



OPINION 6
PUSHPA KAMAL DAHAL
FALLS FROM GRACE

WORLD 9
PUTIN MEETS SYRIAN
PREZ IN KREMLIN

MONEY 10
MARKETS EXTEND LOSSES
FOR 5TH SESSION

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J&K on high alert ahead of PM visit

MOHIT KANDHARI ■
JAMMU/NEW DELHI

The security forces have been kept in a state of high alert ahead of the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to attend the 25th Kargil Vijay Diwas on Friday in Drass. This will be the PM's first visit to the region after recent spate of terror attacks and also a few high-level review meetings in this regard held in the national Capital with two of them chaired by Modi himself.

Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi who landed in Srinagar early Thursday morning visited forward areas along the Line of Control in Kashmir valley to review the preparedness of the forces involved in counter-infiltration and counter-terror operations.

The Army Chief later flew to Kargil to supervise the arrangements. Vital security installations were also kept on high-alert along the Jammu-Pathankot National Highway following the sighting of seven suspected terrorists in a village of the Pathankot district of the neighbouring State, Punjab.

Several schools at Army installations in the Jammu



Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi during his visit to the forward locations of Chinara Corps. Dwivedi also reviewed the security situation along the Line of Control during his visit. PTI Photo

region and along the highway were directed to remain closed till July 29 as a precautionary measure. Massive search operations were also launched by the Army, police, and paramilitary forces in the

border areas of Kathua (Jammu) and Pathankot to track down the suspects. During his brief stay, the Prime Minister will also carry out the first blast of the Shinkun La Tunnel Project, virtually.

Modi meets Maha NDA partners to smoothen ties

RAJESH KUMAR ■
MUMBAI/NEW DELHI

With a lot of complications due to the breakaway factions of two important constituents — NCP and Shiv Sena — in Maharashtra, the Central leadership of BJP, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has personally started taking stock of the situation. The State is to go to Assembly elections soon.

A day after Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar demanded nearly 90 seats for the NCP faction led by him during his meeting with Home Minister Amit Shah, the PM on Thursday met MPs of NDA allies in Maharashtra and discussed the political situation ahead of the upcoming Assembly polls in the state. Among those whom the Prime Minister met included Union Ministers Nitin Gadkari, Piyush Goyal, and others.

The BJP won just nine of the 28 seats it contested in the Lok Sabha polls, down from 23 it won in 2019. Besides the loss of Lok Sabha seats, BJP's vote percentage decline in the State this elections has caused a huge worry. In 2024, BJP got 27.84 per cent votes which has been reduced to 26.1 per cent this time.

Rain-ravaged Maharashtra seeks Army, Navy help

TN RAGHUNATHA ■
MUMBAI/PUNE

At least three people were electrocuted in Pune and three others feared trapped under the debris of three collapsed villas in a hill slide at Lavasa, even as the heavy rains wreaked havoc in Pune, Mumbai and various parts of Maharashtra, prompting the Maharashtra Government to seek the assistance of the Army and Navy to deal with the monsoon-related incidents.

Many parts of Pune lay thick sheets of water as the heavy rains ravaged the city since Wednesday night, while intense rains battered Mumbai, Thane, Palghar and other surrounding areas resulting in heavy flooding in low-lying areas and disruption in train and flight operations. As a precautionary measure, the authorities declared holidays for schools and colleges in Pune, Mumbai and Thane.

Three mobile snacks stall owners were electrocuted when they tried to move their handcarts to safety through the flood waters near Z bridge at around 3.30 am in Pune, while three others were feared trapped nearby Lavasa city after a hill-slide buried three villas.



A commuter makes his way through a waterlogged road after rain, in Mumbai, on Thursday. PTI

and IT capital has been clobbered by torrential rain since last night leaving a trail of destruction, paralysing normal life as the district administration ordered all educational institutions to remain shut for the day. Several parts of Pune, neighbouring twin towns of Pimpri and Chinchwad and dams around Pune have recorded very high rainfall. Since the midnight Wednesday-Thursday, heavy rainfall was recorded in Lavasa (454 mm), Lonavala (323 mm), Nimgiri (233 mm), Malin (181 mm), Chinchwad (175 mm), Talegaon and Khadakwasla (168 mm) and Lavale (167 mm). Pune received an average rainfall of 115 mm. After taking stock of the

situation arising out of heavy rains in Pune, Mumbai Raigad, Thane and other parts of the State, Maharashtra chief Minister Eknath Shinde said, "The units of NDRF, SDRF, Army, Navy, Police, Fire Brigade, Health System have been directed to coordinate with each other and lend help." "These agencies need to work as a team and shift the flood affected people safely, provide them with food packets, arrange medicines and water. Instructions have been given to take the help of NDRF, Army, and Navy," Shinde said. "Around 40,000 cusecs was discharged from the Khadakwasla Dam," Minister of State for Civil Aviation Murlidhar Mohol who is an MP from Pune, said.

"There is also heavy rain in Mumbai city and suburbs. The administration is fully alert to deal with any calamity in Mumbai and I am in touch with Pune, Raigad, Mumbai Collectors and Municipal Commissioners," Shinde said. Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar also coordinated with authorities in rushing help to the people affected by rains in Pune and various parts of the State. On a day when scores of trees were uprooted and two-wheelers and four-wheelers remained stranded in flood waters, personnel from various agencies deployed to ferry the people in the marooned areas of Pune. More than 500 people were evacuated from the low-lying areas during the day.

SC ruling a shot in arm for States rich in minerals

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The legislative power to tax mineral rights vests with the States and the royalty paid on minerals is not a tax, the Supreme Court ruled on Thursday in a landmark judgement which will give a huge revenue boost to mineral-rich States.

A nine-judge constitution bench headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud, in a majority 8:1 verdict, said Parliament does not have the legislative competence to tax mineral rights under Entry 54 of List I of the Constitution which pertains to regulation of mines and mineral development by the Centre.

The pronouncement, which came as a setback to the Centre, however, said

BJP slams Opp for abusing Modi in Parliament debate



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Centre on Thursday hit out at Opposition leaders, contending that they had resorted to abusing Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the debate on the Union Budget in Parliament instead of speaking on the finer aspects of the document. Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju said the manner in which some Opposition leaders made their speeches amounted to insulting the House and lowering the dignity of the Budget Session. "Let us respect the mandate of the people. They have given the mandate to Prime Minister

Modi for the third consecutive term. If anybody tries to insult the verdict of the people, they will be punished in the elections," Rijiju said at a Press conference. His remarks came a day after the Opposition claimed the Union Budget was "discriminatory" against non-NDA-ruled States and accused the Prime Minister of running a "shaky and vulnerable" coalition Government.

During the general discussion on the budget for 2024-25 in the Lok Sabha on Wednesday, various Opposition members accused the government of doling out sops to key allies JD(U) and TDP, which rule Bihar and Andhra Pradesh respectively, to ensure that the government faces no hurdles from its coalition partners. Rijiju said elections were over and now the focus should be to work towards a developed India (Viksit Bharat) and hold constructive discussion on the Union Budget. "The Prime Minister has said that elections were over and now was the time to rise above political lines and work together for the nation," Rijiju said.

UPSC to curb cheating with tech

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

With a series of controversies related to the UPSC and the exams conducted by it including the topmost Civil Services Examinations, the commission is now preparing to enhance its examination security measures by incorporating advanced technological solutions such as Aadhaar-based fingerprint authentication, facial recognition systems, and AI-driven closed-circuit television (CCTV) surveillance, several media outlets reported.

This overhaul, intended to maintain the integrity of UPSC exams, follows widespread allegations of cheating in certain national level exams like the recent NEET. The commission has proposed a real-time attendance monitoring system that includes GPS coordinates to confirm that enrolment occurs within the designated shift. The UPSC specifies that the QR code on the Admit Card, which includes the candidate's roll number, should be scanned to automatically retrieve the candidate's information from



the Application Database. If the QR code cannot be scanned, the candidate's roll number must be entered manually from the Admit Card. The UPSC also plans to implement CCTV/video surveillance with recording and live broadcast capabilities to monitor the activities of candidates and exam personnel across various centres and venues nationwide. The service provider will be required to install an adequate number of CCTV colour cameras in every classroom, ensuring at least one camera for every 24 candidates. Cameras will also be placed at the entry and exit gates and in control rooms where sensitive pre

and post-examination materials are handled. Additionally, the service provider must arrange for remote live viewing of the CCTV footage at the UPSC's control room, ensuring real-time monitoring and enhancing overall security during the examinations. The UPSC has sought bids from public sector undertakings (PSUs) to revamp its examination process. This move also follows a controversy involving trainee IAS officer Puja Khedkar, who is alleged to have forged documents to appear for the CSE 12 times, exceeding the allowed number of attempts. The UPSC has filed a criminal case against Khedkar.

Dhaka takes umbrage at Didi remark, complains to India

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on Thursday confirmed receiving a note from Dhaka that conveyed its objection to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's remarks offering shelter to people affected by violent-clashes in that country. Bangladesh Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud has earlier objected to Mamata's recent remark of offering "shelter" to people from Bangladesh amid ongoing protests in the country. External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal, appearing to disapprove of Mamata's comments, said matters that bring "the Union into relation with any foreign country, are the sole prerogative" of the Central Government. In an address at a public event in Kolkata, Mamata, referring to violence-hit Bangladesh, said she would keep the doors of West Bengal open for people in distress from the neighbouring country and offer them shelter. There were reports in the Bangladeshi media that said Dhaka has communicated to



Protesters in Bangladesh. File PTI photo

New Delhi through diplomatic channels its displeasure over the West Bengal Chief Minister's comments. "I can confirm that we have received such a communication from the Bangladesh side. It is essentially on the lines described in the reports," Jaiswal said during his weekly media briefing while replying to a question. "I would underline that under the Seventh schedule — List one — Union List — item 10 of our Constitution, the conduct of foreign affairs and all matters which bring the Union into relation with any foreign country, are the sole prerogative of the Union Government," he said.

BJP govt announces Rs 2.65 lakh-cr State Budget for 2024-25

- Almost all pre-poll promises, including Subhadra, included
- Special focus given on agriculture, infrastructure, Odia Asmita
- KALIA renamed as CM Kisan Nidhi Yojana

NALINI SAHU ■
BHUBANESWAR

Odisha's first Bharatiya Janata Party government on Thursday presented a Budget of Rs.2.65 lakh crore for the financial year 2024-25 with more special focus on agricul-

ture, infrastructure, welfare and Odia Asmita (pride).

Presenting the Budget, Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi, who also holds the finance portfolio, proposed an administrative expenditure at Rs 97, 725 crore and a programme expenditure of Rs



1,55,000 crore.

The Budget, which saw a 15% increase in total outlay, marked the government accommodating the major pre-poll promises of the BJP. The CM allocated funds for the much-talked-about Subhadra

Yojana, paying Rs 800 extra per quintal of paddy on and above the minimum support price (MSP) of Rs 2,300 and hiking in the social security pensions for old age people, widows and differently-abled persons.

There has been an outlay of Rs 10,000 crore for the Subhadra Yojana, under which a woman of a family will be given a cash voucher of Rs 50,000 to be spent in two years' time. This scheme had proved to be a game-changer for the BJP in the last elections as it smashed the previous Biju Janata Dal (BJD) government's women vote bank. During election campaigns in the State, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had announced that the BJP would roll out the Subhadra Yojana if it came to power in the State.

The Budget allocated Rs 1,166 crore for the Lakhpati Yojana, which the BJP had

promised in its election manifesto.

The Budget proposed Rs 3,056 crore for Gopabandhu Jana Arogya Yojana, which is seen as a replacement of the BJD government's Biju Swasthya Kalayan Yojana. Similarly, Rs 1935 crore has been given for CM Kisan Nidhi Yojana that is seen as an alternative of the BJD government's KALIA scheme. The CM announced that his government would introduce Odia Bhasha Bruti, a scholarship for promotion of Odia language.

An outlay of Rs 6,665 crore has been made for the metro railway project connecting

Trisulia in Cuttack to the Bhubaneswar airport. For Mukhya Mantri Sadak Yojana, an outlay of Rs 3190 crore has been made.

The Budget saw a whopping allocation of Rs 4,487 crore for the Madhubabu Pension Yojana.

The CM announced to launch Utkarsh Utkal, an initiative to woo domestic and foreign direct investments (FDIs). While the government targets to mop up Rs 2.50 lakh crore-investment proposals from the domestic players, it aims for \$ 2 billion FDIs.

The CM took more than three hours to read out the 45-page Budget speech.

Chaos in Assembly over Polavaram project

Opp also protests Minister's call to arrest Naveen

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
The Odisha Assembly on Thursday witnessed chaos over the Andhra Pradesh Government's Polavaram irrigation project and Parliamentary Affairs Minister's comment calling for arrest of Leader of the Opposition Naveen Patnaik.

The disorder prompted Speaker Surama Padhi to adjourn the House until 4 pm. After a three-day deadlock over the Opposition's demand for arrest of the Governor's son, who was allegedly involved in assaulting a government official, the Assembly resumed normal proceedings on Thursday at 10:30 am for the Question Hour.

However, the situation deteriorated during the Zero Hour when opposition Congress members protested against the Polavaram project, arguing that it would displace thousands of tribals in several

villages of Odisha. Congress Legislature Party Leader Ram Chandra Kadam climbed onto the reporters' table while party MLA Tara Prasad Bahinipati rushed to the Speaker's podium attempting to seize the Speaker's microphone.

Congress members also shouted slogans from the Well of the House, demanding formation of a committee to safeguard the livelihoods of the tribals likely to be displaced by the Polavaram project.

Meanwhile, BJD members, protesting the Parliamentary Affairs Minister Mukesh Mahaling's remark about arresting Naveen Patnaik, also rushed into the Well of the House insisting that the speaker be removed from the Assembly records.

The House descended into pandemonium with both Congress and BJD members shouting slogans against the government over their respective issues. Unable to restore order, the Speaker adjourned the session until 4 pm.

Vigilance action Suktel Chief Construction Engineer's properties raided

Assets located in BBSR, Puri, Angul, Cuttack, Balangir

PNS ■ CUTTACK
The Vigilance police on Thursday conducted simultaneous raids at nine places associated with Sunil Kumar Rout, Chief Construction Engineer of the Lower Suktel

project in Balangir district on the charge of amassing properties disproportionate to his known sources of income.

According to sources, several teams of the anti-corruption agency raided properties of Rout and his relatives located in Bhubaneswar, Puri, Angul, Cuttack and Balangir.

The Vigilance teams comprising two Additional SPs, eight DSPs, six Inspectors, 10

ASIs and other staffs conducted the searches on the strength of search warrants issued by Special Judge, Vigilance, Bhubaneswar, sources informed, adding that the teams found some important documents during the searches.

Till the last reports came in, the search operations were underway in the following places:

Triple-storey residential building at Niladri Vihar in Bhubaneswar, double-storey building at Nayapalli in Bhubaneswar, flat at VIP Road in Puri, paternal house at Gurudijhatia in Cuttack, house of his son at Kishorenagar in Angul, his relative's house at Nayapalli in Bhubaneswar, his house in Balangir and his office in Balangir.

OAS officer Dash reinstated after 6-yr suspension

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
Senior Odisha Administrative Service (OAS) officer Deba Prasad Dash, suspended since 2018, has been reinstated by the State Government. He is now appointed as Joint Secretary in the Odia Language, Literature & Culture Department.



BJD government on May 28, 2018.

Dash expressed his gratitude to the BJP government for revoking his suspension after six years and two months.

According to a notification issued by the General Administration and Public Grievance Department, Dash has been appointed as the Joint Secretary to the Government, Odia Language, Literature & Culture Department with a condition that he must adhere to the Odisha Government Servants' Conduct Rules, 1959.

Dash was serving as a Joint Secretary at the Department of Social Security and Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (SSEPD) when he was suspended by the then

"I am delighted that I got justice after a long wait. Even after repeated directives from the Supreme Court and the Chief Secretaries, the suspension was not revoked against me. The present BJP government has provided justice to me and I express my gratitude to everyone," Dash said.

"My suspension was deliberate even after my serving with dedication and honesty. The suspension not only affected me but also hurt my elderly father and family members," Dash added.

In city Woman scribe found dead on railway track

Husband arrested

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
A day after a woman journalist was found dead on railway tracks at Bapuji Nagar of Bhubaneswar, the Dhauli police on Thursday arrested her husband Sridhar Jena after the family members of the deceased Madhumita Parida alleged murder.

between her and her husband, but the matter was resolved with the intervention of the Dhauli police and she went to her husband's house a day before her body was found on Wednesday.

Madhumita was working for a web channel. Her family members alleged that she had attempted suicide some days back. There was some dispute

City DCP Prateek Singh said, "The couple was staying at Lingipur. Husband Sridhar, who works in Air Force, was staying at another place. After marriage, Madhumita alleged frequent disturbances between them. On July 23, Madhumita lodged a complaint with Dhauli police that her husband had returned

to Odisha on holiday for the last 12 days, but he was ignoring her."

