen vehicles on the

Guidebook on residential EV charging to be launched today

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Dialogue and Development Commission of Delhi (DDC), in collaboration with World Resources Institute, India (WRI India) will be launching the 'Residential Electric Vehicle (EV) Charging Guidebook' to simplify and enable the adoption of EV charging in all types of residential areas in Delhi on Monday.

The document guides residential societies in understanding the importance of EV charging, details the processes involved in planning, installing and managing EV charging stations in the parking space of the societies.

The document also addresses some of the common concerns (such as lack of space, capital investment, power load

management etc.) and shares the best practices for RWAs. Vice Chairperson of Dialogue and Development Commission Jasmine Shah said, "Delhi government has taken many pioneering steps to promote adoption of EVs and build charging infrastructure at mass scale.

"With the launch of this step-by-step guidebook, the Delhi government will become the first state government in India to make RWAs and residential areas an integral part of the EV movement.

RWAs across Delhi have expressed their interest to Delhi government of joining the EV revolution. This guidebook will facilitate that journey and enable the people of Delhi to access EV charging points in colonies all over Delhi," he said.

The Delhi Government had announced the Delhi Electric Vehicle Policy in

August 2020, with a vision to promote the adoption of electric vehicles in the city and to make Delhi the EV Capital of India. The policy aims to improve Delhi's air quality by driving the transition to electric vehicles, so that they can reach 25% of all new vehicle registrations by 2024.

In line with this vision, Delhi Government has taken several steps, including directing all residential institutions with a parking capacity of 100 or more vehicles to reserve 5 per cent of their parking space for EVs with suitable chargers with a minimum output of 3.3KW.

As per Delhi Development Authority's amended United Building Bye Laws (2016), 20 per cent of all parking capacity in buildings must be provided with charging infrastructure for EVs.

City's maximum temperature settles at 25.2 degrees Celsius

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi on Sunday recorded a high of 25.2 degrees Celsius while overnight rains in parts of the city brought down the minimum temperature to 12.1 degrees Celsius, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said. The relative humidity recorded at 5.30 pm was 46 per cent, it said.

The weatherman has predicted a partly cloudy sky for Monday and the maximum and minimum temperatures are expected to settle around 24 degrees Celsius and 11 degrees Celsius respectively.

On Saturday, the maximum temperature in Delhi was at 23.8 degrees Celsius, two notches below the season's average while the minimum temperature settled at 13.4 degrees Celsius, a notch above the normal.

Teachers, other staff on Covid duty asked to report back to parent dept

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

In view of the reduction in Icoronavirus cases in Delhi, teachers and other staff of the city Government's Education Department who had been put on Covid duty, have been asked to report back to their parent department on February 28, according to an official order issued on Saturday.

On Friday, the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA), chaired by Lieutenant Governor Anil Bajjal, had decided to withdraw all restrictions from Monday, reduce the fine for not wearing masks from Rs 2,000 to Rs 500 and resume physical classes in Delhi schools from April 1.

In view of the reduction in Covid cases, and further relaxations in restrictions by the DDMA, the services department has ordered to "stand relieve forthwith all ad hoc DANICS, Gr-I, Gr-II, Gr-III,

Gr-IV (DASS) officers/officials" who have been deployed by services department or substituted by administration departments for COVID-19-related duties in various departments of the Delhi government, the order said.

In view of the above, the competent authority is pleased to direct all teachers, IT assistants, and DEOs of Directorate of Education (DoE) who have been deployed on Covid duty in revenue department or are still working on Covid duty in revenue department, to report back on February 28 to their parent school or branch of DoE where they were physically posted, without waiting for any formal relieving from their present place of deployment, it said.

The order issued by the DoE also said that "appropriate action" will be taken if they don't report back on regular duty.

Delhi Police installs e-kiosk for contactless complaint registration

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police has installed a digital e-kiosk at the Parliament Street police station here to smoothen the public-police interface and facilitate citizens, officials said on Sunday.

According to them, the e-kiosk will enable people to easily lodge complaints in a contactless mode. The e-kiosk has a message from the Delhi Police commissioner. It has several options and people can look up information on districts and various police stations.

They can lodge complaints by themselves, the police said. People can also get information on religious places, petrol pumps, post offices, banks, graveyards, milk booths, hospitals and metro stations among others.

With the help of the kiosk, people can also see e-FIRs, report cybercrimes, and lodge complaints of vehicle theft. It will also facilitate tenant verification, they said.

Citizens can avail the online complaint registration facility. For that, they have to scan a QR code given on the screen. The kiosk has information regarding senior police officials of various districts.

It has access to Delhi Police's One Touch app, Himmat Plus app, and Tatpar Delhi Police app which people can download by scanning QR codes. There is an option of feedback as well. The kiosk also has a list of various helpline numbers.

"It has been linked directly with website of the Delhi Police and any complaint which will be lodged by the kiosk will automatically go to the website.

The kiosk is very easy to access and senior citizens can also use it easily." Deputy Commissioner of Police (New Delhi) Deepak Yadav said. A senior police officer said they are thinking about installing these kiosks at market places with high footfall and at police booths.

City logs 484 Covid cases, 3 deaths in a day, positivity rate 0.95%

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi on Sunday recorded 484 fresh Covid-19 cases and three deaths while the positivity rate stood at 0.95 per cent, according to data shared by the city health department. With this, the national capital's case count increased to 18,59,634 and the death toll climbed to 26,122.

The number of COVID-19 tests conducted a day ago stood at 50,759, the health bulletin stated. Delhi on Saturday reported 440 fresh COVID-19 cases and two deaths while the positivity rate was 0.83 per cent.

A day earlier, it recorded 460 cases with a positivity rate of 0.81 per cent and two deaths. On Thursday, 556 fresh Covid cases with a positivity rate of 1.1 per cent, and six deaths were reported in the national capital. The number of daily

cases in Delhi has been on the decline after touching the record high of 28,867 on January 13.

According to health department statistics, the city had recorded a positivity rate of 30.6 per cent on January 14, the highest during the ongoing wave of the pandemic.

Amid the decline in daily cases, the number of patients under home isolation here has also significantly fallen in the last two weeks. The total number of home isolation cases as of February 1 was 12,312. On Sunday, it was 1,479.

The number of containment zones also dipped to 4,777. There are 11,089 beds for Covid patients in Delhi hospitals and 180 (1.62 per cent) of them were occupied. A total of 180 Covid patients were in hospitals, the health department bulletin stated.

BSES goes digital, launches social media services

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Learning a lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruptions caused by it, power discom BSES has digitalised its entire bouquet of customer services to ring fence the consumers in case of such eventualities.

Apart from ensuring reliable power supply, the discom has launched a host of digital services for consumer convenience. These services are designed on various digital platforms so that the users continue to get BSES services while following government guidelines of battling the infection, a company official said. Social messaging platform 'WhatsApp' is the latest arsenal in BSES' digital portfolio for offering hassle-free consumer services. Besides registering 'no supply' complaints, self meter reading, and downloading (and paying) electricity

bills, the customers can avail a host of services, including applying for new connections, through WhatsApp, he said. "BSES has been promoting the use of digital technologies for a while now. The push towards digitisation has come in handy for the discom during the Covid pandemic," the official noted. Customers can connect with the discom and apply for a host of services, including new connections or registering complaints, from the comfort of their homes and offices using mobile application, website and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. In fact, there is no need for a BSES consumer to visit a BSES office for availing any service, he added. Since the advent of the coronavirus crisis in 2020, BSES had launched 'BSES Aapke Saath' - a programme of online RWA meetings -- for the safety of employees and consumers.

90% in 15-18 age group given first dose of Covid vaccine in Capital: Data

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Ninety per cent of adolescents in the age group of 15 to 18 years in the national capital have been administered the first dose of vaccine against Covid-19 since the launch of the drive on January 3, according to official data.

Until February 24, 54 per cent of them have even received the second dose of the vaccine, the data presented during a meeting of the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) earlier this week mentioned.

This means 9.13 lakh adolescents have been administered the first dose of the vaccine while 5.44 lakh of them have received the second dose. According to the data, vaccination in this age group has been the highest in Southwest district of Delhi with 1,22,717 adolescents having received

the first dose, followed by Northwest (1,17,560) and West (93,251). The Southwest district again leads the tally in the administration of the second dose with 74,881 adolescents having received the jab, followed by Northwest (65,617) and Northeast (61,674), the data mentioned.

Earlier, the Delhi government had directed its officials to open temporary vaccination centres in its 20 schools to inoculate the population in the 15-18 years age group.

For the first time in two years, schools in the national capital will open completely for offline education from April 1 with the DDMA on Friday giving its nod to end the hybrid mode of operation. Schools in the national capital were closed in March 2020 ahead of a nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus

Complete absence of motive weighs in favour of accused: SC

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The "complete absence" of motive assumes a different complexion and definitely weighs in favour of the accused, the Supreme Court has said while acquitting a man sentenced to life imprisonment in a murder case of 1997.

A three-judge bench headed by Justice U U Lalit observed it is not that the case of prosecution must be discarded in the absence of motive.

The bench, also comprising Justices S R Bhat and P S Narasimha, set aside the judgement delivered in May 2014 by the High Court of Chhattisgarh which had dismissed an appeal filed by the accused against the trial court verdict convicting and awarding him life imprisonment in the case.

"It is not as if motive alone becomes the crucial link in the case to be established by the prosecution and in its absence the case of prosecution must be discarded. But, at the same time, complete absence of motive assumes a different complexion and such absence



definitely weighs in favour of the accused," the bench said in its February 25 verdict.

The apex court delivered its judgement on an appeal against the high court verdict in the case.

According to the prosecution, a case was registered on a complaint by a man who had said that his son had gone to a paddy milling centre on January 13, 1997 and had since

then been missing.

On January 17, 1997, body of the deceased was recovered from a pond and the case was converted to one under section 302 (murder) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC).

The apex court noted in its verdict that the appellant, Nandu Singh, was arrested in the case and certain recoveries on the strength of his statement were stated to be made.

The counsel, who argued on behalf of the appellant before the top court, had said that in a case based on circumstantial evidence, the prosecution had not alleged any motive on his part to commit murder of the deceased.

The counsel had argued that the case was built by the prosecution based on the alleged evidence of "last seen".

Air India flights to bring back Indians from Ukraine costing Govt ₹7-8L/hour

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Air India flights being operated to bring back hundreds of Indian nationals stranded in Ukraine are costing ₹7-8 lakh per hour. The amount will go up depending on the duration of the flights.

Sources said that the cost of operating a chartered flight with the Dreamliner is around ₹7 to 8 lakh per hour and the total amount will depend "on where we are going and how far we are going". The total cost will include expenses related to crew, fuel, navigation, landing and parking charges.

The airline is operating the services with wide-body Boeing 787 plane, better known as Dreamliner, from neighbouring countries of conflict-ridden Ukraine, including Romania and Hungary. Currently, Air India is operating flights to Bucharest (Romania) and Budapest (Hungary) and both are offline stations for the airline, which means it does not have scheduled services to these places.

According to sources, as the cost will be between ₹7 to 8 lakh per hour, the total cost



for a round trip will be more than ₹1.10 crore. The figure is calculated under the assumption that overall duration of the to and fro flight is around 14 hours. The expenses will shoot up in case the duration is longer.

According to flight tracking website FlightAware, the flight from Bucharest to Mumbai that landed on Saturday night was for a dura-

tion of nearly six hours. The flight from Budapest to Delhi was for about six hours and another flight from Delhi to Bucharest took over seven hours. An Air India flight from Bucharest to Delhi took over 5 hours.

The government is not charging people for the evacuation flights. Some state governments have also announced that they will bear the expens-

es of people from their respective states who are returning from Ukraine. The Dreamliner has more than 250 seats.

According to pilots who fly Dreamliners, the aircraft on an average consumes 5 tonnes of fuel per hour. The source said that once the operations are complete, the exact cost will be worked out and then the airline will send the bill to the government for reimbursement.

Chargesheet filed against 3 in conspiracy for extortion

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Sunday said it has filed a chargesheet against three accused persons in a case of conspiracy for extortion and disruption of Government works at Tetariyakhad Colliery in Jharkhand.

The agency filed the first supplementary charge sheet before the NIA Special Court, Ranchi, against the three accused persons — Saif Ansari alias Saif Ali, 24, Shahrugh Ansari alias Tiwari Khan, 25, and Ajay Turi, 21, all of Bundu village under Keredari police station in Hazaribagh, the NIA said in a statement.

The trio has been charged under various Sections of the Indian Penal Code, Arms Act, Explosive Substance Act, Criminal Law Amendment (CLA) Act and Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. The case relates to commission of terror act of indis-

criminate firing and arson resulting in burning of five vehicles and injuries to four civilians at Tetariyakhad Colliery in Latehar district of Jharkhand on December 18, 2020.

"The motive was to terrorise Delivery Order holders, transporters, lifters of coal in order to commit extortion," it said. Originally, FIR Number 234/2020 dated December 19, 2020 was registered at Balumath police station, Latehar which was re-registered by NIA on March 4, 2021.

Earlier, the NIA had filed a charge sheet against seventeen accused persons on August 5 last year in this case.

"During further investigation it was established that the three accused persons chargesheeted yesterday were responsible for procurement of weapons and ammunition and carrying out the terrorist act at Tetariyakhad Colliery in collusion with other members of Sujit Sinha and Aman Sahu gang," it added.

BJP prez Nadda's Twitter handle hacked, restored

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

BJP national president JP Nadda's Twitter account was briefly hacked on Sunday morning but it was restored within a few minutes. Several tweets were posted from the hacked account on the ongoing Ukraine crisis while seeking cryptocurrency donations for the war-torn nation. The Computer Emergency Response Team has started probing the matter.

The tweet from the hackers read, "Stand with the people of Ukraine. Now accepting cryptocurrency donations. Bitcoins and Ethereum." The tweet had a message in Hindi and addresses to Bitcoin and Ethereum wallets. The tweet was posted at 9:52 AM. Within 10 minutes, another tweet was posted suggesting the account was hacked, and people should support Russia. Soon after the second tweet, both tweets were deleted within a few minutes and his access was restored.

Union Electronics and Technology Minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar told PTI that the matter has been reported to the Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT), and an investigation is on.

Several political leaders including Prime Minister Narendra Modi's personal handle



were targeted by hackers in the past. Earlier, Sansad TV's YouTube account was hacked on February 15. The account was temporarily terminated by YouTube and later restored.

In January this year, the Twitter account of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was hacked. The account was restored within minutes. Last year in December, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Twitter account was hacked, and the hackers published a tweet alleging India officially adopted bitcoin as legal tender.

Effectiveness of Covid vaccine may decline after 6 months: Study

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Emphasising the importance of vaccines in enhancing immunity, a study has said that the effectiveness of the Covid-19 vaccine may substantially decline after six months if booster shots are not taken. For the study, a research team had examined data from nearly 50,000 hospital admissions between April and November of 2021.

Published in The Lancet Respiratory Medicine, the researchers in the study indicated that vaccines were 94 per cent effective at preventing hospitalisation 50-100 days after receiving the shot but fell to 80.4 per cent 200-250 days later, with even more rapid declines after 250 days.

"This data helps us understand differences in waning protection by vaccine type and identify the key risk factors for

severe breakthrough infections to help inform the targeting of potential vaccine booster programmes," said Amy Compton-Phillips, Providence chief clinical officer.

"Unlike most other studies, our data stretched beyond six months, where we found evidence of rapidly waning protection, especially for patients 80 or older," Compton-Phillips added.

In addition to examining the effectiveness of vaccines over time, the Providence study was also able to identify factors associated with reduced vaccine effectiveness.

Key risk factors for a severe "breakthrough" infection included advanced age (80+), comorbidities such as cancer, transplants, chronic kidney disease, hypertension, or heart



failure, the amount of time that had elapsed since being vaccinated, and the type of vaccine one received.

For the latter factor, the study found that the Moderna vaccine offered the best overall protection over time, while the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine offered initial protection equivalent to Moderna's but declined more rapidly over time.

Persons receiving the Janssen vaccine also had higher odds of experiencing a severe breakthrough infection compared to Moderna.

Wildfires to get 50% more frequent by end of 2100: UN report

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

By the end of the century (2100), extreme wildfires are likely to become more frequent and intense — as high as 50 per cent — due to climate change and land-use change globally including India, according to a new UN report.

However, the global warming and urbanisation impact will start to be visible within the next seven years itself when wildfires will increase to 14 per cent by 2030 and 30 per cent by the end of 2050 itself, the report paints a scary scenario for the future. People's and animals' health is directly affected by inhaling wildfire smoke, causing respiratory and cardiovascular impacts and increased health effects for the most vulnerable.

The report by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and GRID-Arendal calls for a radical change in government spending on wildfires, shifting their invest-

ments from reaction and response to prevention and preparedness.

Titled "Spreading like wildfire: The Rising Threat of Extraordinary Landscape Fires," the extensive report finds an elevated risk even for the Arctic and other regions previously unaffected by wildfires. The report is released before representatives of 193 nations convene in Nairobi for the resumed 5th session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-5.2), between 28 February and 2 March, 2022.

According to Andrew Sullivan, Scientist, Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, Australia, who is one of the report's authors, uncontrollable and devastating wildfires are becoming an expected part of the seasonal calendars in many parts of the world. He said,

"We have seen a great increase in recent fires in northern Syria, northern Siberia, the eastern side of

Australia, and India. Although the situation is dire and eliminating wildfire risks is impossible, communities can still reduce their risk and exposure. Where wildfires have historically occurred, they may increase; however, where wildfires have not historically occurred, they may become more common."

He added that extreme wildfires can be devastating to people, biodiversity and ecosystems. They also exacerbate climate change, contributing significant greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, he said.

The authors have called upon the governments to adopt a new 'Fire Ready Formula,' with two-thirds of spending devoted to planning, prevention, preparedness, and recovery, with one third left for response. Currently, direct responses to wildfires typically receive over half of related expenditures, while planning and prevention receive less than one per cent.

"Current government responses to wildfires are often putting money in the wrong place. Those emergency service workers and firefighters on the frontlines who are risking their lives to fight forest wildfires need to be supported. We have to minimize the risk of extreme wildfires by being better prepared: invest more in fire risk reduction, work with local communities, and strengthen global commitment to fight climate change" said Inger Andersen, UNEP Executive Director.

While, the economic costs of rebuilding after areas are struck by wildfires can be beyond the means of low-income countries, watersheds are degraded by wildfires' pollutants; they also can lead to soil erosion causing more problems for waterways," notes the report.

The report was commissioned in support of UNREDD and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.

SII seeks permission from DCGI to conduct phase 3 study of Covovax

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Pune-based Serum Institute of India (SII) has sought permission from the Drug Controller General of India (DCGI) to conduct a phase-3 study of its Covid-19 vaccine Covovax as a booster dose in adults.

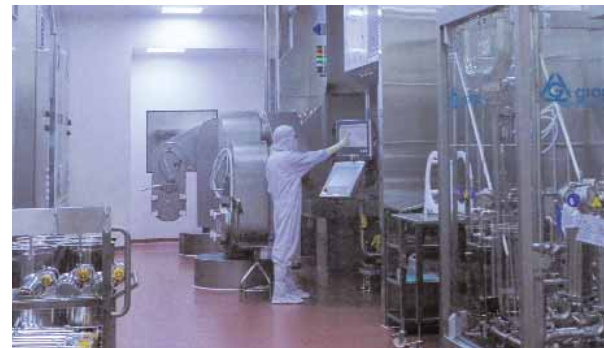
On December 8 last year, the DCGI had approved the vaccine for restricted use in emergency situations in adults. It is yet to be included in the country's inoculation programme which at present majorly has two vaccines namely Covaxine (by Bharat Biotech from Hyderabad) and Covishield by the SII.

Prakash Kumar Singh, Director, Government and Regulatory Affairs at SII had last week submitted an application to DCGI seeking nod for phase-3, observer-blind, ran-

domised, controlled study to evaluate the safety and immunogenicity of Covovax as booster dose on those who have received primary vaccination either with Covishield or Covaxin at least three months ago, an official source said. Singh has stated that many countries are already administering booster doses to their citizens considering the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We are sure that your approval for conducting this clinical trial will ensure an early availability of Covovax for booster dose use for people of our country as well as the world in line with our prime minister's vision of 'Making India for the World'," Singh is learnt to have stated in the application.