Singh further said the deceased had alleged that she was feeling mentally harassed as Sridhar had threatened to give her divorce. "Later, the couple submitted in writing at the police station that the situation between them was normal and they had no grievances. It appears that there was some dispute between them. The deceased saw something in Sridhar's phone and learnt that he had some relationship with

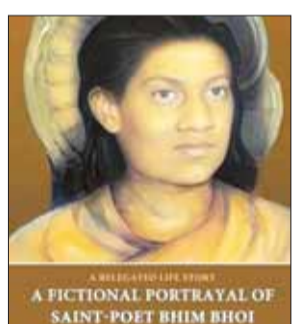
other women. It is for this reason that she was disturbed," said Singh. Singh said Sridhar's mobile phone has been seized and CCTV footage is being checked to analyse the movement of the deceased.

"It appears that there were some problems in their relationship. Sridhar was threatening to give her divorce. The Dhauli police today arrested Sridhar and produced him before court. During investigation, we will ascertain whether Sridhar was earlier married or not," the DCP added.

Author-translator Mali's 2 books released

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Two books 'Fictional Portrayal of Saint Poet Bhim Bhoi' and 'Folklores of Kumaon' by renowned Hindi author and translator Dinesh Kumar Mali have been released.



The "Fictional Portrayal of Saint Poet Bhim Bhoi," with a critical introduction by Prof Nandini Sahu, is a gripping and compelling novella that delves into the life and philosophy of the 19th-century saint-poet Bhim Bhoi. Through the lens of the protagonist Anand, Mali presents a vivid and evocative portrayal of Bhim Bhoi, known for his devotion to Mahima Dharma and his profound poetic expressions that challenge social inequalities and marginalisation.

The novella weaves a fictional narrative around the historical figure of Bhim Bhoi and presents before us a touching story of the poet who lived between 1850 and 1895 and whose belief in God was indisputable.

The book engages the readers with wider themes of marginality and social inequality, drawing parallels between Bhim Bhoi's era and contemporary issues. Narrative of Mali serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing struggles faced



by marginalised communities, highlighting the relevance of Bhim Bhoi's teachings in today's world. The novella encourages readers to reflect on the pervasive nature of social hierarchies and the importance of striving for a more just and equitable society. Hence the book is indispensable to the researchers and scholars of recently introduced theories like Indian Knowledge System and Disability Studies as well as al-

ready established theories like Dalit Studies, Bhasha discourse and Indian Literature.

The other book, "Folklores of Kumaon" offers a collection of traditional tales from the Kumaon region, which have been translated by Mali. The elements of Kumaon's folk culture still exist in the original form, hallmark of Kumaoni folk culture. Impact of many different cultures and mystics, philosophy, values, ideas, emotions, and sentiments corroborated in the folk culture and folklore of Uttarakhand

Mali has made honest efforts in capturing the essence of the folk culture in his translation.

Both titles exemplify Mali's dedication to Hindi literature and cultural preservation. Readers can find these books on Amazon and Flipkart.

In Jajpur 24 buses fined Rs 1.63l for running without permits

AKSHAY ROUT ■ JAJPUR

As many as 24 private passenger buses were fined Rs 1.63 lakh for reportedly running on different routes without permits in Jajpur district today.

As per the State Transport Authority, the general bus fare per kilometer is 88 paise while the fare of the express bus is 92 paise. Taking this into consideration, the fare between Jajpur and Cuttack should be Rs 66.99 in general category and Rs 69.92 in the express buses.

the passengers. Acting on the allegations of not showing the rate charges, overcharging and overloading, a team of officials from the Jajpur RTO office under the leadership of RTO Nilakantha Pradhan conducted an inspection of the buses at Gajipadhi Chhak in Jajpur. The officials waylaid several buses and inspected the documents of the vehicles and asked the passengers about the bus fares. The officials also advised the bus owners to put the rate chart and, accordingly, take money from the passengers. The commuters were also asked to demand tickets for their travel from the conductors while giving the money.

However, the bus conductors were charging Rs 100-110 per person according to their wishes. Besides, they were allegedly not giving tickets to

'Govt forgets Kotia despite assurance'

Says Utkal Sammilani

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The border regions of Odisha are not safe. Longstanding disputes over the Kotia, Polavaran and Naryanpatna areas are continuing with Andhra Pradesh. Besides, the Utkal Sammilani on Thursday said West Bengal is trying to grab Sankhamedi village, Udaypur beach area and Sahabajipur in Baleswar district. Border disputes are also continuing with the States of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. More than 96 villages in the border areas are disputed.



On the request of the Utkal Sammilani, the BJP had formed the South Odisha Vikash Parishad for solving the Kotia dispute and given it a place in the party's election manifesto. But now, no provision has been made in the State Budget for the purpose. The Sammilani has expressed disappointment over this, said Utkal Sammilani general secretary Dillip Dash Sharma.

Hirakud to release water on July 28

PNS ■ SAMBALPUR

The Hirakud Dam would release the season's first floodwater on July 28, informed senior officials on Thursday. The gates of the dam would be opened at 9 am on Sunday.

Official sources said there has been a substantial rise in the rainfall activities in the upper catchment areas of Hirakud. Chhattisgarh re-

ceived heavy rains in the past 24 hours. This has led to a rise in the inflow of water into the Hirakud Dam.

At present, there is an inflow of 2 lakh cusecs into the dam's reservoir. As the inflow is likely to rise further, the authorities have decided to release excess floodwater from the reservoir as its water level is likely to reach 615 feet by July 28.

Despite many schemes, resources allocation Odisha's primitive tribes still on margin

The Union Budget 2024-2025 made announcement of the Pradhanmantri Janjatiya Unnat Gram Abhijana for improving the socio-economic condition of tribal communities. It aims to include all eligible beneficiaries covering 63,000 tribal-dominated villages benefiting around 5 crore tribal people. This time, the overall outlay for the Ministry of Tribal Affairs is about Rs 13,000 crore. Added to this, under the Development Action Plan for STs (DAPST), 42 Ministries /Departments also were allocated funds ranging from 4.3 to 17.5 percent of their total scheme allocation for tribal development.



MANAS JENA

The DAPST fund has increased 5 times since 2013-14 from Rs 21,525 crore to Rs 1,24,908 crore in current Budget estimate. The financial resources for tribal development come from a host of sources which include special Central assistance to TSP, aid under Articles 275(1), TSP component of the State and Central Government Ministries and departments, institutional finance, CSR fund from corporate bodies, UNO, international agencies, District Mineral Foundation fund, OMBADC and

CAMPA fund etc. But tribal development is moving in a slow space and social development gaps widen.

The makers of modern India wanted to build an inclusive society by minimizing many forms of inequality across social groups and within communities through planned economic development. In order to address the development of the most vulnerable groups amongst the marginalised sections such STs, the Central Government has implemented a slew of micro projects since 1975 for as many as

75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) out of notified 700 ST communities in the country. The PVTGs are identified on the basis of stagnant/low population growth, low literacy, subsistence level of economic status and their dependence on pre-agricultural level for livelihood. The majority of PVTGs are inhabitants of Central India.

The largest number of communities in the country listed as STs and PVTGs are in State of Odisha.

There are 62 tribes and among them 13 are PVTGs which include Chuktia Bhunnjia, Birhor, Bondo, Didayi, Dangaria Kondha, Juanga, Kharia, Kutia Kandha, Langiasaura, Lodha, Mankidia, Paudi Bhuyan and Saura. As per a State Government survey, their population was about 90,000 in 2015 who were spread over 20 blocks of 12 districts. Though small in number, these PVTGs are with distinct culture, language and belief systems, but have been on the edge with low literacy, economic backwardness, isolation and distressed condition.

There are as many as 17 micro projects started by the PVTGs be-

tween 1976 and 1995 and these schemes are still continuing with the involvement of the Central and Odisha Governments, corporate, NGOs and international donors such as IFAD. The State Government has taken a loan of Rs 312 crore from IFAD for its Rs 800 crore project for PVTGs empowerment and livelihood improvement.



During the Covid pandemic, the Government of Odisha supported the PVTG households with special Covid assistance, ration kit and labour assistance. There are a host of activities for education and economic development by the State department with support of the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA). There is a National Council for Tribal Welfare headed by the Prime Minister where the Chief Ministers of the 5th and 6th Scheduled areas in their states are members. The Tribal Sub Plan has been implemented for the last 50 years, aiming to bridge gaps between the tribal and rest of the so-

cial groups. It is to bring larger socio-economic equality and building an egalitarian society but certainly not to appease the tribal community as they deserve all the rights as fellow citizens and dignity as human beings.

There are also a number of NGOs, religious bodies, private trusts and educational institutions engaged in tribal development for a long time. As per sources, the MoTA supports 200 NGOs with 300 projects. There are 4 Ministries and departments of the Central Government having a tribal welfare component. The grant to the States under Article 275(1) of the Constitution of India is 100 per cent to the States on the basis of the ST population of the State to the total tribal population of the country.

The micro projects in Odisha have almost completed about 30 years of its operation and no one knows how long they will go further, but in spite of spending a huge amount why the socio-economic indicators such as women literacy, child mortality rate, infant mortality rate, women with anemia, chil-

dren with sickle cell anemia, student dropout rate etc. do not improve is a moot question. The PVTGs are still below than other STs of the State and far below the State and national average and much below other social groups in all these indicators. A majority of them have no basic amenities for life, such as habitat rights, houses, drinking water, sanitary facilities and linking roads to their hamlets. The vulnerable condition of PVTGs in Odisha has attracted national attention on the issues of their extreme economic backwardness, malnutrition, diseases, hunger death, child labour, displacement due to mining and distress migration. There has been no sign of improvement in the standard of living and quality of life of these groups in spite of special projects and micro projects. There may be examples of very insignificant success of a few individuals or households from among them but the socio-economic and educational status of the communities as a whole has not changed much at par with other advanced social groups.

This underscores the need to change the approach of the ongoing project model and cluster

method. In the changing conditions slowly, many of them migrate from their homeland to outside in search of livelihood and mostly they get engaged in odd jobs, low-paid work and work in slums as scavengers and housemaids in the cities.

Unfortunately, for a long time, they have been exhibited as museum materials in the most vulgar and undignified manner in the State sponsored Adivasi exhibitions and Melas, wall paintings in the cities and decorated as statues on traffic islands. Is it decent to show human beings--men, women and children--in such a fashion before others? How such exhibitions are going to help build a positive image of such communities in public needs a pondering. They struggle to cope with external changing conditions which are quite challenging for them. The fact is, mostly non-tribal actors play a major role in the development of PVTGs of the State. The over domination of non-tribal persistently continues in all spheres of tribal development. The organic leadership of STs is not being encouraged much for the execution of the development process.

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No UGC tag Khallikote College students' protests continue

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

Students locked the main gate of the Khallikote College and staged a protest on Thursday here besides threatening to intensify their agitation further over the apathy of the authorities to the Khallikote College which was upgraded to a university in 2021 but now has been stripped of the UGC recognition.

The agitating students are hurt by the denigration of the institution and have accused the authorities of showing step-motherly attitude to the institution. They are planning to continue their agitation with human chains, hunger strikes, and street demonstrations to seek the support of



local residents and intellectuals.

As the institution has no UGC status, the students graduating from the institution receive certificates that might be considered invalid, they apprehended. Despite the

institution's continuous operation, no formal notification has been communicated to the students or their guardians about the issue.

Meanwhile, the college is unable to receive UGC grants, resulting in a lack of neces-

sary infrastructure and manpower recruitment.

The students have demanded that politicizing of the institution be stopped and a former Vice-Chancellor of the university who was involved in irregularities be arrested.

NGT issues show-cause on tourism activities in Satkosia

Says MoEF&CC has not cared to file counter-affidavit

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has issued a show-cause notice to the Deputy Director General of Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) for the delay in filing a counter-affidavit to the petition challenging "ongoing harmful tourism activities" inside the Satkosia Tiger Reserve and Satkosia gorge of the Mahanadi "under the garb of eco-tourism".

Satkosia is one of the largest river gorges of Odisha having a length of almost 14 miles that runs through the tiger reserve and is a natural habitat for about 500 endangered gharials which use sand banks for laying eggs. The area was declared as a Ramsar Site in 2021.

Hearing the petition on Monday, the NGT's East Zone bench in Kolkata found that the State Government had filed an affidavit, but no reply was received from the MoEF&CC which it had sought on March 22. "Today is July 22, 2024, and even after four months, the MoEF&CC has not cared to file its counter-affidavit even though its stand with regard to the controversy

in the present case is most relevant," the Bench of B Amit Sthalekar (Judicial Member) and Arun Kumar Verma (Expert Member) said.

The Bench said that on May 10, Dibendra Narayan Ray, counsel appearing on behalf of MoEF&CC, had again prayed for and was granted four weeks' time. "More than two months have passed, but the MoEF&CC has not cared to file its affidavit. We, therefore, direct the Deputy Director General of Forests at the MoEF&CC's Integrated Regional Office in Bhubaneswar to be present in virtual mode on next date with his explanation as to why he is not filing counter-affidavit with regard to

the issues involved in the present application and why per-day cost be not imposed upon him as per provisions of the section 26 of the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010," the Bench added.

The next hearing has been posted for August 20.

The petition said more than 16 cottage tents, seven of them having AC facility with attendant dining huts, set up during tourist season for eight months from October to May known as 'Badmul Sand Resort', in Satkosia area, where bonfires are lighted at night and sand sports are organised along with folk music and dance, were extremely disturbing to the wildlife.

Prez Murmu completes 2 yrs in office



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

As President Droupadi Murmu completed two years in the office on Thursday (July 25, 2024), she played the role of a teacher that she once was.

In her brief yet lively interaction with Class-IX students of Dr Rajendra Prasad Kendriya Vidyalaya in the President's Estate, she imparted lessons on nature conservation and climate change. Recalling the time when she was of their age, she shared her

experiences of caring for plants and animals. The students responded with enthusiasm and offered many suggestions too. She also participated in other important initiatives undertaken in the President's Estate which included inauguration of the redeveloped Shiva temple, a visit to Pranab Mukherjee Public Library where she interacted with students and launch of e-Upahaar, RB app, e-book, a compilation of glimpses of past one year of Presidency.

In Nayagarh Man, 5-yr-old daughter found dead in house

PNS ■ NAYAGARH

A man and his daughter were found dead under mysterious circumstances in Nayagarh on Thursday. The deceased were identified as Pulak Biswal (36) and his daughter Palak (5).

Police recovered their bodies from their house at Debadatara lane after breaking the lock. Sources said the house was locked from inside.

It was suspected that Pulak first poisoned his daughter and later ended his life by hanging himself.

Notably, only three months back, Pulak had married for

the second time after the death of his first wife.

"I had come to drop my sister off when I found that the house was locked. The mobile phone of my brother-in-law was also switched off. Later, I called police and informed them about the matter," said a relative.

The exact reason behind the incident was yet to be ascertained whether Pulak resorted to such extreme over some family feud or any other reason. Police and a forensic team on Thursday intensified their investigation into the matter which has sent shockwaves in the locality.

In Basanti Colony, Chhend OSHB house allottees yet to get land patta

Assn urges for HUD Min's intervention

AUROBINDA DAS ■ ROURKELA

The Odisha State Housing Board Land and Owners' Association, Rourkela (OSHBLOAR) urged the early intervention of the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Minister to resolve various issues of the house owners of Basanti Colony and Chhend locality here.

OSHBLOAR president Bimal Bisi in a letter to the Minister mentioned that the lease documents of projects constructed 45 years back by the Odisha State Housing Corporation in Rourkela have not yet been completed. Bisi further mentioned that Basanti Colony (was constructed in the year 1977) and Chhend phase - 1 land submission has not been

done yet. Consequently, the allottees of the houses are suffering a lot as the land is in the name of the State Government.

Most of the house owners are senior citizens and they are being harassed to obtain an NOC from the OSHB Office at Bhubaneswar to avail any bank loan for renovation of the house. Though a branch office of OSHB is at Basanti Colony, it is confined to a sign board only for many years. If it was properly operational then the house owners would easily do their paperwork here instead of going to Bhubaneswar, said Bisi and urged the Minister to do the needful to resolve the issue. Besides, Bisi urged for taking initiative for new housing projects at Basanti Colony and Chhend in the demarcated open space as for more than two decades no new housing projects have come up in the vacant lands, leading to their encroachment.

R'gada DM resumes grievances meet, reviews schemes

BADAL TAH ■ RAYAGADA

After the code of conduct for the last simultaneous elections was lifted, Rayagada Collector Manoj Satyawan Mahajan resumed grievance redressal meet at the district and block headquarters.

Several community and individual grievances were addressed at the spot and many were referred to the concerned departments with strict direction by Mahajan for early resolution of people's issues.

Recently, during a joint grievance hearing along with SP Harisha BC, Sub-Collector Gunupur and a gamut of other district level officials at Padmapur Block headquarters, Mahajan heard 48 grievances out of which 39 were individual and 9 were community based. He sanctioned Rs



55,000 to four extremely needy persons from Chief Minister's Relief Fund.

After the hearing at block headquarters, Mahajan reviewed several flagship programmes in a village named Khilapadara under Khilapadara GP. On the spot, he distributed a number of record of land rights to beneficiaries, pensions to senior citizens and divyangs, soil cards to farmers and power tillers to women members of

Mission Shakti. He inaugurated several stalls on Swachha Bharat Mission, Mission Shakti, agricultural initiatives, health programmes and fishery activities and rendered suggestions to improve the programmes.