"Our firm is committed to providing world-class life-sav-



ing vaccines at an affordable price under the visionary leadership of our CEO Adar C Poonawalla. We request you to grant us permission to conduct a phase-3 clinical trial for booster dose of Covovax in Indian adults."

Covovax is manufactured by technology transfer from Novavax and is approved by the European Medicines Agency

for conditional marketing authorisation and also granted emergency use listing by WHO. In August 2020, the US-based vaccine maker Novavax Inc had announced a licence agreement with SII for the development and commercialisation of NVX-CoV2373, its COVID-19 vaccine candidate, in low and middle-income countries and India.

Working to facilitate more border transit points: Indian Embassy in Ukraine

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian embassy in Ukraine on Sunday said it is continuously exploring to facilitate opening up more border transit points with neighbouring countries for the evacuation of Indian citizens from Ukraine.

In an advisory, the embassy said it is closely monitoring the developing situation, especially in the eastern regions of Ukraine, and that it is in constant touch with the authorities for the safety of Indian citizens.

"As and when curfew is lifted and there is considerable movement of people in your respective neighbourhoods, Indian nationals are advised to use nearby railway stations for movement out of regions of active conflict and proceed towards the western regions,"

the embassy said.

"The transportation mode of railways is operational and safer. If tickets are available on regular trains, they may be booked. In addition, Ukrainian Railways is also operating special trains for evacuation of people free of charge on first come first serve basis at the railway station and for which tickets are not required," it added.

The embassy said Indian citizens are being evacuated from Ukraine through Romania and Hungary.

"We are continuously exploring and working to open up more borders with neighbouring countries for our citizens," it added.

It said preference at the railway stations is being given to children, women and elderly people.



The embassy urged people to stay calm and safe. "Please stay calm and safe. Carry only essentials in a rucksack/bag. Wear heavy winter clothing for warmth at night and if possible, a blanket and

essential medicines. Carry cash as much as possible," it said.

"Those who judge that the situation is not conducive for travel, or are unable to leave due to any reason, may wait until further developments,

may also plan accordingly by remaining in groups, keeping enough essentials, following existing instructions on safety and security," the embassy added.

India on Friday managed to set up camp offices in Lviv and Chernivtsi towns in western Ukraine to facilitate the transit of Indians to Hungary, Romania and Poland.

It also positioned teams of officials at the Zahony border post in Hungary, Krakowiec as well as the Shehyni-Medyka land border points in Poland, Vysne Nemecke in the Slovak Republic and the Suceava transit point in Romania to coordinate the exit of Indian nationals from Ukraine.

At present, Indian citizens are being evacuated from Ukraine through its border with Romania and Hungary.

PAGD's white paper desperate attempt to regain lost power in J-K: BJP leader Rana

PTI ■ JAMMU

Terming the PAGD's white paper on Jammu and Kashmir a "bunch of lies by a bunch of dynasts", senior BJP leader Devender Singh Rana on Sunday cautioned against attempts of creating an atmosphere of paranoia to regain lost power by indulging in "falsehood" and "misrepresentation of facts".

The People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD) had on Saturday released the white paper titled 'Betrayal' on Jammu and Kashmir post-abrogation of its special status in August, 2019.

The alliance had asked the Centre to go for a dispassionate appraisal of its decision to revoke the special status of

Jammu and Kashmir, claiming that such an exercise would lead to the realisation of gross violation of the constitution and betrayal of the people.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a function in Akhnoor, Rana said, "On the face of rejection by the people of Jammu and Kashmir, the limited company of dynasts under the umbrella of PAGD is unsuccessfully trying to whip up passions to attain relevance in Kashmir politics."

"The temporary provision granting special status to Jammu and Kashmir had to go for being an obstacle to the rights of dalits, women and tribals in particular," he said.

The BJP leader also questioned the timing of the release

of the white paper, saying it took the alliance 19 months to frame up a response to the August 2019 developments.

While recalling the assurances held out by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah in parliament about Jammu and Kashmir ushering a new phase of development, progress and prosperity post August 2019 political developments, Rana said the interests of the people of the Jammu and Kashmir region will be safeguarded at all costs.

He also exuded confidence that democracy will touch a new zenith in Jammu and Kashmir with the holding of elections and people stamping the government of their choice.

UP polls: 55.76% voter turnout in 5th phase

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

55 per cent polling was recorded on Sunday in the fifth phase of the Uttar Pradesh Assembly polls for 61 seats spread across 12 districts.

According to the Election Commission of India's voter turnout application, the polling percentage was 55.76. Voting ended at 6 pm. The voting started at 7 am and continued till 6 pm. Around 2.24 crore people were eligible to vote in this phase.

Ayodhya, the epicentre of the Ram temple movement, and Amethi and Rae Bareilly, once considered Congress bastions, were among the key assembly constituencies which went to polls in the fifth phase of polling.

Apart from these, voters from districts such as Sultanpur, Chitrakoot, Pratapgarh, Kaushambi, Prayagraj, Barabanki, Bahraich, Shravasti and Gonda also cast their votes. Polling was peace-

ful, barring in Pratapgarh's Kunda assembly constituency where Samajwadi Party candidate Gulshan Yadav's convoy was allegedly attacked by some people and the windscreen of his SUV was smashed.

Gulshan Yadav's convoy was attacked by some people in Pahadpur Banohi area of Kunda on Sunday, police said. Gulshan Yadav, a former associate of Kunda MLA Raja Bhaiya, claimed that he sustained minor injuries in the incident and some vehicles were damaged.

Yadav is contesting from Kunda as SP candidate against Janghata Dal candidate Raghuraj Pratap Singh alias Raja Bhaiya, a six-term MLA from Kunda.

Circle Officer of Kunda, Ajit Kumar, said some persons attacked Yadav's convoy when it reached Pahadpur Banohi polling centre, damaging some vehicles. Yadav's security personnel saved him, he said, adding that a probe was under-

way. Gulshan Yadav was returning after surveying booths in his assembly constituency when his car was attacked. Yadav has accused supporters of Raja Bhaiya for the attack. Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav condemned the incident saying "smashing of vehicle's windscreen cannot demolish the high morale of the Samajwadi Party". SP state president Naresh Uttam and party's national spokesperson Rajendra Chaudhary had given a written complaint regarding the Kunda incident to the Election Commission of India.

While Amethi recorded 52.82 per cent polling, Ayodhya reported 58.01 per cent polling, Bahraich 54.68 per cent, Barabanki 54.75 per cent, Chitrakoot 59.50 per cent, Gonda 54.21 per cent, Kaushambi 56.96 per cent, Pratapgarh 50.20 per cent, Prayagraj 51.29 per cent, Rae Bareilly 56.06 per cent, Shravasti 57.24 per cent and Sultanpur 54.91 per cent. As many as 692

candidates were in the fray in this round of polls, including Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya, who is contesting from Sirathu in Kaushambi district. He is pitted against Apna Dal (Kamerawadi) candidate Pallavi Patel.

Prominent faces in the fray besides Keshav Prasad Maurya, included Sidharth Nath Singh from Allahabad West, Rajendra Singh, alias Moti Singh from Patti (Pratapgarh), Nand Gopal Gupta 'Nandi' from Allahabad South and Ramapati Shastri from Mankapur (Gonda) and Congress Legislative Party leader Aradhana Mishra from Rampur Khas constituency of Pratapgarh.

Union Minister Anupriya Patel's mother and Apna Dal (K) leader Krishna Patel is contesting from Pratapgarh Constituency. The Apna Dal (K) has entered into an alliance with the Samajwadi Party. Union Minister of state Anupriya Patel, heading a rival

faction of the party named after her father Sonelal Patel, however, has handed over the seat to the Bharatiya Janata Party to challenge her mother Krishna Patel. With the completion of polling on Sunday, Uttar Pradesh will have voted on 292 of the total 403 seats in the assembly. The last two phases of the elections will be held on March 3 and 7. The results will be declared on March 10.

According to the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), Samajwadi Party has 42 candidates with criminal records out of a total number of 59 candidates in this phase.

Of the 52 candidates fielded by the Bharatiya Janata Party, 25 have criminal records. Bahujan Samaj Party and Congress have fielded 23 candidates each with criminal records against their names. Ten of the 52 candidates fielded by the Aam Aadmi Party in this phase of UP elections also have criminal history.

Green voting: Combining votes, plants to save democracy, nature

PTI ■ PRATAPGARH (UP)

As the fifth round of Assembly polls was held in Uttar Pradesh on Sunday, it was a day of double excitement for Gem Mishra and Prakriti Shrivastav, both 18 and living with their families in a quaint neighbourhood of Pratapgarh district. As excited as they were for being a first-time voter, Gem and Prakriti were equally exhilarated about becoming part of 'Green Voting' -- a plantation drive conducted on the polling day by a local environment protection group.

"We have to strengthen the democracy and the nature, too," Mishra, a second-year B.Sc student at Babu Sant Baksh College in Lilapur here, told PTI. After casting his vote in the morning in the Raniganj assembly constituency, the first-time voter said he was "very excited" as he rushed home to plant a guava sapling. "A politician is one who leads

the country. Their role is significant and we need to elect the right leader who could take us collectively forward, guide us," Mishra said.

Shrivastav, who is preparing for engineering entrance exams after completing Class 12, said she felt proud after casting her vote for the first time ever and that she felt good being part of the initiative to protect the environment. "It's our responsibility to elect our representatives. I felt proud I did that today. Later, I planted a guava sapling too as part of the Green Voting campaign," Shrivastav told PTI, adding that she has been associated with the cause for a year now and even campaigned to raise awareness about voting and plantation.

Like Mishra and Shrivastav, hundreds of voters, including first-timers, in Pratapgarh pledged to plant a tree after casting their vote through an initiative of 'Paryavaran Sena',

aimed at raising awareness for voter turnout as well as climate change. Ajay Kumar Tiwari, alias Ajay 'Krantikaari', the chief of Paryavaran Sena, said he had started working for environment two decades ago and has been campaigning to raise awareness towards protecting nature and climate change.

"The government does what it has to do but we know nature would be destroyed if people do not wake up to the situation," the 45-year-old social worker and lawyer told PTI. "There are several types of 'sena' in the country. The 'sena' for protecting the country is there of course but several had come up for political activities in recent years. It struck me then about forming a 'sena' that would protect nature," he said.

The Paryavaran Sena was formed on August 9, 2002, he said, adding that since then, the outfit, which has thousands of volunteers, has been working for environment protection. He recalled how a former Pratapgarh district magistrate who was impressed by his outfit's work had called him Ajay 'Krantikaari' (revolutionary), a monk who has now become part of his identity.

Over the years, Ajay and his outfit also joined forces with the district administration for various social campaigns including those on elections and voting. The outfit is running the 'Green Voting' campaign, which aims at raising awareness for environment protection among people as well about the significance of voting in a democracy. The Paryavaran 'sainiks' are going across the district, including villages, to raise awareness for voting, and telling them how to make the day memorable for themselves, he said.

The Paryavaran Sena had worked during the 2019 general elections and the 2017 state assembly elections also, with a

mission to make people aware and encourage them for 100 per cent voting, he said. "If more people vote, it will save the democracy. But a democracy, a nation and world would only survive if the nature survives," Tiwari said. "We conceptualised a method to link voting with plantation. We coined a slogan 'Button Dabao, Ped lagao, Loktantra Va Srishti Bachao'," he said. The Paryavaran Sena chief said this time, the outfit got 'Sankalp Patra' (resolution paper) from around 20,000 voters, who pledged to plant a tree after casting their vote.

They also have to protect and take care of their 'voting tree', he said, adding that for people who cannot arrange plants by themselves, the outfit volunteers are providing them saplings of guava, mango, jamun, etc. "These saplings could be planted in February. These plants will not only add to the beauty of their premises but also be a memory for this election and green voting. It will be a souvenir for people's future generations," Tiwari said.

"The response from the public has been very good and positive. February is not the best time for plantation drives though and arranging saplings is also a bit difficult because of the season. Had the election taken place after monsoon, around October, this drive could have been more successful," he said. Despite the challenges, he said the outfit has got support from its volunteers, the local forest department, and private nurseries -- who have all chipped in the initiative by providing saplings. Highlighting the problem of drinking water, Tiwari stressed the need for protecting the environment while protecting democracy.

The fifth round of elections was held on Sunday across a dozen districts.

Violence, rigging reported in WB civic elections

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ SERAMPORE/KOLKATA

History continued to repeat. Even as blatant booth-capturing, attacks on Opposition candidates and media persons marked the ruling Trinamool Congress' "khela" (game) in Sunday's elections to 108 municipal boards of Bengal.

In protest, principal Opposition BJP immediately called a dawn-to-dusk bandh on Monday terming the votes "nothing but a farce."

Booths were jammed, vote looted and Opposition candidates and their polling agents were brutally assaulted in districts from Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri and Dalkhola in North Bengal to Joynagar, Hooghly and Contai in the South, sources alleged, adding the women contestants too were not spared.

Some were publicly manhandled and others threatened with rape by the rampaging goons of the ruling party. Notwithstanding, about 77 per cent voters exercised their franchise with East Midnapore a stronghold of Opposition Leader Suwendu Adhikari polling the highest with 84 per cent till reports last came in at 5 pm.

While Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri witnessed 80 and 82 per cent voters' turnout, 74 per cent voters exercised their franchise in North 24 Parganas in the northern fringes of Kolkata. Darjeeling recorded the lowest 54 per cent polling.

Throughout the day goons raided booths on North Barrackpore where they manhandled CPI(M)'s woman candidate and threatened her with rape after the elections were over at Serampore in Hooghly the goons assaulted another woman candidate.

At Dhulia the men in uniform were attacking a policeman was given an injured eye. The police resorted to lathicharge and tear gas firing in Jangipur in Murshidabad district where the Congress fought a pitched battle with the TMC men. At Kharagpur a presiding officer complained how he was pinned down at gun point

even as the TMC goons captured the booth.

"The police had fled the spot" he complained. There was massive violence at Shantipur in Nadia district, Garulia and Bhatpara in North 24 Parganas where the TMC fought pitched battle with the local BJP MP Arjun Singh's men.

A woman candidate of the CPI(M) was publicly insulted by the TMC goons in North Dum Dum and when the media went to cover the incident they were beaten up, sources said.

At Contai (Kanthi) the home town of Suwendu Adhikari the men from electronic media were assaulted and their camera smashed when they rushed to capture the shots of booth capturing.

Ditto in places like Kamarhati, Hooghly, Joynagar and elsewhere, sources said and the police played a "limited role" containing violence. "This is anything but election... No report of violence has come from Uttar Pradesh where elections are being held in several phases... Not a single journalist has been attacked in war-torn Ukraine... and here Bengal not even the media and women candidates are spared," State BJP spokesperson Samik Bhattacharya said. "Only Police and goons are voting here."

Voters are scared to vote, especially the Bengali population, who are not being allowed to vote. Even TMC's core vote bank, Muslims are not able to vote. Police here is playing one of the 3 monkeys of Gandhiji," said Bengal BJP vice-president Arjun Singh.

While the BJP claimed in 927 places their representatives or their candidates were attacked voters were not allowed to vote the State Election Commission conceded that it had received 800 such complaints.

The BJP leadership called a 12-hour bandh on Monday to protest against Sunday's electoral violence. "The law and machinery has completely broken down in Bengal," Bhattacharya said.

Covid-19 infections in Maha drops further to 882

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

The daily Covid-19 infections in Maharashtra dropped further to 882 on Sunday, even as daily cases in Mumbai rose marginally from 89 to 103.

A day after the state recorded 893 infections, the daily cases dropped to 782. With fresh infections recorded on Friday, the total number of Covid-19 cases in the state rose from 78,64,516 to 78,65,298.

With 8 fresh deaths, the total number of deaths registered in the state since the outbreak of Covid-19 in the state in March 2020 went up to 143,697. With the fresh 103 cases, the total number of cases in Mumbai mounted on 10,56,296 to 10,56,399.

While the recovery rate stood static at 98 per cent, the overall growth rate of Covid-19 cases in the metropolis for a

period from February 18 and 24 went down to 0.01 per cent.

As 2,521 Covid-19 patients were discharged from the hospitals across the state after full recovery, the total number of people discharged from the hospitals since the second week of March 2020 increased from 77,04,733 to 77,07,254. The recovery rate in the state rose from 97.99 per cent to 98.01 per cent.

The number of 'active cases' in the state dropped from 7,811 to 7,228. The fatality rate in the state stood static at 1.82 per cent. The active cases in Pune dropped from 2705 to 2541.

The active cases in Mumbai dropped from 902 to 838, while the number of active cases in the neighbouring Thane dropped from 642 to 558. The active cases in Ahmednagar dropped from 699 to 645, while number of

active cases in Nagpur came down from 503 to 373. Of 7,78,24,854 samples sent to various laboratories across state so far, 78,65,298 have tested positive (10.13 per cent) for COVID-19 until Sunday.

Currently, 1,36,445 people are in home quarantine while 744 people are in institutional quarantine.

Meanwhile, no fresh Omicron case was recorded in Maharashtra on Friday, resulting in the total number of the new Covid-19 variant remaining static at 4,629. Of these cases, 4,456 patients have been discharged after they tested negative in the RT-PCR tests.

Till Friday evening, 9,382 samples had been sent for genome sequencing, out of which, results of 8,333 patients have been received, while the results of 1,049 samples are awaited.

CPI(M) to commence 4-day-long State Conference at Ernakulam

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

The four-day long State Conference of the CPI(M) will commence at Ernakulam on Tuesday. The triennial event is being held in Ernakulam after a gap of 35 years as last time the city hosted the CPI(M) extravaganza was in 1985. Much water has flown through River Periyar since then and the party has become first political outfit in 44 years to return to power after ruling the State from 2016 to 2021.

The four-day meet will see delegates from all 14 districts assembling in Ernakulam as party is getting ready to undergo an overhauling and modernisation process. This is first State Conference since the CPI(M) was formed in 1964 which would see absence of V S Achuthanandan, the lone surviving member of group of 42 comrades who walked out of national council of CPI in 1964 over ideological differences. The Central Committee of CPI(M) has taken a decision to weed out all those who are above the age of 75 and this is an indication that many old timers and veterans may have to make way for youngsters in the State

Committee. The only exception is in the case of Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, though on the wrong side of 75, is the most powerful leader in the party.

Kodiyyeri Balakrishnan will continue to be the secretary of the party for the next three years, according to party insiders. There was strong news that he is likely to be elected as the all India general secretary of the party since Vijayan and his supporters are not favourably disposed towards incumbent Sitaram Yechury.

Kerala is agog with news that a political realignment is on the cards as CPI(M) is cosying up to Muslim League. Two major developments that took place during last fortnight have sent political grapevine working overtime. Former finance minister Thomas Isaac in his social media post waxed eloquence on Muslim League strongman P K Kunhalikutty. K T Jaleel (who was the State chief of the banned SIMI) who was a minister in Vijayan's cabinet during 2016-2021 held lengthy discussions with Kunhalikutty whom the former had accused of money laundering making use of the State's Cooperative Banks as a medium.

J&K's golden girl makes India proud, wins gold in Moscow

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JAMMU

Golden girl from Jammu and Kashmir Sadia Tariq has made the entire nation proud by winning gold medal in the Moscow Wushu Stars Championship held in the Russian capital from February 22 to 28. Sadia is receiving appreciation from one and all for her brilliant achievement in the world of sports.

Prime Minister, Narendra Modi also took to social media to wish the young Wushu champion. "Congratulations to Sadia Tariq on winning the Gold medal at the Moscow Wushu Stars Championship. Her success will inspire many budding athletes. Wishing her the very best for her future endeavours", PM Modi said in a tweet.

Lieutenant Governor of J&K, Manoj Sinha, also wished the player for her brilliant success. "Congratulations to Sadia Tariq from Srinagar on winning Gold in this International championship. She exhibited great discipline, dedication, talent and mental strength making India proud with her significant accomplishment.



She is an inspiration for budding sportspersons of the UT. I wish Sadia more success in future", Lieutenant Governor said in a tweet.

Sadia Tariq, who hailed from Bemina, Srinagar, has consecutively bagged gold medals in 19th and 20th Junior National Championship held in Haryana and Jalandhar respectively. In the Moscow Wushu Stars Championship, Sadia won the gold medal by defeating a local favourite at the event.

Sadia, who came into sports at a young age, did his schooling from Presentation Convent Srinagar and started playing in school events when she was in her first grade. "When I was in my first grade our fitness teacher came to our class and announced about the sports tourney in our school, I was the first one to register for

the event", Sadia said. Appreciating her parents support from the very young age, Sadia elatedly said, "I remember my Father just told me if I am interested in sports, he will always support me. I was very happy and choose taekwondo as the game and from the very next day I started my training".

After training for a year, Sadia started to participate in district and division level sports events. "I went for my first competition from school level which was organized by Indian Army at Bandipora district and I won bronze medal. I started getting appreciation from my coaches and school administration which kept my morale high in this field", said Sadia.

After her success in local events, the star Wushu player started to participate in national level events. "After winning bronze medal in local events, my coaches appreciated me and encouraged me to participate in national level events and the same year I went to New Delhi for participation in 3rd open India taekwondo championship and won bronze medal", a happy Sadia remarked. Sadia's career took a

turn when she decided to switch from Taekwondo to Wushu sport. "Our Kashmir Wushu Chief Executive Officer and Chief coach of India, Kuldeep Handoo, encouraged me to switch over from taekwondo to Wushu which was hard for me but I took it as a challenge and started training for Wushu", Sadia said. After proper training, Sadia started to participate in professional Wushu events and earned her name.

"I participated in National Level Wushu championship held at Kolkata and won bronze medal which motivated me and earned my love for this sport", Sadia maintained.

Sadia's elder sister also joined sports and is professional Martial Arts player. "In March 2021, I won gold medal at 2nd Junior National Championship at Haryana in which my sister also participated. She has also played for National level championship in Gujarat and state level championships and won few gold medals", Sadia said. Sadia has dedicatedly chosen sports as her career and wants to make her country proud by getting more medals.

BJP meets Guv, seeks fresh polls in 107 civic bodies

PTI ■ KOLKATA

The BJP on Sunday urged West Bengal Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar to intervene to get the State Election Commission to order fresh elections in 107 municipal bodies policed by central forces. A BJP delegation consisting of General Secretary Agnimitra Paul and Sisir Bajoria made the request to Dhankhar Sunday night after meeting the State Election Commission.

"We are not happy with the response of State Election Commissioner Sourav Das to

our demand for repoll with central forces. We have therefore come to Raj Bhavan seeking the intervention of the Governor in the issue. Democracy is in peril in West Bengal under the rule of Mamata Banerjee," Pal told reporters later.

The party said in its letter to the SEC that the state poll panel "has failed to perform its role in ensuring a free and fair municipal election as direct-ordered by the hon'ble high court" resulting in widespread rigging in all 107 municipalities and attacks on BJP activists by TMC cadre. Alleging the

police and SEC failed to perform their role to contain rigging and attacks, the BJP demanded the SEC declares the elections held Sunday in 107 municipalities as "null and void" and comes up with repolling under the supervision of central police forces.

In the letter to the Governor, the BJP said as it was not satisfied with the response of SEC to its request, "We are left with no option but to seek your intervention in the matter." Before the delegation met him, Dhankhar had asked SEC to meet him at Raj Bhavan on Monday.

Probe Fadnavis role in phone tapping case: Cong

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

A day after the Pune police registered an FIR against senior IPS officer and former Police Commissioner Rashmi Shukla under the Indian Telegraph Act, the Congress on Sunday demanded the role of former Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis -- who was also the State Home Minister in the previous BJP-led State Government -- be investigated in the much-discussed phone tapping case.

Alleging that Fadnavis was also involved in the alleged "illegal" tapping of politicians' phones during the previous BJP-Shiv Sena government, Maharashtra Congress president Nana Patole said that

Rashmi Shukla would not have dared to indulge into illegal phone tapping without the blessings of a senior member of the government."

"As per the directives by the Supreme Court, the Home Secretary's permission is mandatory for tapping anyone's phone. Rashmi Shukla would not have dared to indulge into illegal phone tapping without the blessings of a senior member of the government... Fadnavis, who was the former Home Minister, was also involved in the case of illegal phone tapping. Hence, Fadnavis should also be investigated in the phone tapping case," Patole said. Patole alleged that during the previous BJP-led government under

Fadnavis in the state, the phones of many ministers, leaders including his, senior IAS, IPS officers were illegally tapped between 2017 and 2018.

Patole, whose phone was reportedly tapped during the tenure of the BJP-led government, said: "It was shown that we were involved in drug dealing and our phones were tapped. Fake Muslim identities were given to us. My name was Amjad Khan and Bacchu Kadu was given the name of Nizamuddin Babu Sheikh".

"I had also raised the issue of illegal phone tapping in the State Assembly and demanded a high level inquiry. Home minister Dilip Walse Patil has informed that Rashmi Shukla was found guilty in the inquiry

and a case has been registered against her," the State Congress chief said. "Phone tapping is done with special permission to investigate serious cases like terrorism, drug trafficking but our phones were tapped despite us having nothing to do with these crimes," Patole said.

"It is a crime to keep a person under watch by tapping their phone, it is also a violation of individual freedom. And in a similar manner, it has been revealed that the Modi government at the centre has been spying on ministers, political leaders, judiciary and journalists using the Pegasus software. This too is a similar offence and we have demanded that an inquiry be conducted in this case too," the State

Congress chief said. Patole said that though a case had been registered against Rashmi Shukla, there were many unanswered questions like: to whom did she give the recordings of phone calls? What was the main motive behind tapping the phones? Who had ordered Rashmi Shukla to tap phones?

Patole demanded that the state government should expedite the investigations into the phone tapping case and find out the real mastermind of the case and take stern action against him. Patole in past raised issue of alleged illegal phone tapping that took place during previous BJP-led government. Following registration of an FIR against Shukla, he has revived the issue.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

A tightrope

India's abstention at the UNSC resolution against Russia sends out conflicting signals

Why did India abstain from a US-sponsored resolution of the UN Security Council that deplored Russia's aggression against Ukraine? China, a permanent member of the Security Council, and the UAE, also abstained, but the internal debate in India remains largely focused on the country's stand. India's stand is consistent and balanced, the Government argues. The logic is India's abstention allows it to continue talking to both sides; that is, aggressor Russia and victim Ukraine. In keeping with the balanced stand, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin as well as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. He called Putin for "an immediate cessation of violence" and "return to the path of diplomatic negotiations and dialogue". He told Zelenskyy who called him for "an immediate cessation of violence" and "a return to dialogue". Curiously, the Government's message to both sides is similarly worded. For, it is for Russia to stop the aggression and not Ukraine, the aggrieved party. Congress, India's main Opposition party in Parliament, preferred not to react. It claims to refrain from voicing a contrary stand on international crises for the sake of India putting up a united face. That did not stop some of its leaders like Shashi Tharoor and Manish Tewari to argue the Government should have unequivocally supported Ukraine. Tewari suggested that while Russia backed India during crisis times, "when a friend commits a mistake, it needs to be corrected".



BJP's vice-president formally defended the abstention because India believes in dialogue and diplomacy. He even distinguished between the abstentions of India and China saying, to quote a news agency, "We are not like China, which abstained with a message which seems like advocating for war." However, neither the United States nor Russia objected to India's abstention. Moscow lauded India's "balanced" stand. The US said,

"We understand, it is okay." What it left unsaid was unambiguously articulated by two Democrat Congressmen. Indian-American Congressman from California Ro Khanna outlined the American perspective tweeting, "It is the US, not Russia, that will stand with India against China's current expansionist plans." His colleague, Congressman Eric Swalwell said, "Khanna and I represent the largest Indian-American districts and this vote is contrary to what we hear from our constituents." So, where do we stand on this abstention? A lot is already being written about it but two things must be kept in mind. First, a nation's policies will always be at variance with its citizens' sentiments because of the big-picture-small-picture binary. Secondly, most probably, coming-of-age India is only now directly involved in a big-ticket Security Council vote on a global security matter. It missed out on the experience during Kargil and Iraq wars because it was not part of the Security Council (as non-permanent member) then. It is, now, till 2023. Still, it may want to ponder why the world appears more concerned about the implications of China's abstention even as it takes India's abstention as nothing out of the ordinary.

PICTALK



Tourists ride a shikara in the backdrop of snow-covered mountains on a sunny day, at Dal Lake in Srinagar PTI

Neglected sister?

The first phase of polling takes place in Manipur today but all eyes are only on UP

Amid the din of UP elections, the Manipur poll has not been getting the attention it deserves. As per the rescheduled election, voting for 38 seats in Manipur's first phase would take place today; the remaining 22 would vote on March 5. Most of the media and parties chose to ignore this Northeast State, which happens to be among the most volatile in the region. The new dispensation could decide the future of Manipur itself. Whether it would be at peace or boil would largely depend on how the various ethnic groups are accommodated in the new Vidhan Sabha. If one were to go by opinion surveys and expert opinions, the ruling BJP has an edge and Congress is likely to be a close second. Both had an almost similar vote share in 2017. The Congress has forged a six-party alliance, called Manipur Progressive Secular Alliance (MPSA). The reason for BJP's edge is that it got into election mode earlier and that could help it retain power. In the last election, it allied with the Naga People's Party and Naga People's Front but this time it has decided to go it alone.



Regional parties like the NPF and NPP are expected to do well in their pockets but these do not have a State-wide appeal. In smaller States having around 50 seats, the regional parties or independents always play a big role in Government formation. The key concerns of Manipur's people are price rise, unemployment, the lack of education and health services but, like elsewhere, the parties have chosen to concentrate on negative campaigns. Security is a major issue in this border State with a long history of insurgency. The Kuki National Organisation (KNO), an umbrella organisation of 17 Kuki militant groups, under suspension of operation agreement with the Centre influencing the hills of Manipur supported the BJP. It was largely due to Amit Shah's efforts, who promised to address their core concerns while keeping their aspirations in mind. The NPP had accused the BJP of using extremist groups in the Kuki-Zomi areas to prevent its candidate from filing nominations or campaigning. The Congress has been vocal against BJP's "misrule" and criticised its silence on the controversial AFSPA which is very unpopular in the State. It would be quite a task for any party that comes to power to balance local aspirations with national interests.

Unhinged Generals of Rawalpindi GHQ



BHOPINDER SINGH

These amoral, compromised and dishonourable leaders institutionalised doublespeak and double-dealing that afflicts Pakistan to date

Initially, the Pakistan Army's motto used to be 'Ittehad, Yaqeen aur Tanzeem' (Unity, Faith and Discipline) — insisting on functional attributes that reside in any militaristic framework. The forced takeover by General Zia-ul-Haq in 1977 (ironically called 'Operation Fair Play') changed the storyline for posterity. Zia soon initiated systemic sharia-isation of the national narrative, and the Pakistan military was not spared either. Reflecting the deliberate conflation of religion, military and Pakistani identity, the motto of the Pakistani Army was changed to a decidedly religious 'Imaan, Taqwa, Jihad fi Sabilillah' (Faith, Piety, Holy War in the path of Allah). This was not harmless semantics but the calculated posturing of the 'faithful' in a professional Army to fight the 'holy war in the path of Allah'. Jinnah's confused secularism (with underlying two-nation theory) was effectively buried. But just how much personal commitment towards the posited religious tenets would be demonstrated by Pakistani Generals was another matter, beyond the simpler task of changing mottos. Given Pakistan's foundational weakness in 'two-nation theory' that belies the simmering reality of impulsive ethnic/sectarian strife (eg, Bangladesh in 1971), the Pakistani military has arrogated a larger-than-constitutionally-mandated role that trumps true democracy.



Pakistani Army. Bhutto had fatally superseded six officers to appoint Zia-ul-Haq, and later Nawaz Sharif made the same assumption with Pervez Musharraf. Zia handed Bhutto, while Musharraf banished Nawaz Sharif to Saudi Arabia. Such was Zia's cunning that on one occasion he had proclaimed with the Quran in his hand to Bhutto, "You are the saviour of Pakistan, and we owe it to you to be totally loyal to you"; a year later, Zia signed Bhutto's hanging!

But Gen Zia couldn't have done what he did by himself; he needed similar-minded conspirators. In Gen Akhtar Abdul Rahman, he saw a journeyman. Like Zia, Akhtar had endeared himself to Bhutto, especially when he was the GOC of 12 Division at Murree, but shifted loyalties later. Even though Akhtar had not participated in Zia's coup and was known to be opposed to the coup — yet, when contacted by Lt Gen Faiz Ali Chishti to enrol Akhtar's complicity in a possible countercoup against Zia, Akhtar ingratiated himself to Zia's camp by informing him about the plan. Later, Zia rewarded Akhtar with the most coveted post of DG of Pakistani spy agency, Inter-Services Intelligence. Soon Akhtar was to supposedly walk the talk of the newly minted motto, 'Imaan, Taqwa,



THE PAKISTANI ARMY HAS DONE A FAR BETTER JOB OF DEFINING AND MISUSING THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE TO ITS ADVANTAGE THAN IT HAS EVER AT WINNING ANY WAR

To this unhinged fount of institutional privileges birthed the murky ascendancy of Gen Zia-ul-Haq who upped the regression quotient to infuse the ultra-toxic admixture of extreme religiosity, intrigues and deceit. Sir Morrice James had described the institution under Field Marshal Ayub "essentially a Punjab-Pathan autocracy seasoned with emigres from UP" — this undeniable reality had falsely lulled insecure politicians to punt on 'safe' Mohajirs as Chiefs of

Jihad fi Sabilillah', with his shaping of Islamic extremism via Afghan mujahideen, where he was once heard extolling in a presentation, "Kabul must burn! Kabul must burn!" The unholy Operation Cyclone, with ISI-CIA jointmanship and further funding from Sheikdoms, was Akhtar's doing. Then these dishonourable Generals also institutionalised double-speak and double-dealing that afflicts Pakistan to date.

Over 33 years after the curious case of 'exploding mangoes' that killed both Zia and Akhtar in a mysterious air crash, news of misappropriation of funds for 'Holy War' and stashing of the same in private Swiss accounts of Gen Akhtar's sons surfaced. The reality of 'Holy War in the path of Allah', as practised by the amoral and compromised Pakistani military leadership, has tumbled out again. But with Rawalpindi GHQ still controlling all levers, the financially crippled Pakistan Government recently signed a surreal 15 per cent pay increase for its military. The fate of Pakistan, its Generals and outcome of wars is self-explanatory.

(The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal.)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CENTRE NOT FULFILLING PROMISES

Sir — The promise made by the Union Government to create 2 crore jobs per year to remove unemployment has become a distant dream. More than seven years after the BJP-led Government assumed office, only a few lakh jobs have been added, according to the official labour bureau data. The Centre just blames the previous regimes and seeks to dig up past issues pertaining to former Prime Ministers. No journalist ever speaks about unemployment, lack of education budget, misuse of powers, survival struggles of youth, growing crime due to the lack of job opportunities and the promised 100 Smart Cities and 'Make in India' projects an utter failure.

But demonetisation and the long lockdown forced many small businesses to pull down their shutters, with youth losing their jobs. Hundreds of unemployed youth in frustration and tension committed suicides. The pandemic has caused the biggest surge in joblessness, with many companies ousting their employees and the Centre having failed in its policies to secure these jobs. The Centre has not only failed to create jobs but also to keep the existing ones intact. Unemployment is a major problem which is hampering the nation's progress and development.

Bhagwan Thadani | Mumbai

IT'S TIME TO CRIMINALISE WAR

Sir — The entire world is crying hoarse against Russia which has been attacking Ukraine continuously. First, the term "war" itself should be banned from international geography and must be criminalised in all respects. For this, the UN should do some serious work and bring about strong, foolproof rules that will/should unfailingly stop countries like Russia from waging a war against dependent countries. Such strong international rules have been missing from action now. That is the reason countries like Russia have been able to go mindlessly on a war even in the 21st century. Russia must be held accountable for all the economic damage and lost human lives in Ukraine.

A weaker US has led to war



What emboldened Russian President Vladimir Putin was the US' current much-weakened status. American President Joe Biden and new-to-the-office Kamala Harris have jointly ruined the credibility, reliability and respectability of their country. After the American debacle in Afghanistan, even small powers no longer fear or respect the US; so what to say about Putin, a man of steely nerves and icy determination? He seized an opportune moment to achieve his goal. China jumped in to back Russia as it has

its own axe to grind — its obsession with its plans to gobble up Taiwan. The US leadership possesses neither the guts to intervene militarily nor does it have the brains to defuse the situation through a dialogue.

How one wishes Biden had at least chosen Tulsi Gabbard, a level-headed highly intelligent Congress member, in the place of Kamala Harris who appears more like a light-headed laughing hyena. Tulsi would have been of great help to Biden by giving him sane, suitable and timely advice. In a recent interview, she made another sensible statement to the effect that this war would not have broken out had the US and Nato declined to consider Ukraine's request for Nato membership. Ukraine should improve ties with its polar bear, Russia, and stop antagonising it. The American eagle's wings are clipped by its own varied domestic problems. It can no longer fly to the rescue of its allies.

MR Anand | Vrindavan

Above all, the international community and the world media should strongly support this move. Russia should understand that no one has the right to take away human lives or trigger economic damage in another country. The fact is that only economic freedom and development can make the world happy and prosperous. Russia also had better understand this simple fact. Otherwise, it must be made to pay a heavy price for all the damage, both in terms of economy and human capital, caused by it.

PS Saravana Durai | Andheri (West)

CELEBRATING NATIONAL SCIENCE DAY

Sir — February 28 is celebrated as the National Science Day in India to honour 'Raman Effect', one of the discoveries by eminent physicist Sir CV Raman. Chandrasekhara Venkata Raman won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1930 and his phenomenal exploration was named after him. He was the first Indian director of the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, appointed in 1993. In 1986, the

National Council for Science and Technology Communication asked the Government to designate February 28 as the National Science Day. The event is now celebrated across India in academic, scientific, technical, medical and research institutions.

Every year, the day is celebrated with a theme. The theme this year is 'Integrated approach in science and technology for a sustainable future' which, I think, is quite vivid. It conveys that it's a waste of time to live without science. If you believe in science, you would always consider the logic behind any incident or development. We have been fortunate enough to see some amazing scientific studies, breakthroughs and technologies. It is also the responsibility of our students to honour Sir CV Raman through discoveries, inventions and contributions in the field of science and technology.

Ishika Asodiya | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

SOUND BITE

There's a need to appoint more judges on an urgent basis.

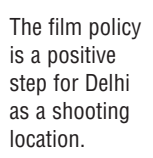


Chief Justice of India — NV Ramana



The US had intensified support to Ukraine since 2014 (attack on it).

Secretary of State — Antony Blinken



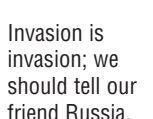
The film policy is a positive step for Delhi as a shooting location.

Filmmaker — Imtiaz Ali



I played some amazing rallies at the breakpoints.

Spanish tennis player — Rafael Nadal



Invasion is invasion; we should tell our friend Russia.