Mahajan instructed his colleagues to be alert to any untoward disasters due to ongoing incessant rains and store dry foods and other relief materials. He has directed the concerned Government staff to

look into the issues of the roads, drainage system and irrigation structures, which have the potential to be affected. With his direction, the municipal authorities have started dismantling old clogged drains at Gundicha Chowk and other places within the vicinity of Rayagada municipality.

Mahajan along with Harisha has paid a visit to the last villages of Niyamagiri hills namely Dangamati and Lakhpadara and interacted with the tribal leaders belonging to Primarily Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) regarding their pressing needs and prospects. Recently the community members from this PVTG met Mahajan in his chamber at Rayagada and discussed about several issues concerning them.

Rs 9.57-cr cheque cloning case Odisha EOW arrests one more accused from WB

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Odisha Economic Offences Wing (EOW) has arrested one more fraudster from West Bengal in connection with the Rs 9-crore Bank of India cheque cloning case.

The arrested was identified as Ajmir Mondal. "He was arrested on July 23, produced before the Howrah Chief Judicial Magistrate and was brought to Bhubaneswar on the strength of transit remand. He was produced in the Designated Court, Baleswar, under OPID Act on Thursday," the EOW said.

The case was registered on basis of a complaint filed by Chief Manager of Bank of India, Baripada, Sujata Kanungo about illegal transactions of Rs 9,56,76,600 from the account



of District Mineral Foundation Trust of Zilla Parishad, Mayurbhanj, through four cheques on April 10 and 18.

The EOW took over the case from Bhanjapur police on April 19.

The investigation revealed that the fraudsters used forged/clone cheques and managed to transfer the amount to the accounts of PT Constructions and Supplier (Rs 2,68,42,300) with Bank of Maharashtra and

SK Enterprises (Rs 1,84,27,400) with Punjab and Sind Bank. They further transferred the money from the accounts of PT Constructions and Supplier and SK Enterprises to several other accounts.

"Out of the illegally transferred amount, Rs.5,04,06,900 was blocked and Rs 13,56,948 lying in 33 accounts have been frozen," it said.

Mondal was the owner/signatory authority of SK Enterprises to which more than Rs 1,84,27,400 was illegally transferred. "Rs 4 lakh was withdrawn from this amount by using cheques and another Rs 1.08 lakh through ATM. The remaining amount was again diverted to more than 15 accounts," the agency said.

Mondal was a habitual eco-

nomical offender and was involved in two more cheque cloning cases registered with the Odisha EOW. "He is also an accused in illegal transfer of the funds of Barbil Municipality by using forged or clone cheques. Of the total fraud amount of Rs 2,45,60,850, Rs 1,30,70,770 was illegally credited to his account maintained with Ujjivan Small Finance Bank."

Three mobile phones, suspected to be containing incriminating materials, have been seized from him. He had been hiding since long to evade the police arrest, it further said.

Earlier, two accused, Pomeshtembhare and Ghanshyam Ahuja, were arrested from Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, respectively, in connection with the case.

In Paradip 2 teachers axed for distributing expired medicines

PNS ■ PARADIP

Two teachers of the Lockpada Government Primary School at Atharbanki in Paradip have been suspended for administering expired folic acid (iron) pills to students.

The Education Department took the action against Head Teacher Manjulata Samal and Assistant Teacher Dipti Kumari Swain while two other teachers were issued show-cause notices by the Kujang Block Education Officer.

The incident occurred on Monday when school children were given folic acid tablets

after lunch. Within one to two hours of ingestion, sixteen students fell ill, experiencing stomach pain, vomiting and allergic reactions. They were admitted to the Atharbanki health centre and recovered after receiving treatment.

The incident triggered tension in the community, leading to the headmaster being detained by concerned residents for four hours before being released. Following the incident, both the Health and Education Departments launched investigations.

The investigation revealed that the school had a mix of old and new medicine stocks.

First STS done in Paradip Port harbour



PNS ■ PARADIP

The Paradip Port has done its first ship-to-ship (STS) special grade diesel oil transfer from MV Orkim Fortitude to empty tanker MV Torm Republican at its North Oil Jetty in the harbour area to save shipping costs as the port looks at innovative ways to boost business.

PPA Chairman PL Haranadh and Deputy Chairman Nilabhra Dasgupta have congratulated the team for this stupendous achievement. A symbolic cake cutting was done by the Chairman and the

team to celebrate the success.

The STS is a critical operation carried out in the absence of shore reception and enables the transfer of cargo seamlessly. In the Paradip Port, the flexibility of doing STS both outside the anchorage and within the harbour is explored as due to unfavorable weather conditions at the anchorage, the STS was done inside the harbour. This has opened new dimensions in the operability of the port. All these were done by the in-house pilot of the PPA supported by the marine and traffic teams.

'Brahmagiri beach sand mining to trigger ecological disaster'

Environmentalists sound alarm over IREL project, write to Govt to cancel tender, have EIA study

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Hundreds of locals and environmentalists of Odisha have expressed concern over adverse environmental impact of the proposed Indian Rare Earths Limited's (IREL) project in Brahmagiri Tehsil of Puri district, through Mine Developer and Operator (MDO).

On July 6, the IREL floated an e-tender inviting reputed and experienced contractors for 'Development and Operation of Mineral Sands Mine' at Brahmagiri for a period of 20 years with provision of further extension for a period of 5 years.

Writing a letter to the con-



cerned authorities noted environmentalist Bijay Parida, president, Jana Adhikar Parisada and journalist Bijay Mishra submitted that the objective and scope of work stipulated under the tender is in violation of Section 5 and Section 11[B] of the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957(MMDR Act), and the rules framed thereunder, which mandate prior approvals and clearances before issuing any tender for mining activities.

Section 5 of the MMDR Act outlines the restrictions on the grant of mining lease.

"The present tender is floated by IREL after cancellation of the earlier tender dated 11.01.2024, since no participants turned up for participating in the bid process. Further, the present tender was floated in complete violation of law and more specifically the environmental norms. T IREL could not have issued the tender without having environment clearance from the

Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MOEF and CC) and NOC from the Inland Water Ways Authority of India. On the contrary, it is shocking to note that all these responsibilities of obtaining clearances have been bestowed upon the MDO, which itself negates the fundamental principle of environmental law and also is contrary to the interest of public at large," said Parida and Mishra.

What seems to be more alarming is that the location of the proposed mining area is only 10 km away from Puri and around 12.4 km from Baliharchandi Olive Ridley turtles nesting beach. The IREL being a Government of India undertaking has completely ignored these glaring issues and floated the tender which is illegal and made without any vision, they added.

Apart from the ecological challenges and threats, the

project will affect the tourist outflow to Puri which is a major tourist destination and attracts tourists and pilgrims from all over the globe.

The proposed mining operation over an area of 3,600 acre would substantively increase the traffic of vehicles between Bhubaneswar and Brahmagiri via Puri, which shall be a hindrance to the traffic between Bhubaneswar and Puri, they said.

In view of the fact that no mining activity has been carried out in the area till date, they demanded that the tender be quashed as no Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) or Environmental Management Plan (EMP) have been conducted in the area yet which are required by the EIA Notification, 2006 and Environment Protection Act 1986.

Parida and Mishra also raised apprehension over the likely impact of the project on

the ecology of the Chilika lake as the distance of the lake (which is an important ecologically sensitive wetland) from the proposed Brahmagiri beach sand mining block is merely 35 km.

"Chilika is home to over 323 aquatic species, which include the endangered Irrawaddy Dolphins and Olive Ridley turtles, apart from being a hub of migratory birds. The change of the surrounding as well as the terrain might prove to be unviable for habitation for the migratory birds. There is also neither any study conducted nor proposed to be conducted with regard to the impact the mining activity on marine life as well as the fishermen in and around the site. Since Chilika lake itself is a source of livelihood for more than 2 lakh fishers supporting 132 villages that live around its shores, they are likely to be affected by the sand mining," Parida and Mishra pointed out.

LS adjourned twice

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Lok Sabha was adjourned twice in the post-lunch period on Thursday as a war of words broke out between the treasury and Opposition benches, triggered by Congress MP Charanjit Singh Channi's spat with BJP's Ravneet Singh Bittu.



Participating in a debate on the Union Budget, Channi referred to the assassination of Bittu's grandfather, former Punjab Chief Minister Beant Singh. This led to a war of words between Channi and Bittu, who recently quit the Congress to join the BJP.

Om Birla to remove any unparliamentary references and continue with the debate. Birla also directed the treasury and the opposition members to maintain the dignity of the House, adding that ministers especially should not break the rules. Channi then proceeded to conclude his speech. He mentioned the meeting of Rahul Gandhi with some farmer leaders on Wednesday, adding that they had also sought time to meet the prime minister.

Chhattisgarh tribals hit by Left extremism unwilling to return

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Tribal families displaced from Chhattisgarh due to Leftwing extremism are unwilling to return to the state despite the availability of rehabilitation schemes and security arrangements through security camps, the Government told Parliament. Replying to a question by Congress MP Phulo Devi Netam, Union Minister of State for Tribal Affairs Durgadas Ujkey told the Rajya Sabha that the State Government had formed teams to conduct surveys in the adjoining districts of neighbouring Telangana and Andhra Pradesh to identify tribal families displaced from Chhattisgarh due to leftwing extremism.



Army contingent leaves for multinational military exercise in Mongolia

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

An Indian Army contingent on Thursday departed for the Multinational Military Exercise KHAAN QUEST. The exercise is scheduled to be conducted from July 27-August 9 at Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, defence ministry said here. Giving details, officials said the exercise will bring together military forces from around the world to collaborate and enhance their peacekeeping capabilities. Last edition of Exercise KHAAN QUEST was conducted in Mongolia from June 19-July 2 last year. The exercise first started as a bilateral event between USA and Mongolian Armed Forces in the year 2003. Subsequently, from the year 2006 onwards the exercise graduated to a Multinational Peacekeeping Exercise with current year being the 21st iteration. The Indian Army contingent comprising 40 personnel is being represented mainly by

As Nationalist Congress Party MP Tatkare Sunil Dattatreya started his speech, Trinamool Congress MP Kalyan Banerjee objected to a Minister taking the seat next to the member. Speaker Birla clarified that seats have not been allotted yet, and the Minister was sitting on a seat meant for NDA members. Banerjee then said he would also sit on a different seat, and sat on the treasury benches' side. He later returned to his seat. As the ruckus continued, Jagadambika Pal, who was then in chair, adjourned the House till 3 pm. The House resumed normal functioning after it met at 3 pm. Speaking outside Parliament later, Bittu accused former Punjab Chief Minister Channi of indulging in "anti-national" behaviour. "An ex-CM was behaving like an anti-national, and is misleading the world through the House. What did he do? He said NSA was imposed on farmers, while NSA has been imposed on those who were trying to divide the country and Punjab," Bittu said. "An ex-CM made remarks that were aimed at dividing the country and Punjab, and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was sitting there. When I said on the floor that he should provide evidence, he went on back-foot. The Congress party and INDI alliance have been embarrassed because of him," Bittu said.

Naidu promises enquiry into MPs charges of abrupt airfare hike

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Union Civil Aviation Minister Ram Mohan Naidu Kinjarapu on Thursday promised to conduct an enquiry into allegations of abrupt fare hike when MPs try to book tickets on Air Vistara airline, following complaints by MPs and a nudge by Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla. He assured the House that his primary focus remains on enhancing the 'Ease of Flying' for all citizens. Raising the issue during Question Hour in Lok Sabha through a supplementary question, DMK member Dayanidhi Maran alleged that whenever he tries to book ticket on Air Vistara for the Chennai-Delhi route, initially it shows a price in the range of around Rs 25,000. However, by the time he concludes the whole booking process, the fare goes up by two to three times more, he alleged. The DMK leader wondered whether some technology applied by TCS, a software giant belonging to the same Tata group, drives up the air fare. Intervening in the discussion, Birla said he had received similar complaints from a few other MPs too and the matter should be thoroughly investigated as the "money of the tickets goes from Parliament". At this, the Minister replied: "We will get the matter



inquired". Parliament sources said the MPs are entitled to travel by business class. Replying to another question, Naidu said ever since he has taken over the charge of the civil aviation ministry, he has been trying make air travel affordable for the common people. However, he said, the air fare is market driven and lots of factors come into play while deciding the fare of any sector. "Customer is king and that is the priority of the ministry. We will do whatever we can to make the air travel affordable," he said. The Minister also said that he will look into the allegations of high air fare during holiday season on international routes. "As far as regulation of airfare is concerned, the government does not regulate the fares set by airlines- Indian or foreign. The fares on any route are dependent on seasonality, holidays and festivals, cost of aviation turbine fuel, competition and other similar factors," he said. Naidu said airline pricing runs

Govt committed to free, fair recruitment tests, Minister assures RS

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

There has been no incident of paper leak reported in the recruitment examinations conducted by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), Staff Selection Commission (SSC), Railway Recruitment Board (RRB) and Institute of Banking Personnel Selection (IBPS), during the last two years, the Rajya Sabha was informed on Thursday. "Recently, National Testing Agency (NTA) conducted NEET(UG) examination on May 5, 2024 in OMR (Pen and paper) mode. Certain cases of alleged irregularities/cheating/impersonation/malpractices were reported," Union Minister of State for Personnel Jitendra Singh said in a written reply. After review, the matter was entrusted to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) for comprehensive investigation on June 22, 2024, he said. "No incidence/event of paper leakage has been reported in the recruitment examinations conducted by Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), Staff Selection Commission (SSC), Railway Recruitment Board (RRB) and Institute of Banking Personnel Selection (IBPS), during the last two years," Singh said. In order to provide for prevention of unfair means in public examinations, the Government has enacted the Public Examination (Prevention of Unfair means) Act, 2024, which has been brought into force vide and subsequently rules under this law have also been notified, he added. The Minister also informed the Upper House that the National Recruitment Agency (NRA) is conducting a detailed study of the prevalent recruitment systems in central and State Governments to conduct a free and fair examination. The NRA, mandated to conduct online examinations to screen Government job aspirants, was given an approval in 2020 by the Union cabinet. "NRA is conducting a detailed study of the prevalent recruitment systems in central and State Governments and the procedure followed by various Public Examination Authorities (PEAs) for conduct of examination and also examining the issues which are likely to arise in the new examination system and address them ab initio so as to conduct a free and fair examination," Singh said in a written reply. The Minister was responding to a query whether the NRA has conducted any recruitment tests since its inception. Singh said the NRA is also in the process of developing protocols and policy frameworks to address various issues associated with conduct of the new examination system as well as evolving effective means for ensuring compliance of normative standards and guidelines by all concerned. He said four Governing Body meetings have been held since the inception of the NRA, which functions from its headquarters at New Delhi.

RS discusses makhana MSP, Ekalavya schools, Dattatreya Temple

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

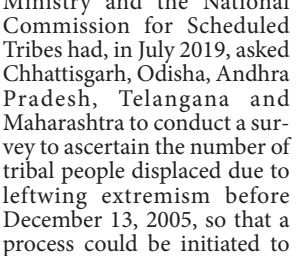
The Rajya Sabha on Thursday saw debate on issues like minimum support price (MSP) to makhana (fox nut) farmers in Bihar, staff recruitment in Ekalavya schools and an appeal to the Government to allocate ₹ 83.52 crore for the development of the Ganagapura Dattatreya Temple in Karnataka's Kalaburagi. Raising the makhana issue, RJD MP A D Singh urged the Government to establish a makhana farmers' cooperative in Bihar, and extend minimum support price (MSP) for the crop. Raising the issue during Zero Hour in the Rajya Sabha, Singh highlighted that Bihar accounts for about 90 per cent of India's total makhana (fox nut) production, with cultivation primarily concentrated in nine districts of the Mithila region. The crop is largely grown by the Malar community. "Despite its significance, farmers are not receiving fair prices for their produce," Singh said, pointing out the stark disparity between international wholesale rates and farmers' earnings. "While makhana fetches up to Rs 8,000 per kg in the international market, farmers struggle to get even Rs 400 per kg due to lack of Government support," he said. Emphasising the labour-inten-



sive nature of fox nut cultivation, Singh advocated for the formation of a cooperative to improve the livelihood of the Malar community. He urged the Government to implement an MSP regime for the crop. Fox nut is recognised for its high nutritional value. Bihar's annual production of 10,000 tonnes constitutes 90 per cent of the national output. Notably, India caters to 80 per cent of the global fox nut demand. Singh also noted that fox nut thrives in water-abundant areas, making it a suitable crop for certain regions of Bihar. DMK MP Tiruchi Siva urged the Government to hand back the responsibility of staff recruitment for the Ekalavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) to State Governments. Speaking during Zero Hour, Siva cited concerns over decreased student engagement due to hiring of individuals from North India for schools in the South.