Congress leader — Shashi Tharoor

FIRST COLUMN

CHAGOS: RECALLING A 50-YR-OLD CRIME

Pentagon wanted Chagos to be a US bomber base in the Indian Ocean



GWYNNE DYER

The object of the exercise is to get some rocks which will remain ours... There will be no indigenous population except seagulls," wrote Sir Paul Gore-Booth, a senior official at the British Foreign Office, as the plan to expel the 2,000 Chagos Islanders from their homes was taking shape in 1966. "We must surely be very tough about this." Six years later the Chagossians ('Ilois,' as they call themselves) were scooped up, loaded on ships, and dumped on the waterfront of Port Louis in Mauritius, where most of them have lived in abject poverty ever since. But this month a number of them went back to the islands on a Mauritian ship. The crime that Gore-Booth was shamelessly discussing in 1966 was committed on behalf of the United States. The Chagos Islands, an archipelago of 62 coral atolls in the middle of the Indian Ocean, would make an ideal bomber



base from which to dominate most of south Asia and eastern Africa, and the Pentagon wanted it. Britain, in its usual kiss-up, kick-down mode, was happy to oblige, but there was a problem. The Chagos Islands had been governed as part of the British colony of Mauritius, which was due to get its independence in 1968. The United States wasn't keen on having a major strategic base in an independent African country, so something had to be done. The solution, obviously, was to separate the Chagos Islands from Mauritius and declare them the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). Easily done: offer the Mauritians £3 million for the islands, and tell them they can't have independence unless they accept the deal. However, this was happening at the height of decolonisation, when colonial territories all over the 'Third World' were claiming the right of self-determination. What if the Ilois do the same? Well, then, we'd better remove all the inhabitants. So that's what Britain did in 1972, falsely claiming that there was no resident population, only contract workers. The Ilois have not been allowed to return for fifty years, and all the people who were actually born there are getting old, but their children and grandchildren have not forgotten. They actually managed to get a decision in the British courts in 2000 ruling that the expulsion had been unlawful and ordering the British government to let the islanders go home. It might even have been obeyed - except that 2001 brought the 9/11 attacks, and the US base on the Chagos island of Diego Garcia became a key hub in the 'war on terror'. American B-52s flying from the Chagos Islands have bombed Afghanistan and Iraq at intervals for twenty years, and Diego Garcia, with no civilian population, became a transit point for prisoners being flown untraceably between American 'black sites' around the planet. The islands were on long lease from the UK, and the US didn't want them given back. Britain still insists it is the sovereign power on the islands (although it is the US that runs them), but since the International Court of Justice ruled in 2019 that the whole expulsion had been illegal it has been on the defensive. The UN General Assembly, and more recently the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, have backed that ruling. So the Ilois will be going home one day soon - and meanwhile, here's a fun fact. The Chagos archipelago is at the bottom of a giant bowl-shaped depression in the ocean almost 100 metres deep. If the sea was actually level - if not for the huge gravitational anomaly that holds that bowl open - the Chagos Islands would all be in very deep water.

(Gwynne Dyer's new book is 'The Shortest History of War'. The views expressed are personal.)

Naval upgrade: Russia is a tricky trader

Russia aspires to create dependency to use as an instrument of exerting its influence on future Indian foreign and security policies



NISHTHA KAUSHIKI

Given the joint Sino-Pak threat, especially from the sea, the Indian government has the strategic foresight to expand the military capabilities horizontally, i.e., diversification and increasing the lethality of the military assets apart from focussing on significant indigenous inductions such as IAC-1 and INS Vagir. The overall aim is to decrease dependency on defence supplies.

Project -75 was initiated to develop the Air Independent Propulsion (AIP) technology for the Indian submarines. The technology allows the submarines to stay longer underwater and hence are not easily detected by the enemy's surface assets. The AIP system that the Naval Materials Research Laboratory (NMRL) of DRDO has developed under Project-75 would be retrofitted from 2024-25 onwards into six Scorpene submarines. On the other hand, a ten-year lease signed with Russia in 2019 for a new submarine will be delivered in 2025. Hence, the period from 2022-2025 is crucial from a naval security point of view.

Given the security challenges from the adversaries apart from China's naval deployments in Djibouti and acquisitions of naval bases in South Asia, Project 75-I was initiated with an urgency to build six new conventional submarines for the Indian navy. The objective was to enhance naval capabilities. The Project worth Rs 45,000 crore was opened for original equipment manufacturers, and it was France, Germany, Russia, South Korea and Spain that were expected to bid. A mandatory condition of AIP technology in the submarines makes the Project highly tactical in nature.

After Germany and South Korea's refusal, Russia has recently refused to bid for the Project. Moscow instead has offered to upgrade the previously purchased Kilo-class submarines. The Russian decision has again brought the growing divergences between the "special and privileged partnership". An important reason for this has been that the component of arms sales in Russia is a "strategic sector" of its economy. By offering India an upgradation, it aims to market its submarines. The financial lucrativeness of selling spare parts and services to the existing and the new weaponry platforms should not be missed either. Thus, Russia aspires to ensure that a path dependency is created that can be used as an instrument of exerting its influence on the future Indian foreign and security policy. This factor becomes essential in the light of the fact that from 2016-20, the Russian arms imports saw a 53 per cent drop.

On the other hand, Moscow is developing state-of-art non-nuclear submarines with China. It has steadily shifted from a transactional relationship of a buyer-seller into a partnership that encompasses joint research, development and production of significant naval assets. Given the current geopolitical scenario, the development



FOR RUSSIA, THE FLIP SIDE OF THIS EMERGING BONHOMIE IS THAT PAKISTAN IS A MINIMAL MARKET FOR DEFENCE SUPPLIES AND IS FINANCIALLY UNSTABLE BECAUSE OF ITS FOREIGN POLICY TOOL OF SPREADING TERROR IN THE REGION. IN SUCH A CASE, RUSSIA SHOULD NOT FALL INTO THE TRAP OF CHINA TO SHARE THE FINANCIAL BURDEN OF KEEPING A TERRORIST COUNTRY LIKE PAKISTAN FUNCTIONAL

(The writer is an Assistant Professor at Central University of Punjab, Bathinda. The views expressed are personal.)



upon its materialisation would be inimical to India's security.

Russia has supplied China with the upgraded Kilo-Class diesel-electric attack submarine. Beijing has successfully convinced Russia to incorporate some of the features of Kilo-class submarines into its own domestically produced Yuan class submarines, which is its first AIP powered submarine. Nevertheless, given the Chinese expertise of reverse engineering and indigenisation to supply military technologies to its recipient countries such as Pakistan, an upgraded version of Kilo-class submarines that Russia has offered to India will most likely not suit India's naval requirements.

It is so because China has shared the technology with Pakistan and rechristened the Yuan as Type-039B 'Hangor Class' submarines for its client state. The deal sees the construction split between China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation (CSIC) and Karachi Shipyard and Engineering Works (KSEW). Further, the submarines constructed by China would be delivered to Pakistan between 2022-2028. With these facts, the upgradation offer of Moscow, if accepted by the Indian government, would tactically mean that all three countries - China, Pakistan, and India - would have Russian submarines or their improvised versions. The consequences of such a scenario can only be visualised by the Defence Ministry and the military experts.

From an Indo-centric perspective, if India successfully gets new submarines with the state-of-art technology, it can bridge the security gap for the next four to five years, thereby ensuring security by the time DRDO's AIP is retrofitted. Further, this period can also be used for experimentation of different

technologies that probably can make the Indian submarines more lethal than that of the arch-rivals of China and Pakistan.

The Russian refusal to bid for Project 75-I was expected and should not be considered a 'sudden development'. From a geopolitical perspective, Russia's refusal is significant in the light of an increasing shift from a Sino-Russo strategic 'partnership' to an 'alliance' and an emerging Russo-Pak bonhomie. The three parallel developments transform the security architecture of South Asia into a new era. Russia has joined China in looking at AUKUS from a Chinese prism. Their joint statement spoke of a "no-limits" friendship and denied any "forbidden" areas of cooperation. The statement without naming Quad criticised the grouping and called it "detriment of the security of others".

Additionally, it named AUKUS and the nuclear submarine cooperation as "contrary to the objectives of security and sustainable development of the Asia-Pacific region". At present, the region has been gradually witnessing the culmination of an 'anti-Quad' block that comprises Russia, China, and Pakistan, which perhaps would be joined in by Iran. The process marks the beginning of power shifts in Asia for the next two decades.

Sino-Russian convergence on an anti-American stand has been well-spoken. However, within the aforesaid platform, rapid convergences between Russia and Pakistan should be a cause of worry for the defence experts. It probably all began with the Russian sales of Mi-35M Hind-E assault helicopters (2015 and 2017) that soon culminated into a 'Security Training Agreement' (2018). The recent advances of Pakistan towards Russia

in the shadow of China aim to offset the 'special' relationship between New Delhi and Moscow.

India has been accorded Strategic Trade Authorization (STA) Tier-1 status owing to the West's strategy of Indo-Pacific, thus, making it eligible to get the much-required technology, or perhaps even a better one. Russia should understand that the greater the depth of its strategic relations with China and Pakistan, the more the chances of losing India. It could be further 'pushed' into the U.S. alliance system in the emerging scenario. The carefully crafted balance that New Delhi maintained until now can perhaps be lost. As the need of the hour is to have state of the art technology for the naval assets, a probable French, British or American willingness to share the technology should be taken by Russia in the right spirit.

For Russia, the flip side of this emerging bonhomie is that Pakistan is a minimal market for defence supplies and is financially unstable because of its foreign policy tool of spreading terror in the region. In such a case, Russia should not fall into the trap of China to share the financial burden of keeping a terrorist country like Pakistan functional. Instead, the Russian leadership should well acknowledge the Indian security concerns. Moscow's vision of South Asian geopolitics should not be primarily confined to an anti-American stand, and other issues such as Islamic fundamentalism, demographic changes, refugee problems, etc., should be genuinely considered. It should understand Pakistan's manipulative and 'victim' policy. An issue and a theatre-based approach, if adopted by Moscow, could perhaps save the Indo-Russian ties from diverging further.

POINT COUNTERPOINT

I WOULD LIKE TO ADDRESS THE PRESIDENT OF RUSSIA... LET'S SIT DOWN AT THE TABLE TO STOP THE DEATH OF PEOPLE.
— UKRAINE PRESIDENT
VOLODYMYR ZELENSKIY



IT SEEMS LIKE IT'LL BE EASIER TO AGREE WITH UKRAINE'S MILITARY THAN THIS GANG OF NEO-NAZIS (KYIV LEADERSHIP).
—RUSSIAN PRESIDENT
VLADIMIR PUTIN

Banking and insurance are different businesses

IRDA guidelines silent on invocation of guarantee or how the amount will be settled by the insurance company

Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India has issued IRDAI (Surety Insurance Contracts) Guidelines, 2022 on 3rd January 2022. The guidelines shall come into force with effect from April 1, 2022. These guidelines are applicable for all general insurance companies under registered Insurance Act 1938. The guidelines define different types of guarantees namely Advance Payment bond, Bid bond, Contract bond, Customs and court bond, Performance bond and Retention Money. The guidelines contain various conditions to be eligible for the surety business like maintenance of solvency margin, premium charged, board approved underwriting philosophy, risk assessment mechanism and



KALYANASUNDARAM

(The writer is a retired banker. The views expressed are personal.)

compliance with specific conditions.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has said the use of surety bonds issued by insurers as a substitute for bank guarantee will be made acceptable in Government procurements.

It is not known what has made the policy makers to allow issue of guarantees by insurance companies. As it is, there are enough number of banks and bank branches to handle this business. The policy makers do not seem have appreciated the nuances of bank guarantees.

Banks provide guarantees to their clients as part of working capital facility. Though at the time of issue of guarantee, there is no outflow of funds, in the eventuality of invocation of



guarantee, there will be outflow of funds from the bank. Hence what initially is treated as a non-fund-based facility may become a fund-based facility. Invoked guarantee or defaulted guarantee is similar to a loan book and ultimately this has to be recovered from the customer.

Banks do collect a margin amount, commission and also

tangible security for issuing guarantees. They do obtain a 'counter guarantee' from the customer to make good the amount of guarantee in case of invocation. In most of the cases, as the customer is enjoying different other facilities, the collateral security provided will be extended for the guarantees also. Hence in the eventuality of invocation of guarantee, the banks will be able to lay their hands on the securities with them. In no way, this can be done by any insurance company.

The guideline issued by IRDA is silent on invocation of guarantee or how the amount will be settled by the insurance company and how will they recover this amount. Or will they pay for the invoked guarantee out of their profit and

loss account?

For all practical purposes, guarantees portfolio should be treated only as a financial intermediation, as anytime the guarantee may be invoked and it squarely falls on the domain of banks. It is not a risk management mechanism and hence not in insurance domain. Why insurance companies must be allowed to enter this field?

Banks guarantees are well accepted by all as there are various guidelines by RBI as to the issue and payment in clear terms. The RBI is categorical that wherever the guarantees are invoked, payment should be made to the beneficiaries without delay and demur. It prescribes that an appropriate procedure for ensuring such immediate honouring of guarantees should be laid down so

that there is no delay on the pretext that legal advice or approval of higher authorities is being obtained.

Over the years the banks have understood that delays on the part of banks in honouring the guarantees when invoked tend to erode the value of the bank guarantees, the sanctity of the scheme of guarantees and image of banks. It also provides an opportunity to the parties to take recourse to courts and obtain injunction orders.

Only where there is an element of fraud in issuing or invoking the guarantees, the payment on the guarantee is withheld. Such occasions are very rare. Time and again courts have made it clear that payment on guarantees cannot be stopped by banks.

There are occasions that

bogus bank guarantees are used by clients. As no payment is involved while issuing a guarantee, it is possible that some guarantees purported to be from banks can be prepared and the beneficiary company can be defrauded. In such cases, only if the guarantees are invoked, the fraud will come to light. To avoid such a situation, banks provide a system to verify and get confirmation of guarantees issued from higher authorities of the bank. IRDA has not made any such provision in their guidelines.

Finally when banks are not allowed to enter the business of insurance (they only act as distributor for insurance companies), why insurance companies must enter the territory of banks? That too where there is tremendous risk.

Belarus holds constitutional vote amid Ukraine crisis

AP ■ KYIV,

Belarusians cast ballots Sunday in a constitutional referendum that the country's authoritarian leader called to cement his 27-year-old grip on power, even as he offers the country's territory to his ally Russia to invade Ukraine. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who has edged even closer to Russia amid crippling Western sanctions over his crackdown on domestic protests, said he was confident that Belarusians will support a set of constitutional amendments that would allow him to stay in power until 2035. The revised main law also sheds Belarus' neutral status, opening the way for stronger military cooperation with Russia, which deployed forces to Belarusian territory under the pretext of military drills and then sent them rolling into Ukraine as part of the invasion that began Thursday. Some of those forces quick-

ly closed in on the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, located just 75 kilometers (less than 50 miles) south of the border. In a video message Sunday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy rebuked Belarusians for allowing their country to be used as a staging ground for the Russian invasion, adding that Ukrainian cities are facing an attack on a scale unseen since World War II when Belarus and Ukraine faced a Nazi invasion as parts of the Soviet Union. "But you aren't on the same side with us in the war that is going on now," Zelenskyy said in Russian, which is widely spoken in Belarus. "The Russian military is launching missiles at Ukraine from your territory. From your territory they are killing our children, they are destroying our homes and trying to blow up everything that has been built for decades." In an emotional speech, the Ukrainian leader questioned how Belarusians will be able to

look into the eyes of your children, into the eyes of each other." "We are your neighbors. Be Belarus, not Russia!" he said. The Belarusian leader quickly shot back, denigrating the Ukrainian president as an American puppet and charging that the Russian attack resulted from Zelenskyy's failure to accept Russian President Vladimir Putin's demand for Ukraine to renounce its bid to join NATO. The West responded to Belarus hosting Russian troops for the invasion by slamming it with new tough sanctions along with Russia. Lukashenko ominously warned Sunday that more sanctions from the West are "pushing the world to the brink of World War III." The Belarusian leader, who said previously that his country could host Russian nuclear weapons, said that he warned French President Emmanuel Macron in a call Saturday that he was ready to make the move if the U.S. and its allies

deploy nuclear weapons to NATO members Poland and Lithuania, which border Belarus. "We have developed plans to protect Belarus and agreed with Putin to deploy such weapons here that will make Poles and Lithuanians lose any desire to go to war," he said. The constitutional amendments bring back limits on presidential terms that had been abolished during Lukashenko's tenure, allowing a president only two five-year terms in office. However, the restriction will only take effect once a "newly elected president" assumes office, which gives Lukashenko an opportunity to run for two more terms after his current one expires in 2025. "This pseudo referendum is being held under the Russian gun barrels and under effective control of the Russian military which has come to stay in Belarus for a long time," Belarus' first post-Soviet leader,

Stanislav Shushkevich, told The Associated Press. "The absurdity that is going on now directly contradicts the existing main law that envisages Belarus' neutral status." Shushkevich warned that "Lukashenko is depriving Belarus of its future and turning the country into a staging ground for Putin's mad games," adding that "the Belarusian leader has no choice, he also is a pariah." In 2020, Lukashenko relied on Moscow's support to survive the largest and the most sustained wave of mass protests in the country's history. Demonstrations, the biggest of which drew up to 200,000 people, were triggered by him winning a sixth term in office in a presidential election in August 2020 that the opposition and the West denounced as rigged. Protesters demanding a new election and Lukashenko's ouster faced a brutal crackdown from the authorities, with more than

35,000 arrested and thousands brutally beaten. Key opposition figures, including Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Lukashenko's main contender in the election, left the country amid the clampdown, along with thousands of ordinary Belarusians. The opposition denounced the vote as "farce" and said it wouldn't recognize its results. "The Belarusians are again being offered a choice between Lukashenko and L u k a s h e n k o," Tsikhanouskaya told the AP. "Belarusians want change, but harsh large-scale repressions forced many to remain silent." She said that Belarusians widely oppose the Russian invasion of Ukraine. "Belarusians' hearts hurt as it's not just the fate of Ukraine but also our fate that is decided now," Tsikhanouskaya told The Associated Press. "We realize that Belarus' independence is closely connected with Ukraine's independence."

Ukrainians return from abroad to fight Russian invasion

MONIKA SCISLOWSKA AND RAFAL NIEDZIELSKI ■ MEDYKA

While hundreds of thousands of refugees are leaving Ukraine amid Russia's attack on the country, some Ukrainian men and women are returning home from across Europe to help defend their homeland. Poland's Border Guard said Sunday that some 22,000 people have crossed into Ukraine since on Thursday, when Russia invaded the country. At the checkpoint in Medyka, in southeastern Poland, many were standing in a line early Sunday to cross into Ukraine. "We have to defend our homeland. Who else if not us," said a moustachioed man in front of a group of some 20 Ukrainian truck drivers walking to the checkpoint to enter Ukraine. They came from across Europe to return to Ukraine. They spoke to The Associated Press in Ukrainian and in Russian. Another man in the group said: "The Russians should be afraid. We are not afraid." Members of the group declined to give their names, or only gave their first names, citing their security and that of their families. A man in his 20s, who said his first name was Denis, said he had been working in Poland but was returning to Ukraine where

his "everything" is. "I'm on my own here in Poland. Why should I be here? So I go, for the homeland," Denis said. Lesa, a woman in her 30s, Lesa, spoke to the AP just before entering the checkpoint building. "I am afraid, but I am a mother and want to be with my children. What can you do? It's scary but I have to." Another young woman said she, too, was returning to take care of her children, so that Ukrainian men can defend the country. "We have to, we Ukrainians have to take our children away ... To allow our boys to fight," she said. On Ukraine's side of the border, a man was directing those arriving to a place where cars and buses were waiting to take them onward. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was staying in the capital, Kyiv, boosting the morale of Ukrainian fighters as Russian troops were closing in on the city and huge explosions lit up the sky early Sunday. Zelenskyy has banned men of military age, 18 to 60, from leaving the country. Ukrainian authorities have also called on foreign volunteers to come and fight in Ukraine's defense. At least 200,000 people have fled Ukraine into Poland and other neighboring countries in the wake of the Russian invasion, the U.N. Refugee agency, the UNHCR, said Sunday.

Pope condemns 'diabolical logic' of war

AP ■ VATICAN CITY

Pope Francis has denounced the "diabolical and perverse logic" of launching a war in Ukraine in his strongest public comments yet. Francis also called Sunday for humanitarian corridors to welcome Ukrainian refugees fleeing the "tragic" invasion of their homeland. Francis has refrained from calling out Russia by name as he seeks to mend ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, and he again omitted any reference

to Moscow on Sunday. But he said: "Those who make war forget humanity," adding that warfare "relies on the diabolical and perverse logic of weapons, which is the farthest thing from God's will." Francis repeated his call for the faithful to mark Ash Wednesday this week as a day of fasting and prayer to show solidarity with the "suffering people of Ukraine." Earlier Sunday, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople described

Russia's invasion as "beyond every sense of law and morality" and pleaded for an end to the war. Patriarch Bartholomew is considered the spiritual leader of Eastern Orthodox Christians worldwide. In 2019 he granted the independence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, severing it from the Russian church it had been tied to since 1686. Austria and Italy are joining a growing list of European countries in closing their airspace to all Russian aircraft.

Queen Elizabeth postpones diplomatic reception amid Ukraine conflict

ADITI KHANNA ■ LONDON

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II has delayed a planned diplomatic reception next week at Windsor Castle on the advice of the Foreign Office, Buckingham Palace said on Sunday. The 95-year-old monarch, who has previously cancelled her virtual engagements as she recovers from COVID-19, was due to host hundreds of ambassadors and

high commissioners at the annual event on Wednesday. According to reports, the reception has been called off over the conflict in Ukraine rather than for health reasons. "The Queen has accepted the foreign secretary's advice that the diplomatic reception at Windsor on March 2 should be postponed," Buckingham Palace said in a statement. The Queen was due to host members of the Diplomatic Corps in the UK at the reception. The

news that it will not go ahead comes days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine earlier this week. The monarch, meanwhile, is said to be carrying out "light duties" as she recovers from "mild cold-like symptoms" of COVID-19. Her next scheduled public engagements are the annual Commonwealth Service in honour of Commonwealth forces who fought in world wars at Westminster Abbey in London on March 14.

Sanctions vs Neutrality: Swiss fine-tune response to Russia

AP ■ GENEVA

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has put Switzerland's much-vaunted neutrality to the test -- and along with it, the country's traditional role as international intermediary and reputation as a safe haven for the assets of Russia's richest and most powerful. The Swiss executive branch stopped short of announcing unilateral sanctions against Russian interests after Moscow's blistering military action in Ukraine. Instead, the Federal Council opted to fall in line with the European Union and pledge that Russian individuals and companies hit with EU sanctions won't be able to evade them in Switzerland, which is not one of the EU's 27 member states. The government said Friday that financial "intermediaries" in Switzerland were now banned from starting new business relationships with 363 Russian people and four Russian companies. Any existing business must be reported to the Swiss economic affairs secretariat. Further steps are under consideration. While hardly a crackdown compared to other Western sanctions aimed at punishing Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine, the impact could be

felt. The rich Alpine nation has been the biggest recipient of transactions by Russian private individuals - ahead of Britain, Spain, Luxembourg and the United States, according to a report compiled by the Swiss Embassy in Moscow. "Switzerland has for years been by far the most important destination worldwide for rich Russians to manage their wealth," the report said, adding that net transfers of Russian taxpayers to Switzerland totaled \$2.5 billion in 2020. The Swiss news agency SDA-ATS reported net transfers of \$1.8 billion in the first half of 2021. Federal Councillor Guy Parmelin, the head of the federal economic affairs department, noted that Switzerland was bound to follow U.N. Sanctions but could decide whether to follow EU sanctions based on criteria such as foreign policy and legal aspects - including legislation that has enshrined "neutrality" into Swiss law. Swiss authorities are in essence extending measures set up in 2014 after Russia's takeover of Crimea, in which they also sought to ensure that EU sanctions were not dodged in Switzerland, to hundreds more people and businesses - but going further. "Switzerland is thus taking

a tougher line with regard to Russia," Parmelin told reporters in Bern, the capital. German government spokesman Steffen Hebestreit said Friday that "every country decides in a sovereign way about its actions ... If you were to ask me whether I'd be happy if Switzerland supported the (EU) sanctions, then I'd clearly say yes." However, Switzerland is also anxious to safeguard its role as diplomatic go-between for some countries - one of which is Russia. The Swiss government represents the interests of the former Soviet republic of Georgia in Moscow and Russia's interests in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, under an arrangement set up after those two countries broke off bilateral ties during their conflict in 2008. "It's important to the Federal Council that implementing these measures doesn't cut off talks between Switzerland and the countries affected," said Parmelin. "Switzerland wants to be able to offer its services to the countries in conflict if these countries wish." "If Switzerland were to automatically adopt the sanctions imposed by the EU or other countries, it could no

longer credibly play the traditional role for which it is valued worldwide," he added. The respected Swiss daily Tages Anzeiger reported Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy asked his Swiss counterpart on Saturday to act as a neutral mediator between Ukraine and Russia, and help work toward a cease-fire between the two countries, notably in the context of a Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva opening Monday. The Swiss Foreign Ministry did not confirm any such communication. Geneva hosted a summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden in June, as well as a couple of bilateral meetings in recent weeks as tensions brewed over Ukraine. The Swiss relish their role and reputation as a skilled, neutral host for such international gatherings and as a hub for international organizations like the United Nations and the international Red Cross in Geneva. The push-and-pull felt by the Swiss could grow. Some Western countries announced or were preparing individual sanctions against Putin and his foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, including possible travel bans. Switzerland is unlikely to go

that far: Lavrov himself is expected to be on hand in Geneva on Tuesday for a session of the Human Rights Council. Economic concerns - not just the political neutrality that is enshrined in Swiss law - could also figure into the Swiss calculations. Geneva is a major hub for commodities trading like oil and wheat that matter to Russia and Ukraine, and is reported to be a favored stomping ground for Russian oligarchs and other economic elites drawn to low-tax and privacy-minded banks and policies in Switzerland. The June report by the Swiss Embassy in Moscow said roughly 80 percent of Russia's commodities trade goes through the Swiss financial services centers of Geneva, Zug, Lugano and Zurich. Major Russian energy and commodities firms have offices in Switzerland. According to the Bank of International Settlements, Russian deposits in Swiss financial institutions totaled the equivalent of nearly \$11 billion at the end of the third quarter last year. That represented about 30 percent of the total Russian deposits overseas of nearly \$36 billion, according to BIS figures.

Refrain from actions that threaten safety of Ukraine's N plants: IAEA

PTI ■ VIENNA

The UN's nuclear watchdog has called on all parties to refrain from any actions that could threaten the safety and security of nuclear power plants in Ukraine amid an intensified Russian military offensive in its capital Kyiv and other areas. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said that Ukraine has four nuclear power sites with a total of 15 reactors, providing roughly half of the country's electricity. Expressing grave concern over the situation in Ukraine, IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi on Saturday called on all parties to refrain from any measures or actions that could jeopardize the security of nuclear material, and the safe operation of all nuclear facilities, as any such incident could have severe consequences for human health and the environment. He said that Ukraine on Saturday informed the agency that the country's nuclear power plants remained stable and in normal operation. In a new update to the IAEA, the State Nuclear Regulatory Inspectorate of

Ukraine (SNRIU) also said its staff maintained regular contacts with the plants, the statement said. "The safety and security of nuclear sites and material in Ukraine must under no circumstances be endangered. For now, the plants are operating as normal and their nuclear material remains under control. It is of paramount importance that this continues to be the case and that plant staff remain able to carry out their vital work without any undue pressure or stress," he said. Russian forces took over the decommissioned Chernobyl nuclear power plant (NPP) on Thursday after a fierce battle with the Ukrainian battalion guarding the facility, where nuclear radiation is still leaking from the world's worst nuclear disaster in 1986. On Friday, the state regulator reported elevated radiation levels at the Chernobyl site, possibly caused by heavy military vehicles churning up contaminated soil, but the IAEA assessed that the radiation readings remained low and did not pose any danger to the public. The state regulator on Saturday reported in an update

that the site continued to operate normally. However, the regulator also said that the staff on duty had not changed since February 24, the statement said. An explosion at the Chernobyl plant in 1986 is the worst nuclear disaster in history. According to reports, more than 30 people died in the immediate aftermath of an explosion that tore through Chernobyl's No. 4 reactor on April 26, 1986, near Pripyat, Ukraine. In the years that followed, countless others died from radiation symptoms, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency and the World Health Organisation. The Ukraine government evacuated some 135,000 people from the area and the 19-mile exclusion zone around the plant will remain uninhabitable for decades. Grossi said the operations of the zone's nuclear facilities should not be affected or disrupted in any way and that staff must be able to work and rest as normal, reiterating that those in effective control of nuclear facilities should not take any actions that could compromise their safety.

China's new-generation rocket launches 22 satellites into space

K J M VARMA ■ BEIJING

China's new Long March-8 rocket placed 22 satellites in space on Sunday, setting a domestic record for the most spacecraft launched by a single rocket. The rocket blasted off at 11:06 a.m. (Beijing Time) at the Wenchang Spacecraft Launch Site in the southern Hainan Province before sending the satellites into pre-set orbits, state-run Xinhua news agency reported. These satellites will be mainly used for commercial remote sensing services, marine environment monitoring, forest fire prevention and disaster mitigation. The mission marked the 409th flight of the Long March carrier rockets. The Long March-8 used for Sunday's launch is a modified version of the medium-lift carrier rocket and is 48 meters long with a take-off weight of 198 tonnes. It uses non-toxic and pollution-free propellants with a 3-tonne capacity for sun-synchronous orbit, the Xinhua report said. Compared with the original model, the modified model does not have side boosters but

can launch multiple satellites with different orbital requirements. The Long March-8 is the new generation of China's carrier rocket. Designed and built by the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology, the rocket fills a gap in China's launch capability to the sun-synchronous orbit and meets the needs of more than 80 percent of launch missions for medium and low-orbit spacecraft. Xiao Yun, chief commander of the rocket, said an assembly and test plant for the Long March-8 family is being built outside the Wenchang launch site. Once completed, it is expected to shorten the launch interval of the Long March-8 rocket to seven days, enabling 50 launches a year. On February 10, China unveiled an ambitious plan for its burgeoning space industry this year which included over 50 space launches and six manned space flights to complete the building of its space station. The China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC) said China will carry out more than

50 space launches in 2022, sending over 140 spacecraft into space. "The year 2022 will see China's projects in space at the top of its game," Ma Tao, the deputy chief of the space department at China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC) said. Among the many tasks planned for 2022, Ma noted that six launches will be dedicated to China's manned space project to build space station, which is expected to be completed this year. "We will complete the rendezvous and docking of the two lad modules with the core module under manned condition to complete the T-shaped design for the space station," Bai Linhou, the deputy chief designer of space station system at CASC, state-run CGTN reported. Last month the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation, (CASTC) said China will complete the building of the space station this year. Last year, China has carried out 55 space launch missions according to China's blue book on the space industry.

Singapore's doyenne of Indian classical dance dies

GURDIP SINGH ■ SINGAPORE

Santha Bhaskar, pioneer of Indian classical dance in Singapore and beloved doyenne of the arts, died on Saturday, local media reported. She was 83. Bhaskar was the chief choreographer and artistic director at Bhaskar's Arts Academy - which was founded by her husband K P Bhaskar in 1952 and which she first joined as an instructor, Channel News Asia reported. The academy is in the midst of its 70th anniversary celebrations and had just staged a musical performance last weekend at the Stamford Arts Centre called 'Sangeetha Saphathi'. Both shows were sold out. Bhaskar was reportedly at the show on the second night when she fell ill and was taken to hospital. She died as the first song of the evening started playing, according to a note sent to students and parents of the academy. The academy announced her death on Sunday morning, saying she had "taken her final bow." "It's with a heavy heart

that we announce artistic director Santha Bhaskar is no longer with us. We are still processing this sudden and unexpected loss," the academy wrote on Facebook. "We are deeply touched by the many calls and messages that have been coming in. We can only believe that this well-loved soul of the arts community, and just about everyone else, is smiling from above and asking us to look ahead and continue the journey she started that many years ago," it said, adding that details of the wake were still being confirmed. Bhaskar's work is widely celebrated. She was awarded Singapore's prestigious Cultural

Medallion in 1990 and the Public Service Star in 2016. Last year, Bhaskar was given the Meritorious Service Medal and inducted into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame. Aside from her knowledge of traditional Indian performance arts, Bhaskar was also known for her keen interest in other cultural art forms. One of her landmark works is 'The Butterfly Lovers', a definitive piece in 1958 infusing Chinese visual elements with Indian song and dance. Vidhya Nair, a director at local dance company Apsara Arts and former president of the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society, penned a touching tribute to her Bharathanatyam teacher on Facebook Saturday night. "There will never be another like her," said Nair. "As Singaporeans, we should be proud to look back on her life and work. She blessed and kicked off the 70th-year celebration of her company. Perhaps it was meant to be. She left with the same vigour and positive (with which) she lived her life," the Channel quoted Nair.

10 dead, 400 hurt in Indonesia earthquake; search on for victims

AP ■ JAKARTA

Search efforts continued Sunday in the hardest-hit areas of Indonesia's Sumatra island after a strong earthquake there killed 10 people, injured nearly 400 and left thousands displaced, a disaster official said. Rescuers retrieved two more bodies late Saturday from the rubble of homes toppled by the magnitude 6.2 earthquake that shook West Sumatra province on Friday morning, said National Disaster Mitigation Agency spokesperson Abdul Muhari. Six people died in Pasaman district and four in neighboring West Pasaman district, he said. Rescuers were still searching for four villagers believed to be buried under tons of mud that tumbled down from the surrounding hills triggered by the quake. At least 388 people were injured by the earthquake whose tremors were felt as far away as Malaysia and Singapore, and about 42 people were still receiving treatment for serious injuries, Muhari said. More than 13,000 people fled their homes to temporary shelters, mostly in devastated areas of Pasaman and West Pasaman districts, the closest areas to the epicenter as over 1,400 houses and buildings were damaged, Muhari said in a statement. Indonesia, a vast archipelago of 270 million people, is frequently struck by earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis because of its location on the "Ring of Fire," an arc of volcanoes and fault lines that arcs the Pacific. The last major earthquake was in January 2021 when a magnitude 6.2 earthquake killed at least 105 people and injured nearly 6,500. More than 92,000 people were displaced after it struck Mamuju and Majene districts in West Sulawesi province. A powerful Indian Ocean quake and tsunami in 2004 killed nearly 230,000 people in a dozen countries, most of them in Indonesia.

US, allies to cut off Russian banks from SWIFT messaging system

PTI ■ WASHINGTON/MOSCOW

Seeking to cripple Russia's economy for invading Ukraine, the US and its key allies have decided to expel selected Russian banks from the SWIFT financial messaging system and impose restrictive measures on its central bank to limit Moscow's ability to access its overseas reserves.

The leaders of the US, the European Commission, France, Germany, Italy, the UK and Canada on Saturday also decided to launch a joint task force to hunt down assets of sanctioned Russian companies and oligarchs.

The Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) is the world's main banking messaging service which links around 11,000 banks and institutions in more than 200 countries, including India.

Based in Belgium, the system is considered central to the

smooth functioning of global finances and Russia's exclusion from it would hit the country hard.

"We stand with the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian people in their heroic efforts to resist Russia's invasion. Russia's war represents an assault on fundamental international rules and norms that have prevailed since the Second World War, which we are committed to defending, the leaders said in a joint statement released by the White House.

"We will hold Russia to account and collectively ensure that this war is a strategic failure for (President Vladimir) Putin," the allies said in the statement.

Removing banks from SWIFT is deemed to be a severe curb because almost all banks use the system. Russia is heavily reliant on the SWIFT system for its key oil and gas exports.

The joint sanctions are the



harshest measures imposed to date on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

"As Russian forces unleash their assault on Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities, we are resolved to continue imposing costs on Russia that will further isolate Russia from the international financial system and

our economies. We will implement these measures within the coming days," the leaders said.

The US and its allies committed to "ensuring that selected Russian banks are removed from the SWIFT messaging system. This will ensure that these banks are disconnected from the international financial

system and harm their ability to operate globally."

"Second, we commit to imposing restrictive measures that will prevent the Russian Central Bank from deploying its international reserves in ways that undermine the impact of our sanctions," they said.

Earlier, there was reluctance within the European Union over blocking Russia from SWIFT as it would impact oil and gas payments.

"Third, we commit to acting against the people and entities who facilitate the war in Ukraine and the harmful activities of the Russian government. Specifically, we commit to taking measures to limit the sale of citizenship -- so-called golden passports -- that let wealthy Russians connect to the Russian government become citizens of our countries and gain access to our financial systems," the allies said.

Further, they agreed to launch this coming week "a transatlantic task force that will ensure the effective implementation of our financial sanctions by identifying and freezing the assets of sanctioned individuals and companies that exist within our jurisdictions."

As a part of this effort, the leaders said they are committed to employing sanctions and other financial and enforcement measures on additional Russian officials and elites close to the Russian government, as well as their families, and their enablers to identify and freeze the assets they hold in our jurisdictions.

"We will also engage other governments and work to detect and disrupt the movement of ill-gotten gains, and to deny these individuals the ability to hide their assets in jurisdictions across the world," the statement said.

"Finally, we will step up

our coordination against disinformation and other forms of hybrid warfare," it said.

The UK government led the charge in Europe to exclude Russia from the worldwide SWIFT banking network.

A senior US administration official told reporters that Russia has become a global economic and financial pariah with over 30 countries representing well over half the world's economy announcing sanctions and export controls against it.

"Putin's government is getting kicked off the international financial system," the official said on condition of anonymity.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has provoked condemnation from countries in the West and retaliatory sanctions.

The US had earlier announced tough sanctions targeting Russian banks, busi-

nesses and oligarchs and several countries have closed their airspace for Russian planes.

Reacting to the latest move by the West, Russia's central bank said the financial messaging system of the Bank of Russia ensures the transfer of financial messages inside the country in any scenario.

The financial messaging system of the Bank of Russia, an analogue of the system of interbank payment SWIFT, is an alternative channel of transfer of electronic messages on financial transactions, guaranteeing uninterrupted transfer of financial messages both inside and outside the country, the official TASS news agency reported.

The system can transfer data in SWIFT format, though it does not depend on its channels. Talks are underway on payments using the financial messaging system with China, the report said.

Govt cancels ₹19k cr tender for connecting villages in 16 States with broadband

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

State-owned Bharat Broadband Nigam Ltd has cancelled a ₹19,000-crore tender that was floated for connecting villages across 16 States with an optical fibre-based high-speed broadband network, following the lack of participation of eligible bidders.

The project was approved in June last year to roll out an optical fibre network under BharatNet in 16 states in a public-private partnership model with a total expense of ₹29,430 crore.

The Centre had approved a viability gap fund of ₹19,041 crore for the project that aimed to connect 3.61 lakh villages across 16 states.

The project was divided into nine packages, and tenders for each of the packages were floated separately.

For each of the nine tenders, BBNL on



February 8 said the tender of the corresponding package "with all its corrigenda is hereby cancelled on account of non-participation by any bidder".

An e-mail query sent to BBNL elicited no response.

However, an official source told PTI that there was participation from some firms; bids were evaluated; but the participants failed to qualify.

"The tender will be floated again after

taking feedback from the industry. The government is committed to connecting villages with broadband at the earliest," the source, who did not wish to be named, said.

The government opted for a public-private partnership after state-owned firms faced several issues in expediting the projects and missed several deadlines.

The BharatNet project was approved in 2011 as the National Optical Fibre Network with an aim to connect all 2.5 lakh panchayats with the optical fibre network by 2013.

The project now has been extended to 2025 now.

According to official data, over 1.69 lakh village panchayats have been made service-ready for broadband services under BharatNet as of December 31, 2021.

Mobile phone users can approach consumer forum for deficiency in service, says SC

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has held that an individual facing any deficiency in telecom services can approach consumer forums directly with his complaint against the company.

The fact that the remedy of arbitration under the Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 is of a statutory nature would not oust the jurisdiction of the consumer forum in such matters, a bench of Justices DY Chandrachud, Surya Kant and Vikram Nath said.

"It would be open to a consumer to opt for the remedy of arbitration, but there is no compulsion in law to do so and it would be open to a consumer to seek recourse to the remedies which are provided under the (Consumer Protection) Act of 1986, now replaced by the Act of 2019," the bench said.

The top court passed the verdict on an appeal of Vodafone by which the company had challenged an order of National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (NCDRC) by which it had affirmed the view of SCDRC that Section 7B of the Act of 1885 would not be applicable to a private service provider since it is not a "Telegraph Authority".