The MP highlighted the inefficiencies arising from the recent shift in recruitment from State Governments to the National Education Society for Tribal Students (NESTS). This centralised approach, aimed at addressing teacher shortages across 400 EMRS by filling 38,000 positions nationally, has led to unintended consequences, according to Siva. "The first batch of 303 principals, 707 junior secretarial assistants, and other staff now primarily consists of individuals from North Indian states appointed across South India," Siva said. He argued that this mismatch is detrimental to education, where understanding local tribal culture and context is crucial. The DMK leader pointed out that the mandatory Hindi requirement in hiring criteria has resulted in communication gaps, affecting teaching effectiveness. "New staff members are burdened with learning the local language within two

years," he added. Siva urged the Government to revert the recruitment responsibility to respective State Governments. "Education is on the concurrent list. I urge the Government to bring it back to the state list," he emphasised, calling for serious consideration of the issue. BJP MP Jaggesh urged the Government to allocate Rs 83.52 crore for the development of the Ganagapura Dattatreya Temple in Karnataka's Kalaburagi. Speaking in Kannada during Zero Hour, Jaggesh highlighted the temple's significance as a major pilgrimage site located on the banks of the River Bhima. He noted that devotees from across the country visit the holy place. "The temple premises are too small, surrounded by houses and shops. It's becoming difficult to manage the increasing number of pilgrims and provide adequate facilities," Jaggesh said. The MP emphasised the need for widening roads connecting to the temple. He mentioned that the Dattatreya Samithi has prepared a master plan for the development. In a separate appeal, BJP MP Sikandar Kumar called for improving rail connectivity to the Tara Devi and Hanuman temples in Himachal Pradesh. The demands come as part of ongoing efforts to enhance infrastructure at religious sites across the country.



Shekhar new IFFI director

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Veteran filmmaker Shekhar Kapur, known for films such as 'Mr India', 'Bandit Queen' and 'Elizabeth', has been appointed festival director for the International Film Festival of India (IFFI). Kapur will head the festival, held annually in Goa, for the 55th and 56th editions, the Information and Broadcasting Ministry said in a notification. "With the approval of the Competent Authority, it has been decided to appoint Shri Shekhar Kapur as the Festival Director for the 55th and 56th editions of the International Film Festival of India, Goa," the notification read.

President educates students on global warming, climate change

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu, who completed two years in office on Thursday, took up the role of a teacher and interacted with students on the issue of global warming and ways to check it. During an interactive session with Class 9 students of Dr Rajendra Prasad Kendriya Vidyalaya in the President's Estate here, she emphasised the need for water conservation and encouraged them to plant more trees in a bid to reduce the impact of climate change. "I was thinking for the past many days to talk to you as today's kids are very talented. There is so much to learn from them," she said, addressing the class of 53 students. At the beginning of her interaction, the President asked the students about their ambitions and subjects they liked and expressed her happiness after learning that they aspired to become scientists and doctors,

among others. "Around the world, scientists, people, administrators and rulers conduct symposiums, seminars and seminars on a very big problem. Do you know what it is?" President Murmu asked and immediately got answers as "climate change", "global warming" and "environmental pollution". The president said she was taught in school about six seasons but "we feel only four". "Out of these four, we feel summer for the maximum time because of global warming. Day by day, the temperature is rising and not only humans but animals, birds and trees all feel its impact," President Murmu said. Because of global warming, parts of the country face drought. Thus, there is a need to conserve water, she said. "Children also know that the environment is getting polluted and we should plant more trees.



We should also take steps to reduce water wastage and conserve it. We should make rain-water harvesting pits to conserve water," President Murmu said. Asserting that more trees than needed were being cut, the President said there was a need to have more trees, conserve forests and reduce air pollution, then "we will be able to check (global warming) in future". She also talked about the 'Ek Ped Maa Ke Naam' initiative started by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and asked the

students to plant a tree on their birthdays. "I really felt very good interacting with you all. I got the opportunity to learn a lot from you. You are studying in Class 9 and you are so talented. You are very aware about the impact of global warming. I am sure, when you grow up, global warming will definitely be reduced (with all people's effort)," she said while concluding her interaction on the day she completed two years of her presidency. Born on June 20, 1958, at Uparbeda village in Odisha's Mayurbhanj district, she was sworn in as the country's 15th president on July 25, 2022. Before taking over the top constitutional office, she was the governor of Jharkhand from 2015 to 2021. An avid reader with a keen interest in spirituality, President Murmu has devoted her life to empowering the downtrodden and the marginalised sections, besides deepening the democratic values.

CDS greets armed forces on Kargil anniversary

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan has conveyed his felicitations and wishes to all ranks of the armed forces on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Kargil War. In his message, he underscored that the supreme sacrifices made by the brave hearts in Kargil War, will not go in vain. "It will continue to inspire and motivate future generations of not only soldiers but also the youth of the nation," he said. Highlighting the uniqueness of the Kargil War, the CDS said, there were lessons in the war for not only the military but for all those who deal with national security. He stressed that the lessons learnt by shedding blood must not be forgotten, the mistakes must not be repeated and the right lessons must be reinforced. Regarding the ongoing reforms in the Armed Forces, General Chauhan underlined that the Tri-services are on the threshold of a major reform, that



range from organisational, structural, conceptual to cultural. "The underlying aim of these reforms is to improve fighting efficiency and keep the Armed Forces battle ready at all times. We must be prepared to shed the obsolete practices and adopt new ones. The shape and contour of reforms must reflect the uniqueness of the Indian environment and challenges," he said. On the occasion, CDS assured the citizens that the Armed Forces remain enthused with new energy as the nation steps into the Amritkaal and are determined to march in step with the rest of the country to make India a 'Viksit Bharat'.

Pandemonium in K'taka House over MUDA scam

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Acrimonious scenes marked proceedings in the Karnataka Legislative Assembly on Thursday with opposition BJP and JD(S) protesting from the well of the House, demanding a discussion on the alleged fraudulent allotment of sites to land losers by Mysuru Urban Development Authority (MUDA), including to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's wife Parvathi. Citing rules, Speaker U T Khader on Wednesday rejected the Opposition's notice for an adjournment motion on the MUDA case, causing a setback to their plans to corner Siddaramaiah and the Congress government. The opposition thereafter had announced that they would stage "day-and-night" dharna in both Legislative Assembly and Council demanding discussion on the issue. The legislators of the two parties stayed back after the Assembly and Council were adjourned for the day on Wednesday and spent the night in the two Houses, continuing their protest. As the House met for the day on Thursday, BJP and JD(S) members trooped into the well of the House, holding placards and shouting slogans. Senior BJP MLA Sunil Kumar said: "Sites were taken in MUDA scam by violating all rules, but you (the Speaker) cite rules (while rejecting our demand for discussion). You don't take up the issue for



discussion. Were sites taken in accordance with rules?" He alleged that the government was trying to cover up and shut the case. "There seems to be a fear that if discussion happens the truth will come out. Chair (Speaker's post) is being used for it. Please reconsider your decision and allow discussion. Where should we discuss if not in the House?" As Sunil Kumar and Leader of Opposition R Ashoka accused the government of running away from debate and trying to misuse the Chair for it, Congress MLAs including Ministers H K Patil and Cheluvarayawamy took strong exception to this, resulting in some argument. Alleging that it was a case of Rs 3000-4000 crore scam, Ashoka sought to know about the Chief Minister meeting the Governor Thaaarchand

Gehlot on Wednesday, and asked: "Has the Governor asked for an explanation on the MUDA scam?" The Speaker then adjourned the House for some time. When the House met again, BJP and JD(S) MLAs continued their protest from the well. Ashoka, Sunil Kumar and other opposition leaders once again urged Speaker Khader to allow discussion on the MUDA scam. Ashoka said a Dalit family's land has been illegally taken away by obtaining the signature of one of their family members and without the consent of others, and alleged that the Chief Minister himself was involved in the scam. "The CM who should protect things, is himself involved in the scam. This scam needs to be probed by CBI, CM should

not remain in power even for a second," he said. "Fourteen sites were given to CM and registered to his family in a single day," Ashoka claimed. Amid protest and sloganeering, the Speaker transacted the business of the House that saw several Ministers and heads of several House committees laying papers and reports on the table of the Assembly, and six bills being passed without any discussion. Also, resolutions against the delimitation of Lok Sabha and Assembly constituencies based on the coming census, "One Nation, One Election" proposal and National Entrance cum Eligibility Test (NEET) were adopted amid protest by opposition parties, without any discussion. It is alleged that compensatory sites were allotted to Siddaramaiah's wife in an upmarket area in Mysuru, which had higher property value as compared to the location of her land which had been "acquired" by the MUDA. Several supporters of Siddaramaiah too have allegedly "benefited this way," BJP leaders alleged. The MUDA had allotted plots to Parvathi under a 50:50 ratio scheme in lieu of 3.16 acres of her land, where MUDA developed a residential layout. The controversial scheme envisages allotting 50 per cent of developed land to the land loser in lieu of undeveloped land acquired for forming layouts.

Bengal Assembly Speaker asks MLAs to behave responsibly

PTI ■ KOLKATA



A day after senior BJP Leader Suvendu Adhikari was involved in a verbal spat with Trinamool Congress MLA Tapan Chatterjee on the assembly premises, Speaker Biman Bandyopadhyay on Thursday asked legislators to behave responsibly. Adhikari had alleged that the TMC legislator abused him verbally and tried to assault him on the premises of the assembly. In a letter to the Speaker, the BJP leader said he was feeling "insecure" in the assembly and demanded action against Chatterjee. The TMC MLA, however, had claimed he did not threaten or assault Adhikari but merely confronted him over some comments by the BJP leader against him and his daughter during an election meeting at his constituency. On the contrary, Chatterjee alleged, Adhikari had threatened him with dire consequences when he wanted his explanation at the assembly lobby for the comments. Taking a serious view of the

incident, the Speaker said, "What happened in the assembly premises yesterday is unfortunate, unexpected and inappropriate." "We need to behave with restraint. We need to conduct ourselves appropriately as stakeholders of the Assembly," he said addressing both treasury and opposition benches. Referring to Adhikari's claim that he and other opposition MLAs were feeling insecure in the House, Bandyopadhyay said, "Adequate security arrangements are in place in the House but people's representatives should not act in a provocative manner." Adhikari was not present in the House when the Speaker made the observation, but Chatterjee was around. The Speaker had said on Wednesday he has initiated an investigation into the allegations of Adhikari. Adhikari, the BJP MLA of Nandigram, in his letter also held the Speaker somehow responsible for the incident since he disallowed entry of personal bodyguards of MLAs inside the assembly.

Women in Goa village tap Govt scheme to weave secure future

PTI ■ SURLA (GOA)

When a mining ban was imposed in Goa in 2012, the women in Surla village in Chief Minister Pramod Sawant's Sanquelim assembly constituency were the first to face its economic impact. Surrounded by iron ore mines, the village with a population of about 4,000 saw its men become jobless after the ban. Their families faced hardships for years until the state government's Swayampurna Goa scheme triggered an agricultural and micro-business revolution. The scheme, launched in 2020, aims at making villages self-reliant. Former sarpanch Vishranti Surlakar, who took up the initiative of creating awareness among the women in the village, brought them together under one roof to start a handloom centre, where traditional 'Kunbi sarees' are weaved. Subraj Kanekar, the Swayampurna Mitra for Surla, ensured that the Department of Handicraft, Textile and Coir took over an abandoned school building for the project in 2020. Kanekar told PTI that the women from Surla requested him to procure machines to weave Kunbi sarees. The department also trained the women to operate the machines. Since then, they have been weaving sarees, shawls and other Kunbi products. "There is a huge market for these products," he said. When he met the residents,



Kanekar said he realised there was a need to revive five square kilometres of paddy fields that had been left abandoned by the men from the village who had become mining workers. "There was a need to revive the water table to facilitate farming. During the first monsoon, we dug trenches on a hill which charged the water table," he said. Farmer Vishnu Natekar's cashew plantation on a hilllock has become a laboratory for water harvesting under the Swayampurna Mitra scheme. "In the first year, we dug trenches which revived the water table. We dug around 1,200 trenches on the hill," said a beaming Natekar. Swayampurna Mitra Kanekar said the villagers did not face any water scarcity this year. "There was enough water even in the summer month of May. The experiment has worked," he said. Under the scheme, Santosh Maulingkar has taken to pearl farming. Maulingkar said he underwent training in Pune before taking up this project.

Telangana Govt presents Budget of ₹2.91 lakh cr

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

The Telangana government on Thursday presented a Rs 2.91 lakh crore state budget for 2024-25, with the total revenue expenditure expected to be Rs 2.21 lakh crore and capital expenditure Rs 33,487 crore. In the past 10 years, the state has racked up an overall debt of Rs 6.71 lakh crore, according to Deputy Chief Minister and Finance Ministry In-charge Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka who tabled the budget in the assembly. The total revenue has been estimated at Rs 2,90,814 crore, including Open Market Loans of over Rs 57,000 crore. Of the total revenue expenditure, Rs 17,730 crore would go towards interest payments during the fiscal. The state's fiscal deficit has been pegged at Rs 49,255.41 crore in the 2024-25 budget, while it showed a revenue surplus of Rs 297.42 crore. The substantial rise in debt relative to income growth suggests heavy dependence on borrowings to fund expenditure, potentially endangering fiscal sustainability, Bhatti said. The persistent rise in debt far out-stripping income gains suggests that without stringent fiscal reforms, Telangana's economic health



could be at risk, necessitating measures to balance expenditure with revenue generation and reduce dependence on borrowing, he added. "Telangana's debt has reached Rs 6.71 lakh crore mark. In the last 10 years, the state government debt has increased by 10 times without any development proportionate to that," the minister said. The state government estimates that it will make Rs 1,38,181.26 crore revenue on its own and get Rs 35,208.44 in non-tax revenue and Rs 26,216.38 crore in tax revenue from Telangana's central share. Among allocations, Telangana has proposed to set apart Rs 72,659 crore for agriculture, Rs 21,292 crore for on education and Rs 22,301 crore for irrigation. Rs 29,816 crore has been set apart for the Panchayath Raj

and Rural Development department. The budget has also allocated Rs 10,000 crore for the development of the capital city of Hyderabad and Rs 11,468 crore for the health department. After the Congress government took over, Rs 35,118 crore debt has been raised and loans of Rs 42,892 crore — including principal and interest — have been repaid, Bhatti said. "It was a huge challenge for the newly-formed Congress government to manage the state which was in a financial shambles. However, we started our administration by controlling frivolous expenditure and with a sense of financial discipline," the minister said. He said the state government has made an attempt to streamline the system and to pay salaries and pensions in a timely manner to 3.69 lakh government employees and 2.87 lakh pensioners from March 2024. At current prices, Telangana's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) in 2023-24 stands at Rs 14,63,963 crore, which is 11.9 per cent. Meanwhile, BRS chief and former chief minister K Chandrasekhar Rao attended the assembly today for the first time in the capacity of leader of Opposition, according to party sources.

High drama inside Bihar Assembly

PTI ■ PATNA

There was high drama inside the Bihar assembly on Thursday as opposition members conducted parallel "proceedings" in the well, expressing their lack of confidence in the ruling dispensation led by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. Several legislators wore black scarves in protest against the CM's disrespectful behaviour towards women MLAs the previous day, as well as the lathi-charge on Congress workers marching towards the Vidhan Sabha to highlight

alleged failures of the NDA government. Despite the commotion, Speaker Nand Kishore Yadav proceeded with the Question Hour, cautioning unruly members against disrupting the assembly's decorum. "These are staff members of the Vidhan Sabha. If anyone gets hurt due to your actions, I will have to take strict action," warned the Speaker to the opposition members seated in protest in the well. Mahboob Alam, the CPI(M) Liberation legislature party leader, sat in a chair and mockingly assumed the role of



"Speaker" in the parallel assembly. After the Question Hour concluded, opposition MLAs staged a walkout, alleging their voices were being ignored. The Speaker read out a number of adjournment

motions, moved by members of various opposition parties, and quipped "it is strange that those who moved these motions did not even bother to remain present". The Zero Hour was conducted with the opposition in abstentia until the House was adjourned for lunch. Meanwhile, the issue of the Chief Minister's conduct towards women MLAs was raised in the Upper House of the state legislature, which adjourned shortly after the session began. Emerging from the legislative

council, the leader of the opposition Rabri Devi lambasted the Chief Minister and his close aide Rajiv Ranjan Singh alias Lalan, the Union minister for fisheries, animal husbandry and dairying. "Nitish Kumar alleges women MLAs in the opposition do not know or understand anything. Lalan accuses me of inability to understand the budget and claims I cannot sign a paper. Both should apologise for such misogynistic remarks," said Rabri Devi, who is also a former Chief Minister.

16 out of 102 Vande Bharat trains catering to needs of Maharashtra: Railway Minister

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Out of 102 Vande Bharat trains operating in the country at present, 16 are catering to the needs of the people of Maharashtra, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said in a written reply in Lok Sabha. The minister was responding on Wednesday to the questions raised by Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Omprakash Bhupalsinh alias Pavan Rajenimbalkar, who wanted to know the details of the proposed number of "Vande Bharat Express" trains and their routes for Maharashtra. "As on 19th July, 2024, 102 Vande Bharat Express services



are operating on the Indian Railways network. Of these, 16 Vande Bharat Services are catering to the needs of the stations located in the State of Maharashtra," Vaishnaw said. "Besides, introduction of new train services, including Vande Bharat Express services, is an ongoing process on Indian Railways subject to traffic justification, operational feasibility, resource availability, etc," the minister added. Rajenimbalkar also asked the

number of trains proposed to be launched by the government in the current financial year, particularly to connect the tourist destinations of Maharashtra with other states, and the details of the coach factories set up in the country along with the total production capacity of Vande Bharat Express trains from these coach factories. "Indian Railways (IR) have issued 'Bharat Gaurav Trains' policy in November 2021 with the objective to showcase India's rich cultural heritage and magnificent historical places through Bharat Gaurav Trains. These are theme-based tourist circuits trains," Vaishnaw said.