In its recent order, the court said that the insertion of the expression 'telecom services' in the definition which is contained in Section 2(42) of the Consumer Protection Act of 2019 cannot be construed to mean that telecom services were excluded from the jurisdiction of the consumer forum under the earlier Act of 1986.

"On the contrary, the definition of the expression 'service' in Section 2(o) of the Consumer Protection Act of 1986 was wide enough to comprehend services of every description including telecom services," the bench said.

Referring to a verdict from last year relating to home buyers, the bench said that the court had invoked the doctrine of elec-

tion, which provides that when two remedies are available for the same relief, the party at whose disposal such remedies are available, can make the choice to elect either of the remedies as long as the ambit and scope of the two remedies are not essentially different.

The bench noted that where Section 7B of the Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 applies, a statutory remedy of arbitration is provided.

"The fact that the remedy of arbitration under the Act 1885 is of a statutory nature, would not oust the jurisdiction of the consumer forum."

"The (Consumer Protection) Act of 1986 and its successor, the (Consumer Protection) Act of 2019 are subsequent enactments which have been enacted by Parliament to protect the interest of consumers. Hence, an ouster of jurisdiction cannot be lightly assumed unless express words are used or such a consequence followed by necessary implication," the bench said.

The bench refused to accept the submission of Vodafone Idea cellular Ltd that the specific incorporation of "telegraph services" in the Act of 2019 is an indicator that it was only as a result of the new legislation that telecom services were brought within the jurisdiction of the consumer fora.

It said, "This submission cannot be accepted for the simple reason that the specification of services in Section 2(s) of the earlier Act of 1986 was illustrative. This is apparent from the use of the expression 'includes but not limited to'."

The top court further said that the specification of services in Section 2(s) of the erstwhile Consumer Protection Act was therefore not intended to be an exhaustive enumeration of the services which are comprehended within the definition.

"On the contrary, by adopting language which provides that the expression 'service' would mean service of any description

which is made available to potential users, Parliament indicated in unambiguous terms that all services would fall within the ambit of the definition.

"The only exception was in the case of (i) services rendered free of charge; and (ii) services under a contract of personal service," it said.

The bench said that the Consumer Protection Act of 1986 was a milestone in legislative efforts designed to protect the welfare and interest of consumers.

It noted that under Section 7B of the Indian Telegraph Act, any dispute concerning a telegraph line, appliance or apparatus, between the telegraph authority and the person for whose benefit the line, appliance or apparatus is or has been provided has to be determined by arbitration. "Such a dispute has to be referred to an arbitrator appointed by the Central Government either especially for the determination of that dispute or generally for the determination of the disputes under the Section," it said.

One Ajay Kumar Agarwal had, on May 25, 2014, instituted a consumer complaint before the District Consumer Disputes Redressal Forum, Ahmedabad alleging a deficiency in service on the part of the Vodafone.

The complaint stated that Agarwal had a post-paid mobile connection and was paying an amount of Rs 249 as the monthly basic rent and Vodafone was providing mobile telecom services to him on the basis of which it was asserted that there exists a relationship of consumer and service provider.

Agarwal had subscribed to an 'auto pay' system through a credit card issued by his bankers in terms of which, Vodafone would receive the payment before the due date to facilitate the timely payment of bills. He alleged that the average monthly bill was in the vicinity of Rs 555 but for the period between November 8, 2013 and December 7, 2013, the respondent was billed for Rs 24,609.51.

KVIC urges Centre to lift export prohibition on bamboo charcoal

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) has urged the Centre to lift the "export prohibition" on bamboo charcoal for optimum utilisation of raw bamboo and higher profitability in the bamboo industry, KVIC Chairman Vinai Kumar Saxena has written to Union Minister of Commerce and Industries, Piyush Goyal, seeking to lift the export restriction on bamboo charcoal for larger benefit of the bamboo industry.

As per the KVIC data, in India, bamboo is mostly used in manufacturing of Agarbatti wherein, a maximum of 16%, i.e. the upper layers of the bamboo, is used for manufacturing of bamboo sticks while the remaining 84% of bamboo is a complete waste. The Bamboo waste generated in Agarbatti and bamboo craft industries is not being utilized commercially, as a result, the Bamboo input cost for Round Bamboo Sticks is in the range of Rs 25,000 to Rs 40,000 per MT as against the average Bamboo cost of Rs 4,000 to Rs 5,000 per MT. Compared to this, the Bamboo price in China is Rs 8,000 to Rs 10,000 per MT but their input cost is Rs 12,000 to Rs 15,000 per MT owing to 100% waste utilization.

"One of the biggest challenges that the Indian bamboo industry faces today is the extremely high input cost owing to inadequate utilization of bamboo. However, export of bamboo charcoal would ensure complete utilization of the bamboo waste and thus make the bamboo business more profitable," it said.

"The bamboo waste can be best utilized by making 'Bamboo Charcoal' which, though, has a very limited use within the domestic market but it is hugely in demand in the international market. However, the Indian bamboo industry is not able to tap the opportunity due to its 'export prohibition'. Considering the repeated requests of the industry, KVIC has requested the government to consider lifting the export restriction on bamboo charcoal. This would not only enable the industry to exploit huge global demand but also enhance the profitability of existing KVIC units by proper utilisation of bamboo waste and thus contribute to the Hon'ble PM's vision of 'Waste to Wealth'," Saxena said.

Notably, the world import demand of bamboo charcoal has been hovering in the range of USD 1.5 to 2 billion and has been growing at the rate of 6% in recent years.

Centre to provide capital support mostly to weak PSBs

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Weak public sector lenders like Central Bank of India and Punjab & Sind Bank will get the lion's share of the ₹15,000 crore earmarked for capital infusion in State-owned banks for the current fiscal.

This will help these public sector banks (PSBs) meet regulatory requirements.

The capital infusion of ₹15,000 crore would go mostly to banks which had got money through non-interest-bearing bonds in the previous year as the RBI had raised some concerns on the fair valuation of these instruments, sources said.

As per the RBI, the net present value of infusion made last year through zero-coupon bonds is much lower than face value as they were issued at discount, the sources added.

These special securities with tenure of 10-15 years are non-interest bearing and valued at par. Such bonds usually are non-interest bearing and issued at a deep discount to the face value. So, the effective Tier 1 capital levels for the banks could be lower than the regulatory requirement.

According to India Ratings and Research, fair valuing of the equity infused by the Government of India

(GoI) in five PSBs last year through zero-coupon bonds could lower the banks' effective Tier 1 capital levels in the range of 50-175 basis points than reported.

Earlier this month, Punjab & Sind Bank got board approval to raise equity capital worth Rs 4,600 crore by issuing preference shares to the government.

This would help the bank augment capital to the required level and save it from coming under the prompt corrective action (PCA) framework.

Similarly, sources said, the decision for the quantum for other banks would be taken in March and subsequently funds would be infused.

The net worth of zero coupon bonds could be lower by almost 50 per cent at end-FY'22 at the outset than similar maturity government papers in the market, given they do not carry any interest, India Ratings said, adding the illiquid, non-trading nature of these securities could add to the discount.

These banks have moderate competitiveness (albeit better than last year) to raise equity and would need to offer materially higher yields to raise Additional Tier 1 (AT1) capital from the markets.

RBI may assess impact of financial literacy campaigns

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is proposing to assess the impact of the multi-media awareness campaigns launched by it to promote financial literacy and also safe banking practices.

The RBI runs the 'RBI Kehta Hai' campaign to educate and empower the public about banking regulations, and also to make them aware of good and safe banking practices. It was a multi-media multi-lingual campaign using SMSes, print, television channels, radio, hoardings, websites and social media.

Inviting the request for proposal (RFP) from certain shortlisted entities, the RBI said they would be required to undertake outcome and impact assessment of its multilingual, pan-India public awareness campaigns.

The RBI campaigns are in 14 languages -- Assamese, Bengali, English, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Odia, Punjabi, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu with more focus on



regional languages.

"Therefore, it is incumbent on the part of the empanelled entity to cover the 14 languages given above for the proposed outcome/ impact assessment of the public awareness campaigns of RBI.

"Campaigns conducted during the year preceding the assessment and during the term of the assessment will be a part of the scope," the said RFP document.

As per the document, the selected entity will be required to customise the tools for study, pre-testing of the tools and incorporate changes if required, to modify a questionnaire, focussed group discussion (FGDs) guideline, depth interview schedules when needed, to conduct training of data collectors/surveyors, to carry out survey and share monthly progress report, to

analyse results and prepare draft and final report.

Some of the key areas that need to be in the questionnaire include the 'ability to recall the campaigns', media on which the campaigns were viewed, 'whether the campaigns added information that was not known earlier', and 'whether any action was taken based on the information from the campaigns'.

The RBI or the central bank regulates the issue and supply of the Indian rupee, is the bank of banks, bank of the Government of India as well as of state governments and also regulates the banking sector.

Consumer protection through financial literacy and awareness is also an important function of the Reserve Bank of India.

'RBI Kehta Hai' is a multi-media multi-lingual campaign, which disseminates information to the public using mass media, namely, SMSes, print, television channels, radio, hoardings, websites and social media.

India's oil import bill to top \$100 bn in current fiscal

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's crude oil import bill is set to exceed USD 100 billion in the current fiscal year ending March 31, almost double its spending last year, as international oil prices trade at seven-year highs.

India spent USD 94.3 billion in the first 10 months (April-January) of the ongoing financial year that started in April 1, 2021, according to data from the oil ministry's Petroleum Planning & Analysis Cell (PPAC).

It spent USD 11.6 billion in January alone when oil prices had started to surge. This compared with USD 7.7 billion spending in the same month last year.

In February, oil prices crossed USD 100 per barrel and going at this rate, India, which imports 85 per cent of its crude oil requirements, is expected to almost double its import bill to USD 110-115 billion by the end of the fiscal year 2021-2022.

The imported crude oil is turned into value-added products like petrol and diesel at oil refineries, before being sold to automobiles and other services. India has surplus refining capacity and it exports some petroleum products but is short on production of cooking gas LPG, which is imported from nations like Saudi Arabia.

Import of petroleum

products in April-January of 2021-22 fiscal was 33.6 million tonnes worth USD 19.9 billion. On the other hand, 51.1 million tonnes of petroleum products were also exported for USD 33.4 billion.

India had spent USD 62.2 billion on import of 196.5 million tonnes of crude oil in the previous 2020-21 fiscal when global oil prices remained subdued in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the current year, it has already imported 175.9 million tonnes of crude oil.

In the pre-pandemic 2019-20 fiscal, the world's third largest energy importing and consuming nation had spent USD 101.4 billion on import of 227 million tonnes of crude oil.

Brent spot prices surged to an over seven-year high of USD 105.58 per barrel on February 24 on fears of supply disruptions after Russia invaded Ukraine. It has dropped to below USD 100 thereafter as those fears receded as the West kept energy trade out of sanctions imposed on Russia.

Higher crude oil import bill is expected to dent the macroeconomic parameters.

The country's import dependence has increased owing to a steady decline in domestic output.

Niti studying proposal to tax foods high in sugar, salt to tackle obesity

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India can take actions such as taxation of foods high on sugar, fat and salt and front-of-the-pack labelling to tackle rising obesity in the population, according to the annual report of Niti Aayog.

The Government think-tank is reviewing the evidence available to understand the actions India can take to tackle rising obesity in the population, the annual report 2021-22 stated.

The Aayog in the report mentioned that the incidences of overweight and obesity are increasing among children, adolescents and women in India. "A national consultation on the prevention of

maternal, adolescent and childhood obesity was organised under the Chairmanship of Member (Health), Niti Aayog, on June 24, 2021, to discuss policy options to tackle the issue.

"Niti Aayog, in collaboration with IEG and PHFI, is reviewing the evidence available to understand the actions India can take, such as front-of-pack labelling, marketing and advertising of HFSS foods and taxation of foods high in fats, sugar and salt," it said.

Non-branded namkeens, bhujias, vegetable chips and snack foods attract 5 per cent GST while for branded and packaged items, the GST rate is 12 per cent.

PUBLIC NOTICE	PUBLIC NOTICE
Be it known to all concerned that after the demise of Late Mr. Vikas Sabharwal/Sunny Sabharwal on 5 February 2022, My Client Ruchi Sabharwal being the wife resident of J/13 Lajpat Nagar 3rd, New Delhi 110024 are the only legal heirs/claimant left as per Hindu Succession act and becomes the owner of properties mentioned below: (1) Plot no. 27 Pushima Market Lajpat Nagar II, New Delhi 110024. (2) Plot No. 10 Shiv Mandir/Marg, Lajpat Nagar II, New Delhi 110024. (3) 2 shops in Plot no. 60 B Central Market Lajpat Nagar II, New Delhi 110024. (4) Stall no. 22 in Khoka Market Amar Colony Lajpat Nagar II, New Delhi 110024 Any one making any document without my clients consent will be treated as null and void ab initio. Sajal Dharmija (Advocate), S-265, L.G.F., Greater Kailash-1, New Delhi-110018	Be it known to all concerned that after the demise of Late Mr. Vikas Sabharwal/Sunny Sabharwal on 5 February 2022, My Client Ruchi Sabharwal being the wife resident of J/13 Lajpat Nagar 3rd, New Delhi 110024 are the only legal heirs/claimant left as per Hindu Succession act and becomes the owner of Fifty present of undivided shares in properties mentioned below: (1) J-13 Lajpat Nagar II, New Delhi 1110024. (2) Top floor L-5 Lajpat Nagar II, New Delhi 110024. (3) E-87, East of Kailash, New Delhi 110065. (4) Stall no 55 A Pushpa Market Lajpat Nagar II, New Delhi 110024 Any one making any document without my clients consent will be treated as null and void ab initio. Sajal Dharmija (Advocate), S-265, L.G.F., Greater Kailash-1, New Delhi-110018



God's wisdom and blessings

Despite unrighteous people prospering these days, RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJJI explains why should one continue to do good



It is a sign of the times that people are taking a keen interest in spiritual matters these days. They are asking questions about the soul, god, karma and values. Seeing the suffering and moral degradation in the world they often wonder as to why there is so much negativity in and around us despite the surge in spiritual awareness in recent times. Many people say that unrighteous people are prospering these days, so why should one do good as per the law of karma? We all know that good begets good and bad always begets bad and the law of karma is infallible. However, due to the dominance of negative forces in the world, the effect of the positive gets clouded but just as the sun keeps shining behind a thick veil of clouds and comes out when the clouds pass, the good deeds can never go unrewarded even though it may take some time.



It is said that when evil goes to the extreme, it comes to an end and paves the way for a new beginning. Another common question that follows from the above is why do good people suffer from painful and deadly diseases like cancer? Well, we must understand that we are living at the end of the Iron Age (Kaliyuga) when the old karmic accounts of all souls are being settled before they can become pure, get liberated and enjoy complete happiness in the new world. So, we are in a period of transition now when the new world is being established but a lot of suffering is also visible as the old world is moving towards its end. Good people are also settling their old accounts but they do not suffer so much pain as they have the blessings earned by their good deeds as well as the protection of God.

In a world that is rife with violence, crime, fear and insecurity, the use of force and violent means are seen as the best way to ensure safety and security. But is it right to use violence to get justice or to succeed in a good cause, people ask? We all know that violence begets more violence. The rise in terrorism is proof that terror cannot be contained by arms. It is the law of karma that if we use hatred or violence for any end, it will rebound and reflect in our lives in one way or another. A good cause is good only if it is achieved through good means and noble values. In a practical sense, this may sound to be impossible. But as we said earlier, as much as possible one should try to find the root cause of any problem and try to solve it with compassion, forgiveness, wisdom and patience. So, to win over violence we need to make peace, tolerance, respect and compassion are our strong weapons. It does take time and effort but we must not forget a fact that even hard stones are cut by a gentle stream over some time.

Amidst all this chaos and confusion people often wonder if God is up there, then what is He doing to set things right? Some faithful ones look up to God as an awesome, formidable figure whose job is to punish humans for their misdeeds and hence we are witnessing so much suffering. But should we fear God or love Him? Why fear God? He is truth and He is love. Loving Him is our birthright because, as souls, we are His children. He is merciful and benevolent. He will never wish suffering for His children, but we all are suffering today because we do not love Him, we do not honour our eternal relationship with Him and we have been even ungratefully blaming God for all our misery. Yet He loves us unconditionally and guides us lovingly to purify ourselves and liberate ourselves from all suffering. But, when we say that God is incorporeal, without any bodily form, then why do we celebrate a festival like Shivratri as His birthday?

Shivratri means the Night of Shiva which signifies the darkness of spiritual ignorance in Kaliyuga. Shiva is the incorporeal supreme soul who is the father of all souls. He imparts the truth about the soul, God and the creation and inspires humans to purify themselves by linking their hearts and mind with Him and by doing pure deeds. He does not live, eat, or indulge in sensual experiences as human souls do. He is the one who never comes in the bondage of actions and their fruits. The supreme soul is remembered in all faiths as Shiva, God, Allah, Jehovah, Ishwar and by many other names. He is praised as the Almighty, omnipotent, omniscient being who can liberate human beings from the cycle of sin and suffering. The best thing to realise is that humans can now experience God's wisdom and blessings as never before because the time has come for Him to guide the process of the transformation of the world from Kaliyug to Satyug. So, what are you waiting for? Let's join Him and be a part of the great transformation of the old world into the new.

AGENTS OF CHANGE

Youth4Children, an initiative in Madhya Pradesh, has transformed the lives of youngsters and adults, says VINATI BHARGAVA MITTAL

Young, energetic, innovative — these children and youth — are the agents of change in rural India. They are the face of a new vibrant country. They are not scared to dream or work hard to achieve those dreams and bring the necessary changes they perceive that society needs.

Riya Soni, Ritesh Chauhan and Divisha Parwar represent the symbols of change that rural India so badly needs. They are all part of Youth4Children, an initiative for promoting child rights in Dhar and Jhabua by UNICEF and a local NGO, Vasudha Vikas Sansthan.

The initiative started as Maandal toli in 2016. Maandal is a *dholak*, a local tribal musical instrument popular in this belt of Madhya Pradesh. These children worked on child rights and other local issues and tried to spread awareness among community members through *dholaks*, *nukkad natak*s and other creative ways. As the children grew into youth and continued to be associated with the project, it was named Youth4Children.



Riya Soni, 16, of village Nowgong, of Meghanagar Block of Jhabua, is an extremely active member. She devised a no-cost indigenous handwashing station during the first wave of the pandemic Covid 19 in 2020. "People laughed at me when I was making it," she says recalling that she had seen a foot-operated handwashing station used by the Army on social media. Soni, who aspires to be a doctor, understood the importance of handwashing with soap regularly to combat the Covid 19 virus. She realised that a handwashing station similar to the one she had seen on social media would be expensive for the villagers. So, she used items — wooden sticks, used bottles, wire, and stone/brick — that were easily available in any household to make an indigenous handwashing station.

In the innovative handwashing station devised by her, as soon as one keeps a foot on a wooden panel and pulls the strings, bottles of liquid soap and water hanging from the wires overturn and the liquid flows. The touch-free station proved safe to use during the pandemic. "This local handwashing station involves no cost, except for the handwash. The solution can be made by mixing soap in water," says Dr Gayatri Parihar Mewade, Director, Vasudha.



When Soni, a class XI student of Integrated Higher Secondary School Naugawan, put up a video of her handwashing station on the Maandal toli (UNICEF) WhatsApp group, there was no looking back. Her simple innovation became very popular and was viewed by lakhs of people across the world. Children from not only her village but from those nearby replicated the model. Nearly 250 such handwashing stations were placed in local schools, community places, the Panchayat and nearby villages. People entering the villages had to first sanitise their hands.



factory. In fact, Madhya Pradesh chief minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan congratulated her on Twitter and UNICEF's brand ambassador Sachin Tendulkar spoke to her personally. "He asked me how I came up with the idea," she recalls.