Indo-Bangla border centre in Assam's Salmara reopens after 4 years

PTI ■ MANKACHAR (ASSAM)

The border trade and immigration centre along the India-Bangladesh boundary, closed for the last four years since the outbreak of COVID-19, reopened formally on Thursday in Assam's South Salmara district, an official said. Mankachar's AIUDF MLA Aminul Islam along with senior district officials were present on the occasion. Islam said the closure of the centre had led to great difficulties for students, traders and even

patients coming for medical treatment from the neighbouring country to the State. During the last four years, the people from the lower and central part of Assam had to go to Bangladesh either via Meghalaya's Dawki or through Kolkata, which caused immense inconvenience to them, he said. Assam has two immigration centres for Bangladesh - one at Sutarkandi in Karimganj district, which was also closed during the pandemic but later reopened, and the other at Mankachar.

Maharashtra Govt asks Karnataka to release more water from Almatti dam to avoid flooding

PTI ■ MUMBAI

In view of heavy rainfall in parts of western Maharashtra, the state government has urged Karnataka to release more water from Almatti dam to avoid flooding in Sangli and Kolhapur districts, Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar said on Thursday. Almatti dam, officially known as Lal Bahadur Shastri dam, is a hydroelectric project on the Krishna river in north Karnataka. Speaking to reporters, he said, "The Maharashtra government has asked Karnataka to increase the water discharge from Almatti dam to three lakh cusec from the current



outflow of 2.5 lakh cusec." The water storage of Koyna dam in Maharashtra's Satara district increased by six thousand million cubic feet (TMC) in a very short period, and it is already 75 per cent filled, he said. "It means, we need to discharge water from Koyna dam, which will increase the water levels of Krishna river," he said. Koyna dam is built on the Koyna river and its storage capacity is 105 TMC. The Koyna river

is the biggest tributary of the Krishna river, which flows to the south and enters Karnataka, crossing Sangli city and Kolhapur district. Mahabaleshwar, one of the highest points in the Western Ghats in Satara, has witnessed very heavy rainfall over the last few days. In the last 24 hours, the region has received more than 400 mm of rainfall, an India Meteorological Department (IMD) official said. The rainfall in Mahabaleshwar contributes to the storage of the Koyna dam. "If water discharge is not increased from Almatti dam, then Sangli and parts of Kolhapur district will experience flooding, which will affect the

citizens and incur heavy agricultural losses," he said. "The water resources department also needs to release around 11,000 cusec water from Warna dam in Kolhapur that will further reach the Krishna river, increasing the chances of flooding. Hence, we requested the Almatti dam authorities to increase their discharge," Pawar said. In the last few years, flooding in Sangli and Kolhapur districts have led to the death of people. The agricultural losses incurred from flooding have run into thousands of crores in recent years, revealed data from the state relief and disaster management department.

All acts of violence should be condemned: Manipur CM

PTI ■ IMPHAL

Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh on Thursday said all acts of violence should be universally condemned and efforts must be made to prevent them. Singh made these comments at the launch of a book programme by the Department of Sericulture and Manipur Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board. He said, "Peace has gradually returned to the state and we must collectively strive to maintain it. All our demands, including the identification of illegal immigrants and the

implementation of the NRC, should strictly adhere to constitutional and legal frameworks. We must denounce acts of violence and work actively to prevent them." Singh also responded to allegations by the Congress that no aid was mentioned for Manipur in the Union Budget. Without directly naming the grand old party, Singh said, "The central government has consistently supported relief efforts since the beginning, regardless of whether the state was mentioned in Parliament or not. Let us refrain from indulging in petty politics. The Centre has provided

assistance for constructing prefabricated homes and daily food provisions. A total of Rs 145 crore has been allocated for managing relief camps." He added, "Rs 3 crore was spent on distributing television sets in relief camps, and Rs 23 crore was distributed in Rs 1,000 installments to each person residing in relief camps, on at least four occasions. Additionally, Rs 44 crore was utilised for children's nutrition and personal hygiene, while Rs 19 crore was allocated as compensatory packages for agricultural and related activities."

Singh added, "Rs 25,000 has been disbursed as the first installment to 6,000 families under the special assistance package for violence-affected families, with each family set to receive Rs 1 lakh." He addressed criticisms, stating, "Those engaging in petty politics have misrepresented the government's efforts for relief camp residents." Singh continued, "Even amidst the disastrous hailstorms and floods in recent months, Rs 80 crore was allocated for flood relief, and Rs 45 crore was spent on distributing GI sheets to 42,000 people whose homes were damaged by hailstorms."



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Reaching out

Netanyahu seeks support for Gaza war during US Congress speech, despite many senators skipping it

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has called for US solidarity in his address to Congress, despite declining popularity and increasing opposition in his own country. In an address to the United States Congress, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sought to rally American lawmakers behind Israel's ongoing military operations in Gaza. The speech, delivered amidst a backdrop of escalating violence and rising civilian casualties, underscored Netanyahu's determination to secure unwavering support from Israel's most powerful ally. He emphasised the existential threats faced by Israel from militant groups operating in Gaza, particularly Hamas. The Prime Minister framed the military actions as a necessary response to ongoing rocket attacks and acts of terrorism that have plagued Israeli communities. However, Netanyahu's speech did not address the mounting international concerns regarding human rights violations in the Palestinian territories. Reports from various human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have highlighted a range of human rights violations.



The humanitarian crisis in Gaza has been further exacerbated by a blockade that severely restricts the movement of people and goods, leading to shortages of essential supplies such as food, water, and medical care. The present Gaza offensive, which has gone over 250 days, has left a spree of death and destruction. According to the Gaza Ministry of Health, at least 34,000 people have been killed, and more than 77,000 have been wounded in Israeli attacks. About 72 per cent of those killed are women and children. United Nations human rights chief Volker Turk has gone on record saying that a child in Gaza is killed or wounded 'every 10 minutes.'

Israel's actions violate international law and constitute collective punishment, disproportionately affecting innocent civilians and deepening the humanitarian crisis. The United States, as Israel's primary ally, plays a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This support has also placed the US under scrutiny, with calls for it to leverage its influence to promote peace and uphold human rights. The very weaponry provided by the US is being used by Israel against the civilian population in Palestine which is undergoing a horrendous time. There is growing advocacy within the US, both among the public and some members of Congress, for a more balanced approach. The US is urged to take a firm stand against human rights violations and to support diplomatic efforts aimed at achieving a sustainable and just resolution to the conflict. A sustainable peace can only be achieved through a comprehensive and inclusive approach that addresses the legitimate concerns of both parties. The US has a moral and strategic responsibility to advocate for human rights and justice in the region. The US can play a pivotal role in paving the lasting peace in the region by telling Netanyahu to comply with the UN directives on Gaza and stop bombing the civilian targets to minimise civilian casualties.

PICTALK



Members of the State Disaster Management Authority perform rescue operation during a mock drill, in Prayagraj PFI

Union budget 2024: A major thrust on agriculture

The budget's focus on sustainable agriculture and innovation highlights the Government's commitment to support the farmers and ensuring food security

Union budget 2024 - a thrust on agriculture for a visit by Biju Dharmapalan. In the Union Budget 2024 presented by Smt. Nirmala Sitharaman, great emphasis has been placed on agriculture and space. Both are essential pillars for transforming our country into a developed nation.



The latter is futuristic, and the former is the lifeline of the present generation. No nation can survive without the farming community, and they are the 'Annadata'. In the changing global climate and environmental conditions, the traditional farming sector would not be sufficient to feed the population. The government has allocated Rs.1,51,851 crores for the agricultural and allied sectors. Stress has been given to agricultural research to increase productivity and release 109 new high-yielding and climate-resilient crops have become essential under the prevailing global climate conditions. During the past few years, we have noticed changes in the climate in

are scarcer. Experiencing drought-like situations in several parts of the country due to climate changes has badly affected the soil health, making the farmland unhealthy for future farming. Moreover, the frequency and severity of droughts are expected to rise, particularly in regions that are already water-stressed. Drought conditions reduce crop yields and affect soil health, making it more difficult for future crops to grow. On the other hand, excessive rainfall and flooding, becoming more common, can destroy crops, erode soil, and wash away essential nutrients. Extreme weather patterns will not only affect crop productivity and microbial biodiversity, which keeps our planet healthy. In addition, it will expedite the emergence of new pests and diseases that may affect crop growth and productivity. The emergence of new diseases may even lead to a pandemic affecting several crop species across the globe. This may jeopardise our food security. Developing resilient crops for the next century is a challenging task. It requires significant investment in research and devel-

opment. Our laboratories in the agricultural universities need thorough transformation. They need to be equipped with state-of-the-art facilities that can handle molecular breeding programmes and large crop phenomics facilities that can speed up the development of new crop varieties. Our scientific community should acknowledge the farmers and share the benefits of the genes taken from traditional varieties for developing resilient crops. By promoting healthy soils, biodiversity, and resilience, natural farming has the potential to support long-term food security and environmental health. Agriculture is not merely an occupation; it is the bedrock of our food supply and a critical component in balancing the health of our planet. So, we need to promote and incentivise our farmers who take up new technologies so that farming remains a viable and respected profession for youngsters.

(The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru; views are personal)



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

Pushpa Kamal Dahal falls from grace



K S TOMAR

The new coalition, dominated by the pro-India Nepali Congress, will now be led by the communist leader Oli who will have a daunting task of ensuring political stability

Politicians have been grabbing the power by following Machiavellian principle of showing complete disrespect to means, the morality and values. This is true of Pushpa Kamal Dahal who fell from the grace after facing humiliating defeat while seeking trust vote in Nepal parliament. While seeking trust vote in Nepal parliament, Prachanda faced the worst type of humiliating defeat as he got 63 votes (Rastriya Swatantra Party-21, CPN(US)-10 and his party-32) as against 194 votes of new coalition combination of Nepali Congress (89 MPs) and Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (78 MPs) which also got support from other smaller parties like Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), Janata Samajwadi Party (Upendra faction) etc. in the house of 275 where majority mark was 138 only. Oli has staked claim after president Ram Chandra Poedel invited the political parties having strength to form the government.



In a positive move, Dr. Rajan Bhattarai, the Foreign Affairs Department chief and a Standing Committee member of the CPN-UML emphasized that CPN-UML believes that Nepal's progress or the welfare of its people can be achieved only by adopting a Pro-India stance. He made it clear that the party's chairman, KP Sharma Oli, is keen on taking Nepal-India relations to new heights thereby aligning with the requirement and urgency of the modern era. Due to fragile nature of democracy in Nepal, unabated and persistent instability has been trademark of the government which is evident from 16 time change of guards in the span of 13 years thereby hitting the interests of the common people in the country besides pushing the country into financial crisis and debt liabilities especially huge loans advanced by China. In a midnight swoop and a dramatic turn of events on July 9, a secret deal was clinched between two former Prime ministers viz. Sher Bahadur Deuba of Nepali and K.P.S. Oli of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) which sealed the fate of current PM, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, Prachanda. In this manner, yet another coalition of Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) and Nepali Congress came into existence today following the humiliating defeat of Prachanda, a diehard loyalist of China' on the floor of house. New regime will be headed by Ex PM, Oli which had preceded withdrawal of the support to current PM, on July 3, 2024 thereby reducing it to minority. The Janata Samajwadi party led by Ashok Rai having 7 MPs also withdrew the support and recalled three ministers from Prachanda government. The coalition government will be dominated by Pro India, Nepali Congress, though a die-hard communist leader, former PM, Oli will be heading it for a term of one half year which will be followed by a takeover by former PM, Deuba of Nepali congress as agreed by two coalition partners. Foreign policy experts say that major factors responsible for the collapse of coalition of Prachanda-Oli, duo, included Power Struggle, style of functioning of prime minister, Policy Differences, Coalition Dynamics and Coalition Dynamics which may lead to more stable dispensation comprising of Nepali Congress, Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) and Janata Samajwadi party. Amidst the toppling game,



OLI AND DEUBA COMBINE WILL BE UNDER COMPULSION TO KEEP EQUI-DISTANCE WITH TWO REGIONAL POWERS VIZ INDIA AND CHINA WHICH HAVE GOT GEO-POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE AFFAIRS OF NEPAL

midnight power sharing agreement between two former Prime ministers, viz. Sher Bahadur Deuba, and Nepali Congress and K.P.S. Oli chairman of Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) was signed on July 5, 2024 thereby leading to a sudden change of regime in Nepal. New coalition government of Oli and Deuba is bound to face multiple challenges which will be key to success otherwise its fallout could be midterm polls. The fragile nature of the new government consisting of the communists (Pro China) and Nepali Congress (Pro India) having opposing ideologies could pose a major challenge to keep them in unison and amalgamated. Oli and Deuba combine will be under compulsion to keep equi-distance with two regional powers viz. India and China which have got geo-political and strategic interests in the affairs of Nepal. Oli's previous stint as PM was marked by his extreme Anti India action of redrawing the map which had shown Indian territories including Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura and Kalapani as part of Nepal. It had exasperated India which rejected this misadventure thereby terming it as baseless besides being an attempt to spoil ties. Now, as dominant partner in the coalition, the onus of checking this tendency will lie on Deuba to prevail upon Oli to come

out of Anti-India mentality and protect age-old relations between two nations. The communists regimes led by Prachanda always gave clear indications about the commitment to China which will expect new government to go ahead with Belt and Road (BRI) initiative especially when outgoing PM has approved the proposal which had been signed between two countries on May 12, 2017. It will be an uphill task for Oli to stick to his predecessors' resolve to toe China's line about BRI as Nepali congress is totally opposed to it hence chances of any progress seem to be remote. It will be a test of the new government to deal with India's Agnipath scheme which is one of the major irritants so far. Nepal's border issues with India, including disputes over territories require a multifaceted approach. Strengthening the Nepal-India Joint Boundary Commission to expedite the resolution of boundary issues through technical and diplomatic means may yield positive results. The survival of the coalition will depend solely on mutual trust of partners and balanced diplomatic strategy and refrain from offending two regional giants which had been lacking in the past. (Writer is a senior journalist and a political analyst; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BUDGET REACTIONS

Madam — Apropos the news headline "Less Tax, More Jobs" (July 24). Finance Minister (FM) Nirmala Sitharaman's 2024 Union budget should be the budget of the whole country, but the FM has presented it as if it is the NDA's budget. To make matters worse, taxpayers have to foot the bill for the NDA government's political survival. There is nothing wrong when the Leader of the Opposition (LoP) Rahul Gandhi criticizes the NDA government's Union Budget, claiming it undermines India's federal structure. He highlights neglect towards other states and vows to advocate for equal justice. INDIA protests against the 'Kursi Bachao' Budget in Parliament. Interestingly, FM Sitharaman, elected from Karnataka, provided nothing in the budget for her state, which is ruled by the Congress. In her Purvodaya scheme for the all-round development of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh, only Bihar and Andhra Pradesh benefit significantly. For instance, Rs 11,500 crore was allocated to Bihar for flood mitigation, while West Bengal, one of the worst flood-affected states, is crying for help. Salaried employees in the new tax regime will save up to Rs 17,500 in income tax. Corporate tax rates on foreign companies were reduced to 25%. Family pensions were enhanced from Rs 15,000 to Rs 25,000. However, nearly 60 lakh EPF pensioners have been receiving Rs 920 to Rs 1000 per month since 1995 without any increase. The government deserves praise for exempting three cancer medicines from custom duties and allocating Rs 2.2 lakh crore to make housing more affordable. It's also commendable that FM Sitharaman has introduced an internship program similar to Congress' Nyay Patra. Overall it is a mix bag but could have addressed the pressing issues on priority. Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

Tragedy at Tribhuvan International Airport



It is deeply shocking that eighteen people have lost their lives in a deadly plane crash at Tribhuvan International Airport, Kathmandu. The plane, a twenty-year-old Bombardier CRJ-200 regional jet owned by the

private airline company Saurya Airlines, skidded off the runway and crashed. It seems that the aviation industry in Nepal has fallen short of both standards and expectations, failing to keep pace with other countries in terms of modernization and sophistication. It is a pity that Nepal has not learned any lessons from past incidents, leading to a continuing series of plane crashes. The aviation sector is crucial for Nepal's tourism and businesses. It is high time that the government of Nepal, along with private airline owners, collaborate to revamp the deteriorating aviation sector. They must pay due attention to improving passenger safety, modernizing logistics and infrastructure, and introducing new jets to avoid future accidents. Path-breaking reforms are essential. Janga Bahadur Sunuwar, Bagrakote

CONTROVERSIAL REMARKS

Madam — The Telangana-cadre IAS officer Smita Sabharwal is being criticized for questioning the need for a disability quota in civil services. She asked the "rights activists" to examine why the policy was yet to be implemented in police services, foreign services, and the defense sector. By raising such questions, she violated the code of conduct for civil servants and is punishable under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 and other relevant laws. Prominent coach and mentor of civil services aspirants in Hyderabad, Bala Latha Mallavarapu, challenged Smita to sit for the UPSC examination again and beat her score. The Supreme Court recently ruled in favor of Pankaj Kumar Srivastava, a 100 percent visually impaired candidate who cleared the Civil Services Examination in 2009 but was denied an appointment. This ruling marks a significant milestone in the fight for disability rights in India. inappropriate remarks. Yash Pal Ralhan | Jalandhar

BIDEN WITHDRAWS FROM THE RACE

Madam — Joe Biden Withdraws from Presidential Race. Madam, Accepting the views of prominent Democratic leaders, including former President Barack Obama, President Joe Biden has announced his withdrawal from the presidential race. Age is not on his side, and Donald Trump, after surviving an assassination attempt, has gained momentum. Vice President Kamala Harris is likely to take on the aging Donald Trump. In India, Kamala Harris' presumptive nomination elicited only lukewarm enthusiasm. During the 2019 election campaign, she criticised Prime Minister Modi's policies on Kashmir, saying, "We have to remind Kashmiris that they are not alone in the world." The possibility of tension in relations between the two countries, despite statements of warm friendship, cannot be ignored. Haridasan Rajan | Kozhikode

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

BUDGET BALANCES FISCAL DISCIPLINE AND EMPLOYMENT

Union budget takes definitive steps to create jobs for India's youth



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

The eleventh full-term budget under Modi 3.0 walks the fiscal discipline path, despite being a coalition government, he is heading. The surprise results from June 4th, which threw in a coalition government for Prime Minister Modi, perhaps for the first time in his career, did not stop his budget proposals, political with sound economics in the background. In the run-up to the budget, many had expected, that the Finance Act would be populist keeping in mind the state elections of Haryana, Maharashtra and Jharkhand scheduled later this year. However what came out from Nirmala Sitharaman's tab, was a document that chose to focus on core areas of long-term growth and decent infrastructure spending, without giving in to populist demands. The key theme as highlighted by Government is Employment.