Soni's laurels do not rest here. An advocate of child rights and menstrual hygiene, Soni has tried to make villagers aware of the drawbacks of child marriage in her small way. During and after the pandemic, along with her team members, she tried to remove the rumours associated with the Covid 19 vaccine, while educating villagers on its importance and the necessity of maintaining the Covid protocol. "Earlier, people did not want to get vaccinated. Men thought they would become impotent, and women were under the impression they would not be able to conceive after getting the jab," she says.

During the lockdown, Youth4Children members used mobile phones to make villagers aware of the Covid 19 protocol and the necessity of getting a job. Once the lockdown was lifted, the team visited homes. Today, 100 per cent of the eligible population of Nowgong has received the first dose, claims Soni adding that the response to the second dose has also been overwhelming.

Another member of the group, Ritesh Chauhan of Dhar, along with other

Youth4Children volunteers visited villages during the second wave of the pandemic and found out the kind of problems the villagers faced. He even checked their oxygen levels and body temperatures. Dhar became the first district in Madhya Pradesh to reach 100 per cent Covid 19 vaccination in the 15-18 age group.

Chauhan and other Youth4Children volunteers arranged second hand smart mobile phones for poor children studying in senior classes so that they could attend online school. Each mobile costs ₹5,000. Following the pandemic, there had been a large number of dropouts in the nearby villages and children had even taken to child labour. Sheela Damar of Gopalpura tried to convince parents to send their wards back to school.

"During the lockdown villagers would be found sitting on the *chaupal*. And, the children would be playing outside. They would not be wearing masks," says Divisha Parwar of Dhar. Not only did she distribute and make them aware of the importance of wearing masks to ward off Covid 19, but spent considerable time finding out the problems that the children faced during online education. She taught students how to use various educative sites. Applauding Soni and others, Michael Juma, then chief of UNICEF, Madhya Pradesh had said, "Progressively, adolescents in Jhabua have been proactive in advancing child rights. We may need to leverage their experiences to roll out sustained advocacy on infection prevention and control and hygiene management practices for Covid 19 response in the district and beyond whilst maintaining social distancing." (The author is an independent journalist.)

Long way home

SHABANA KAUSAR documents how the delay in providing houses under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) in Mendhar, Poonch, is affecting the people

In 2019, Ulfat Bi, a resident of Mankote tehsil in Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir, applied for the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY). Earlier known as Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), it was revamped as Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) with effect from 2016-2017, with the aim of 'Housing for All by 2022'. Mohammed Shakeel, a local from the village, helped her in submitting the required documents to reap the benefits of this scheme, but three years have passed without any tangible action. Currently 60, Ulfat still waits for a home of her own.

"My husband abandoned me a few months after our wedding. It has been almost 35 years since. I did not remarry. I requested my mother to live with me. After some time, my mother also passed away. My house, my only haven, collapsed during the 2014 floods, leaving me homeless. I have been staying at my mother's house with my brothers," said Ulfat.

While sharing her experience of dealing with the concerned authorities, Ulfat informed that she has tried talking to them multiple times regarding the delay in the process. "Whenever I talk with someone regarding the file, they demand a commission. I receive only ₹1,000 as a widow pension which I use for groceries and my medicines. How am I supposed to meet their demands?" she lamented.



Mushtaq Shah, Block Development Officer, Mankot, said, "Ulfat's file was among the several files which failed to be uploaded on the official portal due to a technical problem. When we re-surveyed to identify people under the Below Poverty line (BPL) to include them in the PMAY beneficiary list, Ulfat Bi's name was not on it. I will try to get her name on the list as soon as possible."

Covid-19, on the other hand, has made Ulfat's life even more difficult. The help she received from neighbours to get her medicines or enquire about the progress of her file also stopped due to lockdown.

Abdul Majeed, another resident from the tehsil, is in the same boat. Despite several attempts, he could not receive the benefits of PMAY, and his house is in a dilapidated state and can

collapse at any time! "I met Inder Jeet, the deputy commissioner of Poonch, and told him about the difficulties I was facing in the procedure. He assured his help and eventually, my file was uploaded. But now it has been deleted again. According to Ismail, the sarpanch of the village, there was an error that led to the deletion of the file again. I will now have to create a file again," he expressed.

Likewise, Saghira Bi, a 50-year-old woman from the same village, is exhausted by the technical procedure, which has left her hopeless. "With great difficulty, I somehow managed to apply for the scheme. However, I recently learned that my file had been deleted due to technical reasons. I have lost all hope as I am not sure if I will be able to invest the same time

and energy at this age is going through the entire process again," she expressed.

According to a report, under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin, the mission target in Jammu and Kashmir was set for 1.40 lakh houses. Out of 1.40 lakh houses, 1.39 beneficiaries are registered on Awas Soft. Further, over 1.36 lakh houses have been sanctioned with verified accounts. Although there is no doubt in how this scheme has benefited several lives, it is imperative to ensure that everyone who applies for the scheme should be catered for.

The effort, time and hope that hapless and elderly people like Ulfat invest in government schemes should not be ignored. They are the ones for whom our policymakers design these schemes. The implementation of such schemes on the ground should be made easier, especially for elderly people like Ulfat. Their lives depend on these files, which are handled haphazardly. The concerned departments should conduct the procedures to make the process smooth for the beneficiaries while ensuring the fulfillment of all the required procedures. So that, during times like Covid-19, they are not left stranded without any help. (The author is a rural writer from Poonch, Jammu and Kashmir.) — Charkha Features

I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones. —Albert Einstein

WATER CYCLE AT TWICE THE PREDICTED RATE

Rising global temperatures have shifted at least twice the amount of freshwater from warm regions towards the Earth's poles than previously thought as the water cycle intensifies, according to new analysis. Climate change has intensified the global water cycle by up to 7.4 per cent — compared with previous modelling estimates of 2 per cent to 4 per cent research published in the journal *Nature* suggests. The water cycle describes the movement of water on Earth — it evaporates, rises into the atmosphere, cools and condenses into rain or snow and falls again to the surface. "When we learn about the water cycle, we think of it as some unchanging process which is constantly filling and refilling our dams, our lakes, and our water sources," the study's lead author, Dr Taimoor Sohail of the University of New South Wales, said. The volume of extra freshwater that had already been pushed to the poles as a result of an intensifying water cycle was far greater than previous climate models suggest.



EXCESSIVE HANDWASHING & ENVIRONMENT

EXTRA hand-washing and use of hand sanitisers during the Covid pandemic has damaged the environment and, ironically, public health too. Scientists led by a Trinity College Dublin expert found that the environmental damage was "significant" and said more eco-friendly hand hygiene options were needed. Plastic packaging, chemicals in hand gels and the increased demand on water have all had a negative impact, they said. The extra manufacturing, packaging, transport and energy use associated with sanitisers produced carbon emissions equivalent to 2 per cent of annual emissions. Chemical ingredients were damaging to the ozone layer and added toxicity to waste water. The researchers, headed by Dr Brett Duane, associate professor in Trinity's School of Dental Science, acknowledged the importance of hand hygiene in preventing the spread of germs.



BLUE WHALES ARE NOT SELFISH

Despite their size and clear need for as many nutrients as possible, blue whales are innately unselfish foragers according to the first study, led by David Cade, a postdoctoral research fellow at Pacific Grove's Hopkins Marine Station, and co-authored by MBARI biological oceanographer John Ryan and incoming MBARI postdoctoral fellow William Oestreich. With Ryan analysing environmental variables and Oestreich speech patterns, the research team found that blue whales, which often travel in pairs or as individuals, can recognise when a patch of krill (a favorite meal) is especially dense. The whale will send out a call that can travel hundreds of kilometers and alerts other blue whales. According to the study, this can lead to up to 40 blue whales populating a one-kilometer radius, feeding on the krill swarm. This is remarkable, says Oestreich, since krill populations are often patchy and spread out. He says if whales find food that is going to help them survive, then it's intuitive that they just feed on it but the study shows a propensity for inviting other blue whales.



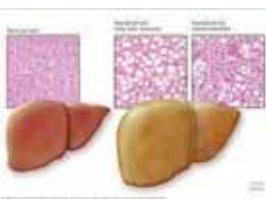
AIR POLLUTION MAY INCREASE RISK OF ADHD

Children living in areas with higher levels of small pollution particles and less green spaces might have up to 62 per cent increased risk of developing ADHD, according to a study. The research, published in the journal *Environment International*, found that children living in greener and less polluted areas have a 50 per cent lower risk of developing ADHD, one of the most prevalent neurodevelopmental disorders. The researchers led by Matilda van den Bosch, from Barcelona Institute for Global Health (ISGlobal), used data from 37,000 children in Vancouver, Canada. They analysed the possible associations between exposure to greenness, small pollution particles (PM2.5) and noise in early life with later incidence of ADHD, which affects up to approximately 5-10 per cent children and adolescents.



NEW DRUG FOR FATTY LIVER DISEASE

The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research-Central Drug Research Institute (CSIR-CDRI), along with the ICMR (Indian Council of Medical Research) will begin phase-III clinical trials for Picroliv drug for treatment of fatty liver. A phytopharmaceutical product, Picroliv, developed by the CDRI, has got the nod for phase-III clinical trial for the treatment of fatty liver disease. Director, Dr D Srinivas Reddy informed that CDRI received permission for phase-III clinical trial of the drug in patients of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD). The new drug may reduce the fat in the liver and its subsequent complications. The trial will be conducted in six hospitals, including AIIMS Delhi, ILS Delhi, PGIMER Chandigarh, KEM Mumbai, NIMS Hyderabad and KGMU Lucknow in collaboration with the ICMR.





GOOD DAY FOR MADRID CLUBS

AP ■ MADRID

Karim Benzema proved the difference again for Real Madrid on Saturday by scoring a late winner against Rayo Vallecano to send his team nine points clear at the top of La Liga.

Atletico Madrid then backed up their encouraging performance against Manchester United in the Champions League by beating Celta Vigo 2-0 to go fourth, above Barcelona. Renan Lodi scored twice at the Wanda Metropolitano.

Benzema struck in the 83rd minute, his 29th goal of the season enough to seal a scrappy victory at Vallecas but one that could put Madrid almost out of sight if Sevilla fail to beat local rivals Real Betis on Sunday.

Betis sit third and have been in excellent form in recent weeks.

For an eighth match in a row, Madrid failed to score in the first half and this was their fifth game out of the last six that has seen them unable to score more than once.

Their lack of creativity could prove problematic against more testing opponents, with a Champions League second leg against Paris Saint-Germain and then the Clasico against Barcelona both approaching next month.

"We knew it would be a difficult game," said Carlo Ancelotti. "We won but I'm not very, very satisfied."

THEIR LACK OF CREATIVITY COULD PROVE PROBLEMATIC AGAINST MORE TESTING OPPONENTS, WITH A CHAMPIONS LEAGUE SECOND LEG AGAINST PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN AND THEN THE CLASICO AGAINST BARCELONA BOTH APPROACHING NEXT MONTH. "WE KNEW IT WOULD BE A DIFFICULT GAME," SAID CARLO ANCELOTTI. "WE WON BUT I'M NOT VERY, VERY SATISFIED."

Benzema returning to peak fitness and form would certainly help and the Frenchman looked sharp again after recently recovering from a thigh injury.

Also encouraging was his combination for the goal with Vinicius Junior, whose scintillating form has faded in recent weeks. "They combine so well," said Ancelotti. "Real Madrid is lucky to have these two players."

A superb start to the campaign had Rayo in the hunt for the European places a few weeks ago but five consecutive defeats has seen them drop to 12th.

They pushed Madrid hard but were made to pay for a lack of quality in the final third, which Benzema and Vinicius ultimately provided.

Marco Asensio and Benzema both had early chances but Rayo were the better team in the first half, drawing Madrid into a scrap and harrying them into mistakes.

Casemiro was particularly out of sorts but thought he had given Madrid the lead, banging a bouncing ball into the net after winning an aerial duel with Alejandro Catena.

The goal was ruled out after replays showed he had pushed Catena in the back.

Both teams had chances early in the second half. Vinicius' finish from six yards was blocked before Thibaut Courtois did brilliantly to deny Mario Suarez from heading Rayo in front.

Rayo tired and Madrid turned the

screw in the last 20 minutes although Rayo had the best chance, Oscar Trejo and then Alvaro both thwarted by Courtois after Madrid failed to clear.

The miss proved costly because moments later, Benzema was celebrating in the corner.

He started the move, threading Vinicius through in the box before continuing his run. Vinicius could have shot but tapped it to his left, giving Benzema an open net.

Atletico moved three points clear of Barcelona, who play the first of two games in hand against Athletic Bilbao on Sunday.

Lodi, who provided a superb cross for Joao Felix's goal against Manchester United on Wednesday, completed a remarkable week by scoring twice.

First, he fired in at the near post after some quick feet in the box and then he latched onto Geoffrey Kondogbia's ball over the top and fired in a second.

"He is very dangerous, he can score, he can break but the most important thing about him is what you don't see - how he gets on with his teammates, how he trains, how he commits," said Atletico coach Diego Simeone.

Atletico have now registered two clean sheets in their last three games after managing none in their previous seven.

"The team has a different spirit, a different aggression, we are much faster in transition, more forceful," said Simeone. "The results are coming."

MAN CITY OPEN 6 POINT LEAD

AP ■ LIVERPOOL

Frank Lampard described the decision not to award Everton a late penalty as "incompetence at best" as Manchester City ground out a 1-0 win at Goodison Park to move six points clear at the top of the Premier League.

City's first league defeat since October last weekend against Tottenham has reawakened the title race with second-placed Liverpool having a game in hand on the leaders.

Pep Guardiola's men looked set to drop points again until Phil Foden pounced to punish an error from Michael Keane eight minutes from time.

But the drama did not end there as Everton had strong claims for a penalty waived away after a VAR review for a handball by Rodri.

"The decision was incredible," said Lampard. "A mistake is when you have done something wrong and don't have time to think about it. They had two minutes to digest the handball."

"Even if the VAR says not sure, then go have a look. It is incompetence at best, if not that then someone needs to explain what it is."

Lampard's men are now just one point above the relegation zone, but there was hope for the Toffees in a bat-



ting performance that pushed the champions all the way.

Before kick-off both sets of players showed solidarity with Ukraine as the eastern European nation is under siege from a Russian invasion.

Ukrainian internationals Oleksandr Zinchenko and Vitaliy Mykolenko were named on the bench.

City left-back Zinchenko was

moved to tears as his teammates wore tracksuit tops blazoned with the Ukrainian flag and "no war", while Everton players took the field with Ukrainian flags draped around their shoulders.

Once the action got underway, it was hard to tell which was the side going for a fourth league title in five years and the one battling for survival.

"The performance was great," added Lampard. "Everyone in the stadium would have felt the level of performance in so many ways."

Everton's energy forced City onto the back foot, but without the injured Dominic Calvert-Lewin, the hosts failed to take advantage.

Jonjoe Kenny sliced their best opening into the side netting before Richarlison fired too close to Brazilian international teammate Ederson.

City rode out the first-half storm and went on to dominate the second without creating many big chances.

Jordan Pickford made double saves to deny firstly Foden and Joao Cancelo and then powerful efforts from Kevin De Bruyne and Bernardo Silva.

However, their defensive resistance was ended by a basic error as Keane failed to connect with Silva's low cross and Foden pounced to tap in from point-blank range.

"I have to admit (it was) really important," said Guardiola on bouncing back to win. "The second half was much better."

Guardiola claimed there was an offside in the build-up to the penalty claim, but City instead got away with the lack of conclusive proof that ball had struck Rodri low enough on the arm to be considered handball.

Mbappe creates PSG history

AP ■ PARIS



Runaway league leader Paris Saint-Germain again relied on Kylian Mbappe as it rallied from a goal down to beat Saint-Etienne 3-1 at home.

Mbappe has rescued PSG with late goals this season and this time he scored either side of halftime, before assisting on the third goal for midfielder Danilo in the 52nd minute at Parc des Princes on Saturday.

Record seven-time Ballon d'Or winner Lionel Messi set

up Mbappe twice as the Frenchman tied Monaco's Wissam Ben Yedder on a league-leading 14 goals. Messi joined Mbappe as top of the passers with 10 assists.

The victory moved PSG 16 points clear of second-place Nice but it was the 13th time in 26 matches that PSG has fallen behind in a game, raising further questions about its vulnerability against quick passing and transition play.

Both sets of players stood behind a banner reading "Peace for all" before kickoff amid Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

After conceding two early goals in last Saturday's 3-1 win defeat at Nantes, PSG trailed in the 16th minute after a bad mistake from Danilo.

He decided not to clear the ball and tried to turn into a better position, only for striker Denis Bouanga to rob the ball from him and drill a low shot under the body of goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma.

Messi had a free kick saved by Paul Bernadoni, but the goalkeeper made a handling error on Mbappe's equalizer in the 42nd.

Messi played Mbappe in behind the defense with a typically astute pass, but he was still wide right and Bernadoni got a hand to his angled shot as it squirmed in.

Messi's fine run and pass set Mbappe up two minutes after the break and Mbappe turned provider as Danilo headed home.

Saint-Etienne remained in 16th place ahead of Sunday's games.

Vlahovic double gives Juve hope



AP ■ MILAN

Dusan Vlahovic scored twice as Juventus claimed a 3-2 win at Empoli on Saturday to move within seven points of Serie A leaders AC Milan.

The Turin giants were shaky at

the back but secured a first win in four matches thanks to Vlahovic, who moved to the top of the league goalscoring charts ahead of Ciro Immobile.

Massimiliano Allegri's side are unbeaten in 13 Serie A games, since a 1-0 loss to Atalanta in

November. "An individual can never make the difference without a team behind him," the 22-year-old Vlahovic told DAZN. "If we stay united and all work together, we can achieve great results."

"I was not accustomed to all this attention, as the coach also said, but with the right mindset, focus and concentration, you can do anything."

Fourth-placed Juve are also locked in a battle with Atalanta, who they lead by six points, in the race to qualify for next season's Champions League.

Atalanta, who have played two games fewer than Juventus, host Sampdoria on Monday.

But an unlikely title challenge could still materialise, after a series of slip-ups from the top three of AC Milan, Inter Milan and Napoli.

Juve were 14 points off the pace and languishing seventh in the table in December, but have revived their slim hopes of winning a 10th title in 11 seasons.

Allegri opted to start Moise Kean and Vlahovic together up front at Empoli, with Alvaro

Morata dropping to the bench after starting the midweek 1-1 draw at Villarreal in their Champions League last-16 first leg.

On-loan Everton striker Kean put Juventus ahead just after the half-hour mark, heading in Adrien Rabiot's cross.

Polish midfielder Szymon Zurkowski levelled for the home side in the 40th minute, poking the ball in from close range.

But Juve retook the lead on the stroke of half-time, as Vlahovic collected Juan Cuadrado's clever pass, sold the Empoli defence a dummy and slotted in.

The Serbian international's second goal, in the 66th minute, was sublime. He somehow managed to drag substitute Morata's pass from behind him with his first touch before dinking the ball into the net.

Vlahovic has scored 20 Serie A goals this season, one more than Immobile.

Andrea La Mantia ensured a tense finale to the game when he pulled one back for Empoli with 14 minutes remaining, but Juventus held on.

Czechs join Poland, Sweden in refusing to play Russia

AP ■ PRAGUE

The Czech Republic joined Poland and Sweden on Sunday in rejecting the to play Russia in the 2022 World Cup qualifying next month in response to that nation's invasion of Ukraine.

The Czech soccer association's executive committee said it "unanimously approved a decision that the Czech national team will not in any case play Russia."

The soccer federations of Poland and Sweden made the same decision on Saturday.

The Czech Republic is a potential opponent of Russia in next month's playoffs. The winner of the Poland-Russia match is due to host Sweden or the Czech Republic on March 29 for a place at the World Cup being played in Qatar from Nov. 21-Dec. 18.

The executive committee asked Czech soccer federation head Petr Fousek to lead negotiations with UEFA and FIFA about the Czech position.

"The Czech FA executive com-



mittee, staff members and players of the national team agreed it's not possible to play against the Russian national team in the current situation, not even on the neutral venue," the federation said in a statement.

"We all want the war to end as soon as possible."