Questions have been raised in post-budget analysis regarding the feasibility of the schemes announced for creating lakhs of jobs for the youth of the country. The apprentice scheme promising a government stipend for lakhs of youth per year, in some of the largest companies of India, may only be a game changer if these young interns are attentively skilled to be formally absorbed into jobs, once their tenure is over. There are serious concerns regarding the abundant availability of a relatively unskilled workforce, hanging around in large offices, without learning any meaningful skills.

Similar questions have been raised regarding the EPFO-linked new job incentivisation scheme, which has various blindspots, possibly pushing a well-thought-out policy push into a dark corner. It may be said that the policy push is primarily to bring more youth employed in the informal sector within a formal standard workforce and instil a financial literacy discipline in them early on. However, this financial literacy falls flat when one looks at the changes made in the tax structures for any investor punting in the speculative equities market. The increased rate of capital gains tax and a general push to the new income tax regime, seem to be at cross purposes of the financial literacy programme, the government wants youth to undertake to avail of full benefits of INR 15,000, as a first month's salary subsidy. The earlier tax regimes instilled a sense



of financial responsibility for any youth entering the formal job sector, with several choosing at least one product, as a means to save and claim tax rebates in the future. This set them off for a long financial discipline path during their tenure as working professionals, which now seems to be slowly being eased out. The counter-argument the government may have is, that they want the consumer economy to grow first, led by the youth, who may be more willing to spend on food items, entertainment etc, with the monthly salaries they would be drawing in their new jobs. However, it prevents them from getting into habit of savings, which are useful during rainy days or Covid type crises. Yes, the government, did well to maintain the fiscal discipline glide path, buoyed by a better than expected GDP growth, and lumpy dividend payouts from the central bank. Overall inflations, except for food are also within tolerable levels, giving the government, a cushion for spending on welfare projects, it feels are essential. Union budget 24-25 is an attempt woo back disgruntled voters.

The lesson BJP appears to have taken from the June 4 results is, that the youth are excited about huge temples, few smart glitzy trains, and cheap mobile data in their 'Made in India' phones, but they are increasingly getting anxious to earn money, have an engaging occupation, which feeds into their aspirational upwardly mobile lifestyle. Then there are pulls and pressures of coalition politics, with NDA's two partners TDP and JD(U) having their wish lists for catering to their core constituencies. A long-term dice has been rolled, perhaps NDA 3.0 with this budget has achieved the goldilocks balance.

(The writer is a policy analyst, views are personal)

Budget 2024: A blueprint for long-term growth



DEEPAK SOOD

The Union Budget 2024-25 reaffirms the Govt's dedication to long-term growth. India is well-positioned to harness its immense potential for rapid development



In a pivotal move aimed at strengthening India's economic prowess, the Union Budget for the fiscal year 2024-25 has made significant strides in assuring continuity of progressive reforms. There is cheer in the MSME, E-commerce and start-up worlds, which have been extended additional support as the country progresses on the road towards a Viksit Bharat. The Finance Minister made various announcements to empower the Garib, Mahila, Yuva and Kissan. The announcements made under this budget are timely and set to propel the Indian economy to new heights during the Amrit Kaal, enhancing its resilience in an ever-evolving global landscape.

A booster for MSMEs

The budget rightfully supports the bottom of the industrial pyramid by offering much-needed ease of credit for the MSME segment. India has 633.9 lakh MSMEs, where over 99% of them qualify as micro-enterprises that make up 630.5 lakh enterprises. One of the critical reasons why micro enterprises (with investments up to INR 10 million) do not graduate to being small or medium enterprises is the lack of access to formal credit. By doubling the MUDRA loan amounts and setting up new SIDBI branches, credit will now be more accessible to these organizations. Other steps (mandatory Trade Receivables Discounting System) have improved liquidity, while Industrial parks will provide the much-needed digital support that MSMEs usually cannot afford for growth. Additionally, the new credit guarantee scheme for MSMEs offers term loans without collateral or third-party guarantees, significantly easing the financial burden on small business owners and fos-

tering entrepreneurship. Such positive support for this crucial sector is bound to give it the confidence to shed its risk-averse nature and grow with ambition on the road to 2047.

Skilling and Job Creation

With this budget, the Government has responded positively to the need for job opportunities and skill development among youth in our country. The continued emphasis on skilling will allow training institutions and large corporations to participate in creating a pool of professionally trained manpower that would be readily absorbed by them and the larger MSME ecosystem, which is often strained for funds for training purposes. Meticulous implementation will, however, be key to setting the ball rolling in the right direction of creating jobs. Rural Economy

The rural economy

continued to receive support from the government, as strengthening this segment will be crucial for the sustained economic growth of the country. Budget 2024 had some big announcements for them that would increase productivity and food security in grains and oilseeds. Such measures will go a long way in creating new economic clusters that will support sustained growth.

With 1 crore farmers to be trained in natural farming, marketing, certification, and brand-

ing, organic farming is all set to receive a big stimulus. The focus on addressing the impact of climate on our food basket showcases the government's long-term vision towards building resilience in the ecosystem.

Start-ups and E-Commerce

There is general cheer in the start-up ecosystem across India over the abolition of the angle tax, proposed in the budget. Angel tax, introduced in 2012, was imposed on the capital raised by unlisted companies through the issue of shares to Indian investors if the share price exceeded the fair market value (FMV) of the company. Traders and artisans using e-commerce sites got a lift up in this budget when TDS was not just reduced but TDS delays were decriminalized.

E-commerce exports, \$2 billion now, are expected to be \$350 billion by 2030. With revised custom duties, the Government hopes to give the required fillip to these artisans/traders who sell their wares using websites, in line with its Make in India strategy.

Energy security

India is a fast-developing economy and our energy needs are rising rapidly. By encouraging private investment in setting up small nuclear energy reactors and encouraging R&D into newer forms of nuclear energy, the budget aims to achieve India's goals of energy security. With regular energy audits across

clusters, larger commercial thermal plants and a pumped storage policy, the budget aims to help India cope with the rising demand without missing a step. However, our green economy targets are very ambitious and much more needs to be done to ensure our transition to green fuels.

Digitization of Land Records

This one step is perhaps the most impactful step the budget has outlined for the growth of India's economy. Vast tracts of our land, especially in rural India, are often embroiled in disputes with no proper documentation. This is a key hurdle in land acquisition for major projects. By digitising these records across India, the Government will end middlemen and reduce the number of land cases in the legal system. Overall, the Union Budget 2024-25 reinforces the Government's commitment to sustained long-term growth.

With strategic investments and forward-looking policies, India is poised to navigate global challenges while harnessing its immense potential for socio-economic development. The road towards Viksit Bharat could have its set of challenges, especially given the global dynamics, but the sustained vision and progressive policy support will help realise the dream of a Viksit Bharat.

(The writer is secretary general of ASSOCHAM; views expressed are personal)



THERE IS GENERAL CHEER IN THE START-UP ECOSYSTEM ACROSS INDIA OVER THE ABOLITION OF THE ANGEL TAX, PROPOSED IN THE BUDGET

Commemorating 25 years of Kargil victory: A tribute to India's bravehearts

As we remember the 527 soldiers who laid down their lives, we celebrate the enduring legacy of their heroism and dedication to the nation

Visitors to Drass, a town situated at an altitude of 10,760 feet (3,279 metres) in India-administered Kashmir, are greeted with a signboard that says at -60 degrees Celsius on January 9, 1995, it was the second-coldest inhabited place on the planet. Drass, located in Kargil district, has an additional claim to fame. In the summer of 1999, it was on its western edge with rocky and barren Himalayan peaks that India and Pakistan fought their last war.



RAHUL KAMBLE

Pakistan had named its move to take over the control of Indian posts along the LoC as 'Operation Badr', India called its offensive 'Operation Vijay'. It was a war fought in the era of satellite news channels. The battles were broadcast directly to homes in both countries, making Drass and Kargil as a whole, a symbol of India's nationalism, inspiring a raft of jingoistic Bollywood movies. This July 26 is the 25th Kargil Vijay Divas. On this day in

1999, the Indian forces threw out the Pakistanis from the incursion points in the general area of Kargil, which they had illegally occupied, bringing to a close a two-month war. It was a tough war, fought on sheer grit and courage, as gutsy young officers, most of them in their twenties, led equally brave soldiers up naked rock faces and managed to evict the enemy within weeks. Names such as Tiger Hill, Tololing, Point 5140, Point 4700, Three Pimples, Chorbat La, Point 5203, Point 4875, Khalubar, and Jubar Top became household names across the country. On 26 July 1999, the Kargil conflict officially came to an end. The Indian Army announced the complete eviction of Pakistani intruders, but a price was paid

for it in blood and tears. We lost 527 of our brave soldiers; 1363 came back wounded. The Indian army has marked July 26 - the day the Kargil war ended - as 'Vijay Diwas' (Victory Day). Every year for the past 25 years, the whole nation celebrates proudly on this day. Army also undertakes commemorative treks on the icy features, where our Braves became invincibles. What seemed an impossible task to the world, was accomplished in a mere 50 days, with all the features lost, back under our control. The '50 Day War' as it is fondly called, was a record in itself. Whenever the story of Kargil is told, it shall be incomplete without paying homage to the steely resolve and cold



courage of these young men who went to fight for their nation knowing that they might never return. Barely out of the academy, they fought against all odds, with single-minded devotion, and set new benchmarks in heroism. Their spirit and daring will be difficult to replicate. The war will always be remembered for its strategic and tac-

tical surprise, the self-imposed national strategy of restraint in keeping the war limited to the Kargil-Siachen sector, military strategy and planning, and the dedication, determination and daring junior leadership at the tactical level. In fiercely fought combat actions, on the most difficult terrain that gave immense advantage to the enemy, we were able to evict Pakistani troops from most of their surreptitiously occupied positions. The Pakistani leadership was forced to sue for a ceasefire and seek the withdrawal of its troops from the remaining areas. Operation Vijay - the Indian codename for the war - was a blend of strong and determined political, military and diplomatic actions, which enabled us to transform an

adverse situation into a military and diplomatic victory. As two prime ministers of Pakistan later acknowledged, 'Kargil war was Pakistan's biggest blunder and disaster.' A reflection on the Kargil War can never be complete without a mention of the brilliant junior leadership that we witnessed during battles. Such acts by young officers and men can never be forgotten. They make us proud. Commanding officers of many infantry battalions displayed steely resilience and single-minded devotion to duty. There were actions by young artillery forward observation officers and battery commanders who took over infantry companies when their company commander colleagues were killed. A victory in war is

achieved when battles are won. Battles are won when soldiers put duty before themselves. Soldiers who put their lives at stake in wars and war-like situations and expect nothing in return. But what the nation owes to them is recognition and gratitude. For every single brave deed noticed and recognized, many went unnoticed in the fog of war. These legendary tales deserve mention not only in our military history books but also in school textbooks to serve as inspiration for young people. This success shall not be taken for granted. With heights averaging 15000 feet, bone-chilling temperatures and a dominating hostility, the Kargil war in itself is a global legend.

(The author is freelance writer; views are personal)

Biden says he quit re-election bid to save US democracy

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

US President Joe Biden said his decision to quit the 2024 presidential race and endorse Kamala Harris as the Democratic presidential nominee was aimed at unifying the nation and passing the torch to a new generation.



serve as president but in the defence of democracy, which is at stake, I think it's more important than any title," he said. "I believe my record as president, my leadership in the world, my vision for America's future all merited a second term," Biden said, three days after he withdrew from the November 5 presidential election.

half years together. "I've made my choice. I've made my views known ... Now, the choice is up to you, the American people," he said. Biden continued to emphasise what he believes is at risk this election, which he's repeatedly cast as an "inflection point" to save the nation's founding principles.

now will determine the fate of our nation and the world for decades to come," he said. Harris, 59, who is of Indian and African origin, has now emerged as the presumptive presidential nominee of the Democratic Party.

mies, but as fellow Americans," he said. Biden also looked ahead to what he still hopes to do in these final six months. He zeroed in on the need to address gun violence, and climate change, continuing to improve the economy and reforming the US Supreme Court.

world. "We'll keep rallying a coalition of proud nations to stop Putin from taking over Ukraine and doing more damage. We'll keep NATO stronger, and I'll make it more powerful and more united than at any time in all of our history," he said.

Netanyahu will meet with Biden and Harris

Washington (AP): Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is set to make a long-awaited White House visit Thursday to meet with President Joe Biden and likely Democratic nominee Vice President Kamala Harris at an important moment for all three politicians.

Protestors burn US flag near Congress

Washington (PTI):

Pro Palestinian-protestors on Wednesday lowered an American flag and burned it down a few blocks away from the US Congress and hoisted a Palestine flag in its place.

Cease-fire talks face delays after Netanyahu's fiery speech

AP ■ JERUSALEM

Officials from Egypt, Israel, the United States and Qatar were expected to meet Thursday in Doha with the aim of resuming talks for a proposed three-phase cease-fire to end the war between Israel and Hamas and free the remaining hostages.



Relatives and supporters of the hostages held captive by Hamas in the Gaza Strip take part in a protest to demand their immediate release outside of the U.S. Embassy Branch Office in Tel Aviv, Israel, Wednesday.

they are sleeping in the streets. The Health Ministry in Gaza says more than 39,100 Palestinians have been killed in the war.

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's fiery speech to the United States Congress, accusing him Thursday of obstructing efforts to end the war and return the hostages.

they are sleeping in the streets. The Health Ministry in Gaza says more than 39,100 Palestinians have been killed in the war.

after the International Criminal Court requested to issue arrest warrants against him for war crimes. The ICC also requested warrants for his Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, Hamas officials Mohammed Deif, Yehya Sinwar, and Ismail Haniyeh.

after being detained in Washington dur In Tel Aviv - A group representing the families of Israeli hostages held in Gaza said Thursday that six hostage relatives have been released after they were briefly detained during Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to the joint session of Congress.

Kamala Harris unfit to rule: Trump

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Unleashing a volley of attacks against his new campaign opponent Vice President Kamala Harris, former president and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has said she is "unfit to rule" and described her as a "radical left lunatic".



country if she ever gets the chance to get into office. We're not going to let that happen," Trump said.

gerous people. When you're dealing with them, you can't be too nice. You really can't be. So if you don't mind, I'm not going to be nice. Is that okay?" he asked his supporters amidst huge applause from the audience.

four more years of dishonesty, incompetence, weakness and failure, Trump said. Trump alleged everything Harris touches turns into a total disaster. He mentioned Harris as many as 45 times in his speech.

British officer suspended over ill-treating man

London (AP):

A British police officer was suspended from his duties Thursday after a video was posted on social media that appeared to show an officer kicking and stamping on the head of a man lying on the floor of a terminal at Manchester Airport.

NORAD tracks Chinese and Russian bombers near Alaska

AP ■ BEIJING

Two Chinese and two Russian long-range bombers were tracked flying over international waters near Alaska and US and Canadian fighter jets were sent up in response, their joint aerospace command said.