As the attack of Ukraine entered a fourth day on Sunday, Russian

President Vladimir Putin temporarily lost his most senior official position in world sports. The International Judo Federation cited "the ongoing war conflict in Ukraine" for suspending Putin's honorary president status.

The Russian president is a keen judoka and attended the sport at the 2012 London Olympics.

Nadal beats Norrie in Acapulco for his 91st career title

AP ■ ACAPULCO (MEXICO)

Rafael Nadal said earlier in the week that he wasn't aware of his career statistics. Now, he might want to have a look at them.

The 35-year-old Spaniard defeated Cameron Norrie 6-4, 6-4 on Saturday to win the Mexican Open and extend his career-best start for a season to 15-0 as he won his 91st ATP title. Nadal, who won his third title in 2022, including the Australian Open for his record 21st Grand Slam singles title, is three victories from tying Ivan Lendl's total of 94 for third place for most championships in the Open Era. Jimmy Connors leads with 109 and Roger Federer has 103.

The Spaniard won for the fourth time in Acapulco (2005, 2013 and 2020) where he is a fan favorite. Norrie, who was on an eight-game winning streak, was trying to become the first British man to win the Mexican Open in its 29-year history.

At the start of the match, Nadal had a break in the fifth game to take a 3-2 lead and went on to in the first set in 51 minutes.

In the second set, Nadal had a break in the first game, but Norrie returned it and appeared to be back into the match, but the Spaniard added breaks in the fifth and seventh games to take home the trophy.

In the doubles final, Feliciano Lopez and Stefanos Tsitsipas defeat-

ed Marcelo Arevalo and Jean-Julien Rojer 7-5, 6-4.

SWIATEK CLAIMS QATAR OPEN TITLE

Poland's Iga Swiatek swept aside Anett Kontaveit in the Qatar Open final on Saturday and dedicated her victory to "the people who are suffering in Ukraine".

Former French Open champion Swiatek, seeded seven, needed just over an hour to see off the fourth-seeded Estonian.

"I want to show my support to all the people who are suffering in Ukraine," the 20-year-old Swiatek told the crowd after capturing her fourth career title.

"Seeing those images is really

emotional for me. I wouldn't even imagine stuff happening like that in the country next to me."

Her remarks came a day after Russian men's star Andrey Rublev, playing in neighbouring Dubai, marked his semi-final win by signing a camera lens on court with the message, "No war please", clearly stating his feelings about his nation's invasion of Ukraine.

Swiatek beat three top 10 players on her way to the Qatar title.

The 2020 French Open champion now has two 1000-level titles after winning in Rome last year, where she crushed Karolina Pliskova 6-0, 6-0 in the final.

RUBLEV WINS TITLE IN DUBAI

An emotional Andrey Rublev said he will sleep for two days after



securing his third trophy in seven days by ending the dream run of Czech qualifier Jiri Vesely with a 6-3, 6-4 victory in the Dubai final on Saturday.

The second-seeded Russian won the singles and doubles titles in Marseille last Sunday before flying to the Emirates and clawing his way to a 10th career singles crown, and a fifth at the ATP 500 level.

"For sure for the next two days I will sleep, I won't leave my bed," said Rublev, whose plea for peace in Ukraine after his win the previous night went viral across news stations worldwide. "Finally I can rest for maybe one week now. I feel super happy, even though maybe I'm tired."

"I think I was lucky today that Jiri also was super tired. He had really tough matches since qualifiers, three sets, he beat top players starting from the first round, so I was super lucky that he couldn't perform the way he can."

"I was lucky today and that's why I'm happy to be the champion, I didn't expect this. It's an amazing feeling."

Rublev entered the Dubai final having contested 17 matches — across singles and doubles — in three weeks, 12 of which were three-setters.

The world number seven has been running on fumes all week and had to rally back from a set down in three of his five matches.

PTI ■ DHARAMSALA

Making full use of the opportunities, Shreyas Iyer was breathing down Suryakumar Yadav's neck as India completed a clean sweep with consummate ease, beating Sri Lanka by six wickets in the third and final T20 International here on Sunday.

The Indian team's last three T20 home series against New Zealand, West Indies and now Sri Lanka have ended in identical 3-0 margins.

Chasing a target of 147, it was like a walk in the park for Shreyas, who smashed 73 not out off 45 balls to complete the chase in 16.5 overs after Avesh Khan and Mohammed Siraj enjoyed a brilliant run in the powerplay overs.

Shreyas, whose game against the short ball was once found to be suspect, had a rubber to remember with a hat-trick of half-centuries, an aggregate of 200 runs that fetched him the Player-of-the-Series Award.

Come to think of it, Shreyas is fighting for one elusive middle-order spot with Suryakumar, who was the Player of the Series against the West Indies before sustaining a hairline fracture on his right hand.

Not only in the third match but throughout the series what was evident was that Shreyas was in control of the pull shots which he had been made to practice for hours in the nets.

He is getting in line to keep the pulls down and now presents a happy headache for skipper Rohit Sharma, who became the most capped player in T20 Internationals

INDIA WHITEWASH LANKA

Shreyas Iyer magical run with the bat continues in the third T20I as well as his unbeaten 73* seal 12th consecutive T20I win for India

with 125 games, one more than Pakistan's ageless wonder, Shoaib Malik.

It was a 'Super Subs' day out with India making four changes in the playing XI, including Ishan Kishan due to concussion. They came up trumps without breaking much sweat.

Avesh made amends for a forgettable debut as his scorching opening spell alongside Mohammed Siraj put the Sri Lankans on the back



foot straightaway, as both made full use of the pace and bounce on offer on the Dharamsala track.

Even the two wrist spinners, Ravi Bishnoi (4-0-32-1) and Kuldeep Yadav (4-0-25-0), did well enough to bottle up the islanders on a chilly night.

Strange enough, for two years Bishnoi has been only bowling googlies but with so much accuracy, that the batters in IPL and now in international cricket are yet to get a measure of him.

Sri Lanka captain Dasun Shanaka was once again the saviour

with a 74 not out off 38 balls that took his team close to 150-run mark. Shanaka hit nine fours and two sixes.

But it was Avesh (4-1-23-2) and Siraj (4-0-22-1), who just dismantled the Lankan top-order with pace and bounce, as they were

reduced to 11 for 3 in the fourth over and there was no coming back from there.

Siraj started it by hurrying Danushka Gunathilaka (0) with a short ball which he tried to pull but only managed to drag back onto the stumps.

Avesh, who went for 40 odd runs on debut on at Eden Gardens belter, bowled much fuller from his usual back-of-length stuff and sent back Pathum Nissanka (1) and Charith Asalanka (4), both deliveries hitting the bat faster than they could have comprehended.

The best part about India's performance was that vice-captain Jasprit Bumrah, veteran Bhuvneshwar Kumar and first choice wrist spinner Yuzvendra Chahal were given a much-needed break.

The skipper is spoilt for choice as he and coach Rahul Dravid are slowly building a set-up where they have multiple options for each and every position in both departments.

The only missing link in the T20 squad is the absence of a good off-spinner as the Indian team management is unlikely to go back to Ravichandran Ashwin for the T20 World Cup in Australia.

Otherwise, the team looks in good health. Also consider the fact that people who are not playing this series include Virat Kohli, Rishabh Pant and KL Rahul.

There is Suryakumar, Deepak Chahar and now Ishan Kishan getting injured at some point and Shardul Thakur being rested.

Yet a Test specialist like Siraj and the fiery Avesh or the committed Harshal Patel (4-0-29-1) are all making their cases for selection going into the big-ticket event eight months from now.

There would be injuries or the odd loss of form but even then, Rohit will have not much to worry about in terms of options.

South Africa leads NZ by 211 at stumps after day 3

AP ■ CHRISTCHURCH

South Africa held a 211-run lead over New Zealand at stumps Sunday on the third day of the second test at Christchurch, a day on which there were four specific episodes and one general theme.

The binding theme of the day's play was that South Africa held a tenuous upper hand. From the start of play when New Zealand was 157-5 and 207 runs behind South Africa's first innings of 364, the Proteas kept a grip on the match, shaken momentarily by the day's events.

At stumps South Africa was 140-5 in its second innings with Kyle Verreyne 22 not out and Wiaan Mulder 10.

In the first episode of the day, 35-year-old allrounder Colin de Grandhomme continued a gallant counter-attacking innings to post his second test century, four years after his first.

De Grandhomme shared a 133-run sixth-wicket partnership with Daryl Mitchell which shored up the New Zealand innings after the home team had



been 91-5 late on the second day. He made a half century from 56 balls before stumps on Saturday and carried on to 90 in the first session Sunday, then spent 47 nervous minutes in the 90s before completing his century.

"It went well for me today and the

boys got a good score on the board," de Grandhomme said.

"Hopefully, we'll be in a good position by lunchtime tomorrow."

When Mitchell was out for 60, New Zealand was 224-6 and the sixth-wicket partnership had made South Africa's

lead less oppressive.

In the next episode, South Africa pushed back. They ended New Zealand's innings at 293 to take a 71-run lead on the first innings.

De Grandhomme continued what became a slow accumulation of runs and finished 120 not out. A bright innings of 21 by Neil Wagner helped New Zealand take a little more weight out of the total. Wagner's innings included three fours, a six and a lot of bouncers and banter because he had tested some of the South African bowlers with short pitched deliveries in their first innings.

Kagiso Rabada took the last two wickets with consecutive balls to end the innings with 5-60, his 11th five-wicket bag.

In another, short but significant episode, New Zealand made early inroads into South Africa's second innings. Tim Southee took two wickets and Matt Henry one, leaving South Africa 38-3 and briefly raising the prospect the target New Zealand ultimately will have to chase will be less

onerous.

Then, for most of the last session there was a dogged battle for supremacy. The New Zealand bowlers kept heavy pressure on South Africa and managed by the close of play to break through its top order.

First-innings century-maker Sarel Erwee (8), captain Dean Elgar (13) and Aiden Markram (14) fell before tea when South Africa was 42-3. A battling partnership of 65 for the fourth wicket between Rassie van der Dussen and Temba Bavuma allowed South Africa to rally to 104-3, steadying the innings.

Van der Dussen was dropped by de Grandhomme off Wagner and successfully overturned a caught behind decision as he grafted his way to 45 from 85 balls. He was tested by Wagner's persistent short-pitched bowling and finally returned a catch to Wagner when he was 35.

Bavuma made 23 from 51 balls before flashing at a ball well wide of off stump and providing a catch to Southee off Wagner.

WC warm-up: Harman scores hundred in India's win



PTI ■ RANGIORA (NEW ZEALAND)

Star batter Harmanpreet Kaur struck form with a timely hundred as India eked out a narrow two-run win over South Africa in a warm-up match of the ICC Women's World Cup here on Sunday.

The India vice-captain, who had regained some form with her first fifty in 12 months during the final ODI against New Zealand, slammed a 119-ball 114 with the help of 11 boundaries.

The innings will calm the nerves of the team management as she remains a key player for India's World Cup campaign.

India, however, suffered a injury scare during the game when star opener Smriti Mandhana (12) was struck on the head by a bouncer from Shabnim Ismail and was forced to retire hurt.

Opening the innings, Yastika Bhatia gained rhythm ahead of the tournament proper with a 78-ball 58 but the team didn't get the impetus in the final overs to end at 244 for nine after being invited to bat first.

Defending the total, Rajeshwari Gayakwad (4/46) returned with a four-wicket haul to stop South Africa at 242 for seven, despite some good work from opener Laura Wolvaardt (75), Sune Luus (94) and Marizanne Kapp (31).

Ayabonga Khaka (3/23) was the most successful bowler for South Africa.

India will face arch-rivals Pakistan in their campaign opener on March 6 and Bismah Maroof's team geared up for the 50-over showpiece with a four-wicket win over New Zealand in another practice game in Lincoln.

Opting to bowl, Pakistan dismissed New Zealand for 229 in 45 overs and then romped home in the last over, scoring 233 for six in 49.2 overs.

Nashra Sandhu (4/32) shone with a four-wicket haul for Pakistan, while Amy Satterthwaite (80) and Maddy Green (58) scored bulk of the runs for the White Ferns, who were cruising at 142 for two before losing six wickets for 30 runs.



Ranji Trophy Updates

All-round Mulani takes Mumbai to top with fine victory over Goa, Saurashtra earn bonus point versus Odisha

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

Left-arm spinner Shams Mulani singlehandedly carried Mumbai to the top of the points table as the 44-time champions thrashed Goa by 119 runs after having conceded a 164-run first-innings lead in their group D match.

Mulani had match figures of 11 for 167 (6/107 and 5/60) along with a crucial half-century and a 116-run ninth-wicket stand with fellow spinner Tanush Kotian (98 and 4 wickets) that took Mumbai to 395 for nine and leaving Goa with a tricky 232-run chase on the final day.

However, Goa managed only 112 runs in 48 overs, giving full six points to the heavyweights.

Mumbai are on top of group D with nine points from two games while Saurashtra, by virtue of an innings victory, got seven against Odisha and are second with eight points.

While Saurashtra play Goa in the final game and would be gunning for at least seven points as Mumbai, if they get six against Odisha, will both be on 15 points.

Mulani and Kotian snared eight wickets between them on a surface where there were no demons. There was turn that is expected on a fourth day surface but no uneven bounce that mainly causes trouble.

It's the famous Mumbai willpower of fighting with their backs to the wall that saw them first gather momentum with a good second innings score and then come out all guns blazing as Prithvi Shaw gave the new ball to Mulani.

Left-arm spinner Dharmendra Singh Jadhava got seven 7 for 88 to end with 11 wickets as Saurashtra blanked Odisha by an innings and 131 runs in their match.

Saurashtra scored 501 in their first innings and bowled out Odisha for 165 and 205 in their two essays to log home seven points.

Delhi all but out of Ranji Trophy knock-out contention

Dhruv Shorey's counter-attacking hundred set up a fitting final hour but old warhorse Shahbaz Nadeem's second five-wicket haul enabled Jharkhand to oust Delhi from quarterfinal contention with a thrilling 15-run win in the final over of their Ranji Trophy group H encounter here on Sunday.

While Shorey should be credited for his superb 136 off 177 balls that kept Delhi in hunt for a tough score of 335 but they wilted under pressure during the final half an hour when Nadeem (5/83 in 31 overs) and fellow left-arm orthodox spinner Anukul Roy (2/71 in 20.4 overs) brilliantly closed down the run-scoring opportunities.

Delhi skipper Pradeep Sangwan was coolly stumped by debutant wicketkeeper Kumar Kushagra after he failed to get going.

Nadeem's 10-wicket match haul ensured that Jharkhand, with full six points, stay in contention for a knockout berth when they lock horns with Tamil Nadu (6 points) in their last game.

However, both teams will want that Delhi at least stop Chattisgarh (7 points and current group toppers) from going beyond a point.

For Delhi, the tournament is as good as over and only seven points (including a bonus) against Chattisgarh will give them a slim chance in theory. On the day, Jharkhand skipper Virat Singh declared at 307 for 7 leaving Delhi with a target of 335 in just over two and half sessions.

CSK to launch Super Kings Academy in Chennai, Salem

PTI ■ CHENNAI

IPL franchise Chennai Super Kings will be establishing the Super Kings Academy -- cricket coaching centres for both boys and girls -- which will be functional from April in Chennai and Salem.

The Super Kings Academy will start with two centres and spread to other places over time, said a press release here on Sunday.

The first Super Kings Academy in Chennai will be located at suburban Thorapakkam, while the one in Salem will be at the Salem Cricket Foundation.

The academies will operate throughout the year.

"We have been involved with cricket for five decades and believe this is an ideal way to give back to the sport. This will be the right opportunity



for us to share our experience and help nurture the next generation of cricketers," Chennai Super Kings CEO K S Viswanathan was quoted as saying in the release.

He further said, "With experienced coaches and best of facilities, the Super Kings Academy will not only provide top class coaching but also take a holistic approach in guiding boys and girls."

Chennai Super Kings batting

coach and former Australia batter Mike Hussey termed it a fantastic initiative.

"I think this gives opportunities to so many youngsters out there to get access to some great facilities, great coaching and then hopefully improve their game and come up the ranks and then one day, it would be awesome to see a number of players coming out of these academies playing for CSK in the IPL," Hussey said.

On his part, CSK bowling coach L Balaji said it is a great initiative from the franchise.

"Budding cricketers from various parts of the country will definitely benefit. Over the years, CSK have conducted a lot of junior level cricket tournaments (Junior Super Kings) with schools across the state. There have been a lot of cricketers who have been sent overseas for exposure," he said

After 24 years, Australia's cricket team is back in Pakistan

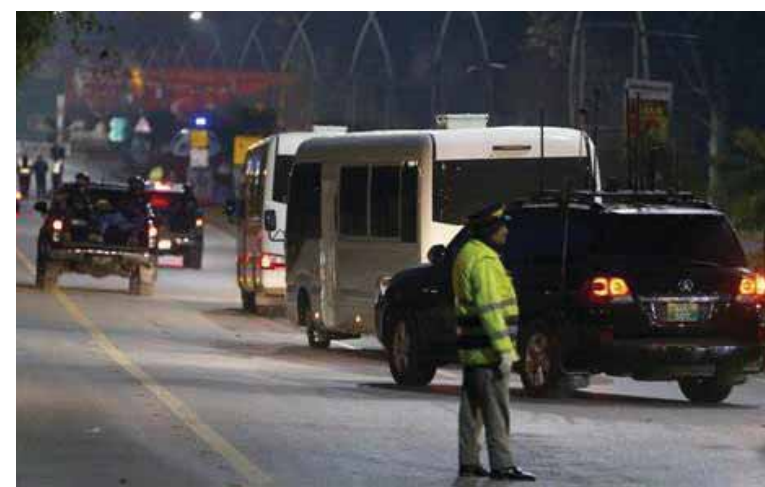
AP ■ ISLAMABAD

Australia arrived for its first tour to Pakistan in 24 years on Sunday with the visitors due to play three test matches, three one-day internationals and a one-off Twenty20 during their six-week tour.

Australia last toured to Pakistan in 1998 when it won the test series 1-0 while also winning all the matches in the limited-overs series. Pakistan has struggled to attract visiting sides since a fatal terrorist attack on the visiting Sri Lanka team's bus in 2009, and Australia pulled out of a tour five years earlier after a suicide blast at a Lahore church.

Pakistan has hosted Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, West Indies, Bangladesh and South Africa over the last six years, but Australia is the first high-profile team that will be touring Pakistan for a fully-fledged bilateral series.

Last year both New Zealand and England pulled out of limited-overs tours to Pakistan due to security concerns. New Zealand abandoned its tour just hours before the toss for the first ODI in Rawalpindi, which is due to host the first test against Australia beginning March 4.



The Pakistan Cricket Board has labeled 2022 as "bumper year" with New Zealand and England also due to tour Pakistan later this year.

Karachi will host the second Australia test from March 12-16 followed by the third test at Lahore from March 21-25. Rawalpindi will host the ODI series from March 29 before Australia rounds off its tour with a

Twenty20 on April 5.

Security teams from Australia visited Pakistan last year to assess the security arrangements in the three cities before the tour was given the approval by Cricket Australia.

Thousands of security personnel are expected to be deployed during the Australians' stay and the Pakistan cricket board expects fully vaccinated capac-

ity crowds for the tests and limited-overs series.

"You are really lucky to be surrounded by so many professionals, that was one of the big factors that we wanted to be really, really thorough on," Cummins said in a virtual press conference just hours after arriving in Pakistan.

"There's lots of things going on around. This (security) might be a little bit different to what we're used to, but we know it's been taken care of so we can just really enjoy our first tour here in 24 years. And yeah, there's no distractions other than the cricket."

Steve Smith and Pakistan-born Usman Khawaja also shared their pictures on Twitter as the team boarded a chartered flight from Melbourne.

Australia players remain in one-day isolation in their team hotel before starting training from Monday at the Pindi Cricket Stadium, venue for the first test.

Capacity crowds are expected to witness the historic series which is part of the World Test Championship. Australia is at No. 2 on the WTC table behind Sri Lanka with Pakistan occupying No. 3 spot.

Cummins expects passionate crowds at all the venues.