Defense Ministry said the joint patrol also flew over the Chukchi Sea, which is on the north side of the Bering Strait. Russian fighter jets and strategic bombers were joined by Chinese strategic bombers in the exercises, which lasted more than five hours, the ministry said.

jet escorting a Chinese bomber. Another photo posted online by the military channel of China's state broadcaster CCTV showed Russian and Chinese long-winged bombers flying in parallel formation against mostly blue skies.

Nepal: Black box of crashed aircraft found, probe committee formed

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

Nepalese authorities on Thursday recovered the black box of the aircraft that crashed here a day before and handed it over to a probe team formed to inquire into the tragic accident that killed 18 persons, including a child.



director general of the Civil Aviation Authority, said the black box of the crashed aircraft has been recovered and handed over to a probe team for necessary action.

includes four other experts. The team has to submit its probe report along with recommendations within 45 days. The dead bodies are in the process of identification after conducting a post mortem and they will be handed over to the family members by Friday, Pandey said.

Kathmandu (PTI): Captain Manish Raj Shakya, the lone survivor of a deadly plane crash in Nepal that killed 18 other people on board, was saved after the cockpit of the aircraft was sheared off by a freight container seconds before the rest of the aircraft went up in flames, a media report said on Thursday.

Pokhara International Airport for regular maintenance service. Of the deceased, 15 died on the spot while three died during treatment at a local hospital, authorities said.

"We rescued Captain Shakya from inside the container," The Rising Nepal newspaper quoted DIG Joshi as saying. Doctors have initiated an investigation into the brain scars of Shakya. Shakya is currently receiving treatment at Kathmandu Medical College (KMC).

ther information only after the Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scan of Shakya's brain scars. Captain Shakya's health condition showed improvement on Thursday as compared to Wednesday. The doctors said he is "free from danger" and can speak. He can also consume liquid food.

on Thursday. In response to the tragedy, a five-member probe commission has been formed to investigate the incident. The commission will be led by Ratish Chandra Lal Suman, former Director General of the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN). The commission is tasked with delivering its report and recommendations within 45 days to prevent similar accidents in the future. Authorities are conducting an autopsy on the 18 people who lost their lives in the accident. The postmortem of the deceased began on Wednesday evening at the Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital (TUTH).

Court sets aside physical remand of Pak ex-PM Imran in 12 cases

MAY 9 RIOTS
PTI ■ ISLAMABAD



A Pakistani court on Thursday set aside the physical remand of Imran Khan in connection with 12 cases linked to last year's May 9 riots, in a major relief to the jailed former prime minister who has been imprisoned for almost a year. On July 16, an anti-terrorism court granted Punjab police Khan's 10-day physical remand in a dozen cases linked to the May 9 riots. Supporters of Khan attacked several important government buildings and army installations following his arrest in an alleged corruption case in May last year.

The Punjab police last week arrested Khan in 12 terrorism cases, including an attack on a senior army officer in Lahore, soon after he and his wife Bushra Bibi were acquitted in the Iddat case, making sure the cricketer-turned-politician remains in Adiala Jail in Rawalpindi.

On July 18, Khan approached the Lahore High Court challenging his physical remand in 12 criminal cases of last year's violent attacks on military facilities and other properties, including the Lahore corps commander's residence.

Khan, the 71-year-old Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) founder, had argued that the anti-terrorism court order be declared illegal and set aside, and that his custody be transferred from the police to judicial custody.

"The Lahore High Court's two-member bench grilled the Punjab prosecutor general for seeking physical remand of Imran Khan for more days to conduct polygraph, voice matching and other tests. As the suspect was already in custody why the police need his physical remand for the purpose as they could have done it much earlier in jail even without a physical remand," a court official told PTI after the hearing.

The two-member bench comprising Justice Tariq Saleem Sheikh and Justice Anwarul Haq Pannu further noted that

what kind of evidence the probing team want to get from the suspect (Khan). The court asked the Punjab prosecutor general to read out the transcript of Khan under which police have registered multiple cases against for inciting the public to attack the state and military installations.

"Physical remand is a serious matter. It is not acceptable if you say a girl is not a girl but a boy," Justice Pannu remarked and further noted "judges are being given more threats these days."

"The court official further said the LHC observed that if Imran Khan was not leading the violent protest no case could be instituted against him. On this the prosecutor general argued that Khan incited the public," the court official said.

After hearing the arguments of the prosecutor general and Khan's counsel, the LHC set aside the anti-terrorism court's decision to grant his physical remand noting that he will remain in judicial custody in these cases. Khan is facing over 200 cases mostly of which he is on bail. He has been in jail since August last year.

The PTI believes he is being arrested in more cases on the behest of the powerful military establishment to make sure that he does not come out of jail.

Separately, Khan filed a petition against his potential handover to military custody in connection with the May 9 riot cases, arguing that detainees involved in the events should remain

EC notifies 39 successful MPs as PTI lawmakers

Islamabad (PTI): Pakistan's Election Commission has notified 39 successful MPs as lawmakers of Imran Khan's party after the Supreme Court ordered the top electoral body to do so in its verdict on the reserved seats case, a media report said on Thursday.

The notification for the 39 MNAs (Member of the National Assembly of Pakistan) was issued on Wednesday, the Dawn newspaper reported.

On July 12, the Supreme Court declared jailed former prime minister Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) eligible to receive reserved seats for women and non-Muslims in the national and provincial assemblies, giving the party a new lease on life in the legislature by declaring it to be a parliamentary party.

Despite an 8-5 split, all 13 judges declared the PTI a parliamentary party. The majority judgement explained that 39 out of the 80 MNAs, shown by the ECP as PTI candidates, belonged to the party. The rest of the 41 independents would have to file duly signed and notarised statements before the commission within 15 days, explaining that they contested the February 8 general elections as a candidate of a particular political party, the paper said.

The ECP had finally decided last week to implement the apex court's decision. In a notification, the ECP said the following "returned candidates against general seats of National Assembly are declared to have been returned as candidates" of Khan's political party.

under the jurisdiction of civilian courts.

The petition was submitted by Khan's lawyer, Uzair Karamat, to the Lahore High Court. The federal government and the Inspector Generals (IGs) of all four provinces have been made respondents in the case, the Express Tribune newspaper reported.

Khan said that a false narrative had been constructed, accusing him of inciting protests at the General Headquarters (GHQ). He described the May 9 incident as a "false flag operation," asserting that those who stole the CCTV footage of the events were the true culprits.

He criticised the comparison of the May 9 incident to the US Capitol Hill protests on January 6, 2021, highlighting that a thorough and transparent investigation was conducted in the case, leading to the punishment of only the involved individuals, without implicating the entire Republican Party of Doland Trump.

The former premier urged the court to order that custody in the May 9 cases remain with civilian courts and to issue a stay order preventing his handover to military authorities.

On Monday, the cricketer-turned-politician expressed concerns that he and his wife, Bushra Bibi, might be sent to a military jail in connection with the May 9 riot cases.

"They plan to send me to a military jail for the May 9 incidents," he said while speaking to the media during a hearing of the Al-Qadir Trust case in the Adiala Jail Rawalpindi.

He had lamented the biased treatment meted out to Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) workers detained in military jails, suggesting a plan to also incarcerate him under similar charges.

Khan was booked on the charges of abetment in attacks on Lahore Corps Commander House known as Jinnah House, Askari Tower, and Shadman police station on May 9, 2023. He clarified that he had called for peaceful protests outside the army's General Headquarters (GHQ) if arrested but never authorised any violent actions.

Khan accused Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of stealing CCTV footage related to the May 9 events.

Publisher Jimmy Lai will testify in his defence at HK national security trial

Hong Kong (AP): A defence lawyer said on Thursday that prominent publisher Jimmy Lai will testify in his defence in the landmark national security trial brought under a Beijing-imposed law that has all but wiped out public dissent. Lai, the 76-year-old founder of the now-defunct Apple Daily newspaper, was arrested in 2020 during a crackdown on the mass pro-democracy protests that rocked Hong Kong in 2019. He was charged with colluding with foreign forces to endanger national security and conspiring with others to put out seditious publications. If convicted, he faces up to life in prison.

On Wednesday, Lai's lawyer Robert Pang argued his client had no case to answer because the prosecutors' evidence was insufficient. Pang said the prosecution had failed to prove Lai's intent after the introduction of the 2020 law and stressed the importance of freedom of speech.

But judges Esther Toh, Susana D'Almada Remedios and Alex Lee ruled against him on Thursday. "Having considered all the submission, we ruled that the first defendant has a case to answer on all charges," Toh said, without elaborating. Pang later said in court that Lai would testify in his defense, but when he would do so was not immediately settled.

Observers said Lai's high-profile case, which has already stretched over 90 days, is a trial of press freedom and a test for judicial independence in the Asian financial hub.

When Britain handed back Hong Kong to China in 1997, the city was promised to have its Western-style civil liberties kept intact for 50 years. However, the freedoms that once set Hong Kong apart from mainland China, including freedoms of press and assembly, have drastically shrunk since the enactment of the 2020 security law. Beijing and Hong Kong governments insist that the law brought back stability to the city following the social unrest.

More than hundred flights cancelled in Germany Environmental activists target airports across Europe

AP ■ FRANKFURT



Emergency vehicles from the police, fire department and airport security are parked on the apron of Frankfurt Airport, where a few activists have taped themselves up, in Frankfurt, Germany, on Thursday

Germany's busiest airport canceled more than 100 flights Thursday as environmental activists launched a coordinated effort to disrupt air travel across Europe at the height of the summer holiday season to highlight the threat posed by climate change.

Frankfurt Airport said flights were halted for safety reasons after climate activists breached security fences, triggering a response from police, firefighters and airport security officers. All runways were back in operation by 7:50 am local time, it said. About 140 flights have been cancelled so far, but further disruptions are expected throughout the day, the airport said.

Environmental groups said they planned to target airports around Europe this summer to remind people about the link between fossil fuels, such as those used by airliners, and climate change. The groups are calling for governments around the world to end the extraction and burning of fossil fuels by 2030.

"We sharply condemn these unauthorized demonstrations, and we reserve the right to take legal action against the participants," Frankfurt Airport said. "Their activities pose severe danger to flight operations — possibly putting human life at risk."

Climate data showed that Monday was the hottest day ever recorded as human-caused climate change continues to drive unprecedented heat and growing weather extremes. Global investments in planet-warming oil and gas are expected to increase by 7 per cent this year, according to the International Energy Agency, despite global promises to slash fossil fuel use.

Flying is considered one of the most carbon-intensive activities, but the aviation industry is expected to grow steadily over the coming decades despite efforts to contain the climate crisis.

The Last Generation group, which organized the Frankfurt

demonstration, said six protesters cut holes in the perimeter fence and headed toward the runways on foot, bicycles and skateboards.

It was the second time in as many days that a protest by Last Generation caused disruption at a German airport.

On Wednesday, five protesters glued themselves to a taxiway at Cologne-Bonn Airport, forcing a roughly three-hour halt to flights. That protest resulted in 31 flights being canceled. There were other protests or attempted protests in other European countries.

Climate activists staged similar actions in Finland, Norway, Switzerland and Spain on Wednesday.

At Helsinki Airport, a handful of protesters blocked the main check-in area for about 30 minutes, but police said the demonstration caused no delays to flights or other disruption.

At Oslo's main Gardermoen airport, three activists managed to enter the runway area early Wednesday, waving banners and disrupting air traffic for about half an hour.

Police said there were no major flight delays. Police in London said Wednesday that they prevented a planned protest at Heathrow Airport that could have had a significant impact on Europe's largest airport. Seven members of the group known as Just Stop Oil were arrested at Heathrow and three others were taken into custody at other locations as part of an "intelligence-led" operation, the Metropolitan Police Service said in a statement.

One of those arrested in London was Sean Callaghan, 29, who described himself as an environmental educator. "I'm taking action at airports this summer because it is impossible for me to see a way in which we can inspire and enthuse students about the future of our planet," Callaghan said in a video posted on social media.

Last week, the German Cabinet approved legislation that would impose tougher penalties on people who break through airport perimeters.

The bill, which still requires approval by lawmakers, foresees punishment ranging up to a two-year prison sentence for people who intentionally intrude on airside areas of airports such as taxiways or runways, endanger civil aviation, or enable someone else to. Currently such intrusions only draw a fine.

China past in terms of investments in Pak, US future, says official

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Days of China investing in Pakistan is now a thing of the past, a senior administration official has told the lawmakers noting that the United States is the future.

"China is the past in terms of investments in Pakistan, we are the future," Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Donald Lu told lawmakers during a Congressional hearing on Tuesday.

Lu was responding to questions from the Congressmen, who expressed concerns over the Chinese investment in Pakistan and other countries in South and Central Asia, including Sri Lanka and Maldives.

"I would argue the Chinese plan is to have a military base in every country and every infrastructure project is made with high interest Chinese loans and low paid Chinese workers. We just see this model all throughout the region," he said. The Chinese bring in their own workers.

They don't actually train local workers to do their enterprises. They extract minerals, literally take gold and copper from the ground and just ship it back for processing in China.

"They don't spend any money in local communities. This is going to have a boomerang effect for Chinese businesses and their interests. We talked about Pakistan and the investments there, USD26 billion. They put a huge amount of money in Pakistan. I actually don't see them putting a dime in there right now because they're really worried about whether they're going to get their money back there," he said.

"Their really terrible investment strategy is biting them in the ass and we have an opportunity to do a better job to make sure countries know there are options and they don't have to be beholden to one," Lu said.

Congressman Rich McCormick said China has vastly outspent the United States throughout the entire

region, especially in Pakistan since 2012. They are making solid progress in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor known as CPAC.

This gives China a significant leverage over Pakistan, he noted.

"I'm really worried about the future as we invest, how do we leverage our position with Pakistan, our historic relationship given also our relationship with India and that's developing very quickly. How do we balance that and keep that in our advantage?" he asked.

Lu said the US is facing ongoing challenges and opportunities in Pakistan.

"The president's budget requests a straight lining of our USD101 million Pakistan budget. That money will be used to strengthen democracy and civil society, fight terrorism and extremism and to support economic reforms and debt management to help stabilize Pakistan's economy and prevent further overreliance on China," he said.

Putin meets Syrian Prez in Kremlin

Moscow (AP)

Russian President Vladimir Putin met President Bashar Assad of Syria in the Kremlin, video distributed by the Kremlin press service on Thursday showed. "I am very interested in your opinion on how the situation in the region as a whole is developing," Putin said to Assad. "Unfortunately, there is a tendency towards escalation, we can see that. This also applies directly to Syria."

The Kremlin said Putin and Assad's meeting took place Wednesday. Putin and Assad last met in March 2023 in the Kremlin on the anniversary of Syria's 12-year uprising-turned-civil war. At that meeting, Putin emphasized the Russian military's role in stabilizing the country. Russia has waged a military campaign in Syria since September 2015, teaming up with Iran to allow Assad's government to fight armed opposition groups and reclaim control over most of the country. While Russia now concentrates the bulk of its military resources in Ukraine, it has maintained a military foothold in Syria and keeps troops at its bases there.

Possibility of 'growing' Chinese presence in Bangladesh concerns United States

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The United States is concerned about the possibility of growing Chinese presence in Bangladesh, a senior administration official has told the lawmakers.

"We are concerned about the possibility of a growing Chinese presence in Bangladesh. But I would say the Bangladeshis have been pretty careful about not overextending quickly," Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia told the lawmakers during a Congressional hearing on Tuesday.

"In terms of Russia, Chinese influence in Bangladesh in that area, have you seen any things that are concerning in that regard as well?" Congressman Bill Keating asked.

"I would say the most influential country in Bangladesh is actually not Russia or China, it's India. And we have a really active dialogue with India about our policies in Bangladesh and

throughout the wider region," Lu said in response to the question.

Congresswoman Young Kim said the Chinese Communist Party is a top trading partner for Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Afghanistan, which is around America's strategic partner India.

"The PLA's presence is also intensifying both along the Indian border and in the Indian Ocean. Aid and cooperation play a pivotal role not only in advancing US interests in South Asia, but also in enhancing their prosperity and keeping the region free and open," she said.

Responding to another question from Congressman Andy Kim, Lu said that the recently held elections in Bangladesh held less violence than the previous two.

"We believe that these elections were less violent than the last two in Bangladesh, in part due to both government and opposition taking a step back because of the threat of sanctions," he said.

Lu told the lawmakers that the United States has been following very closely this past week the violence in Bangladesh.

"We've condemned that violence we've called on the government to respect freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. We've called upon the government to restore internet to the country, which has been off now for several days," he said. "You will be aware that there is a curfew that has been put in place by the government as a response to some of the violence that's happened. Some in police have said there's a shoot on sight

order for anyone involved in. That's what I heard. So we have condemned from the spokesperson of the State Department uh the shoot on sight order and ask them to roll that back," Lu said.

"It's a very tense moment in Bangladesh between protesters and the government. We hope that calm is restored. I have been in touch with senior leaders in Bangladesh. We remain in touch with them now to try to encourage them to find a peaceful way to resolve this crisis," said the Assistant Secretary of State.

Japan's population falls for 15th year in row

Tokyo (AP)

Japan's total population marked the 15th straight year of decline, according to government data released Wednesday, dropping by more than a half-million people as the population ages and births remain low. Births in Japan hit a record low of 730,000 last year. The 1.58 million deaths last year were also a record high. Japan's population was 124.9 million as of January 1.

The data released by the Internal Affairs Ministry also showed that the 11% increase in foreign residents helped their population surpass 3 million for the first time. They now make up nearly 3% of the total population and are mostly of working age from 15 to 64.

Surveys show that younger Japanese are increasingly reluc-

tant to marry or have children, discouraged by bleak job prospects, the high cost of living — which rises at a faster pace than salaries — and a gender-biased corporate culture that adds a burden only on women and working mothers.

The government earmarked 5.3 trillion yen (\$34 billion) as part of the 2024 budget to fund incentives for young couples to have more children, such as increasing subsidies for childcare and education, and is expected to spend 3.6 trillion yen (\$23 billion) in tax money annually over the next three years. Experts say the measures are largely meant for married couples who plan to have or who already have children, and don't address the growing number of young people reluctant to get married.

Romania says more Russian drone debris from Ukraine war has landed on its territory

Bucharest (AP)

Debris from what is believed to be a Russian drone landed in a rural area of Romania, the country's Defense Ministry said on Thursday, in the latest apparent incident of drone wreckage from the war in neighboring Ukraine falling onto the NATO member's soil.

Since the war started in February 2022, Romania has confirmed drone fragments on its territory on several occasions. The debris of what the Defense Ministry called a "Russia origin" drone were found following Russian attacks on Ukraine's port infrastructure near the border. The fragments were discovered by a team of specialists in an uninhabited area near the village of Plauru in Tulcea county.

Oil tanker sinks in Manila Bay

AP ■ MANILA

A Philippine oil tanker sank in Manila Bay early on Thursday after encountering huge waves, and the coast guard was working to determine whether the vessel was leaking oil — in what could be a major spill — after it rescued 16 of 17 crew members in a nighttime operation, officials said.

The tanker Terra Nova left Bataan province en route to the central province of Iloilo with about 1.4 million liters (370,000 gallons) of industrial fuel oil stored in watertight tanks when it got buffeted by huge waves and took on water. The crew struggled to steer the tanker back to port but it eventually sank shortly after midnight, coast guard spokesperson Rear Admiral

Armando Balilo said, citing statements from surviving crew members.

The sinking followed days of monsoon rains, exacerbated by a passing offshore typhoon, that caused landslides and floodings across the archipelago, leaving at least 22 people dead and displacing more than half a million people.

An aerial survey spotted an oil spill about 3.7 kilometers (2.3 miles) long near the rough waters where the tanker sank but that may have come from the fuel intended to power the tanker's engine, not the much greater amount of fuel the Terra Nova was carrying as cargo, Balilo said.

A coast guard ship, the BRP Melchora Aquino, was in the waters where the tanker sank, more than 6 kilometers (about 4 miles) from Bataan province's

coast, to search for the last missing crewman and to carry out an initial assessment of the tanker's fuel oil cargo, Balilo told an online news conference. He added that the coast guard was bracing to contain a possible major oil spill.

"There's a big danger that Manila would be affected, its shorelines, if the fuel leaks because this happened within Manila Bay. It's part of the contingency we're preparing for," Balilo said. "The effect on the marine environment would not be good."

Balilo later said the oil tanker sank at a relatively shallow depth of 34 meters (111 feet), based on an initial assessment, and raised the possibility that its fuel oil cargo could be siphoned off by special ships in a delicate operation that could take about a week.

UPSIDA कार्यालय प्रधान महाप्रबन्धक (आर) उ.प्र. राज्य औद्योगिक विकास प्राधिकरण, पृ-1/6, बलरामपुर, कानपुर-208024

सूचना
सूचना: द्वारा पुरिष्ठ किया जाता है कि दिनांक 04.07.2024 को सम्पन्न चर्चे में अकाशित Upgradation of Street light and High Mast with 3 year AMC at Bhara Pachpera, Dist.- Pillibhit हेतु निविदा संख्या (2024 SIDC 935130 1) को दिनांक 24.07.2024 तक असेलड की जाती की, पर 25.07.2024 को खोली जाती है, अपरिस्थित कारणों से अब उक्त आमंत्रित निविदाओं में निविदा पत्र अपडेट करने की अवधि दिनांक 01.08.2024 तक विस्तारित की जाती है। यह निविदाएं अब दिनांक 02.08.2024 को अपरान्ह 16:00 बजे खोली जायेंगी। शेष नियम व शर्तें क्यावत रहेंगी।

वरिष्ठ प्रबन्धक (प्र.) विद्युत
उ.प्र.रा.औ.वि.प्र., कानपुर

PUNJAB STATE POWER CORPORATION LTD.
(Regd. Office: PSEB Head Office, The Mall Patiala-147001)
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(Phone No. 01881-275289) E-mail: se-hq-ggsstp-ropar@pspcpl.in

E-Tender (Short Term) Enq. No. 542/P-2/EMPW-12733 Dated 17.07.2024
Dy.Chief Engineer/ Headquarter (Purchase Cell-2) GGSSTP, Rupnagar invites E-Tender ID No. 2024_POWER_124109_1 for Annual Contract for Rewinding/ Re-caging/Re-staggering and other repairs of HT Motors of GGSSTP, Rupnagar.
For detailed NIT & Tender Specification please refer to https://eproc.punjab.gov.in from 18.07.2024 onwards.
Note:- Corrigendum & addendum, if any will be published online at https://eproc.punjab.gov.in
RTP-67/24

GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY, AMRITSAR
SHORT TERM E-TENDER NOTICE FOR SOPHISTICATED EQUIPMENTS
Short Term E-Tenders are invited for purchase Fluorescence Spectrophotometer, CAD software for Fabric Design, Garment Design Software, Socks Knitting Machine, Single Color Roti Flat Printing Machine, Universal Testing Machine (UTM), Narrow Fabric Weaving, Lab Coating Machine, Package Dyeing Machines, Printing Screen making and Exposure Unit, Pad Thermal Fixation Range, Calendaring Machines, Digital Tear Tester, Air Permeability Tester, UV Penetration Tester, Automatic Hydrostatic Head Tester, Computer Color Matching System and Computer be submitted online latest by 09/08/2024 upto 4:00 p.m. Detailed information can be obtained from website www.eproc.punjab.gov.in Any corrigendum/Addendum related to these e-tender will be uploaded, if required, on Punjab Govt. website: eproc.punjab.gov.in
Director of Research
Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar
NA/12/24361/2023/36011 Dated CHD :- 7/25/2024

I-T Act review attempt to make it simpler for taxpayers: CBDT chief

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Budget announcement about a comprehensive review of the Income Tax Act, 1961, is an attempt to make the “bulky” law “simpler” to understand and comfortable to use for taxpayers along with aligning new technology processes with it, CBDT Chairman Ravi Agrawal has said. The Act that started its journey in 1922 contains 298 sections, 23 chapters and other provisions in its current form of 1961. Speaking to PTI during a post-budget interview on Wednesday, Agrawal said the Act has seen “redundancies” over a period of time making it “thick and bulky.” “The taxpayers also feel that the Act is not so simple, as it ought to be...It is cumbersome...So the attempt is if we can make this Act simpler, simpler to comprehend, simpler in terms of language, simpler in terms of presentation, then that hitch of the taxpayer to actually not see the Act and take the help of a tax practitioner or someone (maybe eased)...”



“We are working towards how can we make it (Income Tax Act) simple so that the taxpayer feels comfortable seeing the provisions himself or herself and that it is more user friendly,” the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) head said. It is also important to review the law as technology has become an integral part of tax administration and “we have to see where the gaps are and how we actually can align technology with the provisions of the Act,” Agrawal said. We are looking to undertake further improvements (in the law), he added. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, while

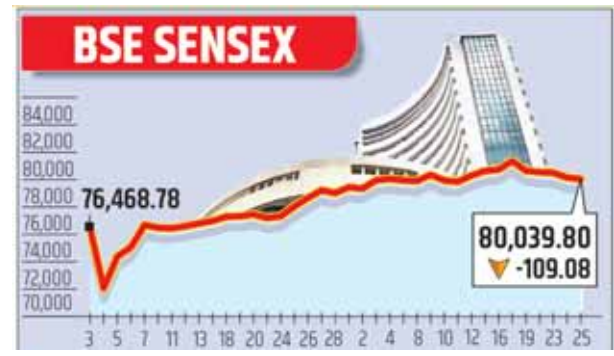
presenting the Union Budget for 2024-25 on Tuesday, announced a “comprehensive” review of the Income Tax Act of 1961. “The purpose is to make the Act concise, lucid, easy to read and understand. This will reduce disputes and litigation, thereby providing tax certainty to the taxpayers. It will also bring down the demand embroiled in litigation. It is proposed to be completed in six months,” she said. Sitharaman added that a beginning was being made in the Finance Bill by simplifying the tax regime for charities, TDS rate structure, provisions for reassessment, search

provisions and capital gains taxation. Asked about the budget proposal of granting immunity from penalty and prosecution to a ‘benamidar’ (in whose name a benami asset is standing) under the Benami Transactions Prohibition Act, the CBDT chief said this was aimed to make the act “effective”. The minister said the move was intended to “improve conviction” under this law, which was enacted in 1988 but implemented in November 2016 by the Modi government. A convict under this law can be sentenced to a rigorous imprisonment of up to seven years and a fine of up to 25 per cent of the fair market value of the property. Benami properties are those in which the real beneficiary is not the one in whose name the property has been purchased. Agrawal also said that the Income Tax Department has completed about 6.5 lakh assessment cases and about 2 lakh appeals under the faceless assessment regime that was launched by the government in 2019-20.

Markets extend losses for 5th session

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Equity market benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty stayed on the back foot for the fifth straight session on Thursday as investors offloaded metal, banking and finance stocks amid a lacklustre trend in global markets. Heavy foreign fund outflows after a hike in securities transaction tax and short-term capital gains tax also impacted markets’ sentiment negatively, traders said. However, strong buying in oil & stocks, energy and auto shares helped the indices offset some losses, they added. After a sharp fall in intra-day trade, the 30-share BSE Sensex managed to recover some of the lost ground to settle 109.08 points or 0.14 per cent lower at 80,039.80, as a sharp rally in Tata Motors and Larsen & Toubro restricted its fall. During the day, it tanked 671 points or 0.83 per cent to 79,477.83. Shares of Larsen & Toubro ended nearly 3 per cent higher after the company posted a 12 per cent rise in consolidated profit after tax (PAT) in the June quarter. Tata Motors jumped nearly 6 per cent. The NSE Nifty dipped 7.40 points or 0.03 per cent to 24,406.10. Intra-day, it tumbled 202.7 points or 0.83



per cent to 24,210.80. In five days, the BSE benchmark has tumbled 1,303.66 points or 1.60 per cent, while the Nifty declined 394.75 points or 1.59 per cent. “Overnight slump in US equities caused a major slump in domestic markets in early trade due to heavy profit-taking in banking, IT, metals and realty stocks. “However, markets recouped most of its losses towards the end, with Sensex managing to close above the crucial 80k-mark amid buying in oil & gas and automobile stocks, indicating that investors are willing to bet on good fundamental sectoral stocks despite rising concerns of the stretched valuations of the Indian markets,” Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said. From the Sensex pack, Axis Bank declined over 5 per cent

after the company’s June quarter earnings failed to cheer investors. Nestle, Titan, ICICI Bank, Tata Steel, IndusInd Bank, ITC, JSW Steel and State Bank of India were the other laggards. Sun Pharma, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Bajaj Finance and Power Grid also ended in the positive territory. “After a volatile session, the Indian market concluded on a flat note, influenced by lower-than-expected earnings growth from major banks. Global indices also reacted pessimistically due to the disappointing results from top US tech companies. “However, the government’s commitment to improving consumption and bridging the gap for energy transition in the budget buoyed sectoral sentiments,” said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services. In the broader market, the BSE midcap gauge declined 0.22 per cent, and smallcap index dipped 0.14 per cent. Among the indices, metal lost 1.19 per cent, bankex (1.10 per cent), realty (0.80 per cent), telecommunication (0.65 per cent) and financial services (0.60 per cent). On the other hand, energy, healthcare, industrials, utilities, auto and oil & gas were among the gainers. “Global stocks tumbled on Thursday after a tech-fuelled sell-off on Wall Street last night. A slew of disappointing results caused traders to panic that the artificial-intelligence frenzy that has powered the bull market this year may have been overdone,” Deepak Jasani, Head of Retail Research, HDFC Securities, said. In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled lower. European markets were trading in the negative territory in the mid-session deals. US markets ended significantly lower on Wednesday. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 5,130.90 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 1.73 per cent to USD 80.31 a barrel.

Rationalisation of duties on leather sector to help create more jobs, push exports: CLE

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Rationalisation of customs duties in the Budget on leather sector will help create more jobs and push exports, CLE said on Thursday. The Council for Leather Exports (CLE) said that the Budget announcement of support for setting up working women hostels, establishing creches and women-specific skilling programmes will further enhance the women workforce in the sector. The employment linked incentive scheme is a major support measure for the leather and footwear sector, as this is a labour-intensive sector, CLE Chairman Rajendra Kumar Jan said. “Two major measures have been announced for the leather and footwear sector in the Union Budget. One is the rationalisation of export duties on leathers and the other is the inclusion of more inputs including wet blue chrome tanned leather, wet white leather, crust leather and finished leather under the Duty Free Scheme for leather garments, leather



products and footwear exporters,” he said. Janan added on the export duty front, the levy on wet blue and crust leather has been brought down from 40 per cent to 20 per cent. This will facilitate the export of value-added processed leathers from the country as there is a huge demand for these leathers in the global market, he said. “We hope that the government will further reduce this export duty for crust leathers from 20 per cent to nil in future, so as to achieve our objective of enhancing the export of

value-added leathers by USD 1 billion in the next 2-3 years,” Janan said. He added that allowing duty free imports of critical raw materials and inputs, including wet blue, crust and finished leathers, will help facilitate the export of value-added products from the country. “This will be a major step in realising our ambition of achieving the exporter target of USD 13.7 billion by 2029-30 by the leather and footwear sector, from the export value of USD 4.69 billion during 2023-24,” he said.

Map war intensifies, Google announces new features to woo users in India

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Amid rising competition from homegrown challenger Ola Maps, Google on Thursday announced a slew of new features on Google Maps to woo users in India, including EV charging station information, flyover callouts and AI-driven routing capability to reduce narrow road usage for four-wheeler drivers. It is “an exciting time in mapping”, Google Maps said announcing its lineup of new features, which comes in the backdrop of a pitched battle with Ola. Google recently decided to cut the pricing of Google Maps platform for developers by up to 70 per cent from August 1, just weeks after Ola Founder and CEO Bhavish Aggarwal openly nudged Indian developers to shun Google Maps and offered them sweeteners like one-year free access to Ola Maps. Replaying to a question on the timing of Google Maps’ price cuts - coming right after an offensive from Ola - Google Maps senior executives said that while “it’s tempting to think that way, but we actually do not focus on competitors”.



“We’re very focused on making sure we’re serving our user base and our partner community, which is our developer partners. And to be honest, we timed it with our IO Connect event in Bengaluru,” Miriam Daniel, VP and GM at Google Maps, said at a briefing. Daniel added: “...This is something our partners have been requesting of us for a while, and we’ve been working on it for quite some time to make sure our infrastructure, our pricing systems are localised and adapted to the needs of our partners in India.” On Thursday, the company announced six ways it is enabling more efficient and sustainable journeys on

Google Maps in India, powered by AI and local partners. “These new features reaffirm our commitment to making digital mapping even more helpful for users, businesses, developers and society at large. “We’re excited to continue our journey of innovation and build the future of Google Maps right here in India,” a blogpost by Daniel and Lalitha Ramani, GM at Google Maps, India, read. Stating that navigating narrow or congested roads in unfamiliar areas can be a challenge for four-wheeler drivers, Google Maps announced it is introducing a new feature for users in India designed to reduce the use of

narrow roads when driving four-wheelers. “To address this, we’ve developed an AI model specifically for Indian roads that incorporates multiple signals satellite imagery, Street View and other information like road types, distance between buildings, paved sections, etc. To estimate road widths at scale. Using these road width estimates, we’ve fine-tuned our existing AI routing algorithms to help four-wheelers avoid narrow roads whenever possible, without significantly impacting travel time or distance,” the blogpost said. This means four-wheeler drivers can enjoy a less stressful driving experience, and it also benefits bikers, pedestrians and other commuters who can now use these narrow roads more safely and confidently, it added. Google Maps is starting to roll out this feature on Android devices this week in eight cities - Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Chennai, Coimbatore, Indore, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar and Guwahati, and has promised to bring the feature to iOS and more cities soon.

Another new feature on Google Maps is call-out flyovers along the recommended route. This feature helps users anticipate upcoming flyovers and prepare ahead of time to get onto the flyover. “Starting this week, you’ll see these flyover callouts in 40 cities across India for both four-wheeler and two-wheeler active navigation on Android apps and Android Auto. iOS and CarPlay support will be coming soon,” it said. Both Narrow Roads and Flyover features have been pioneered in India, tailored to the unique navigation needs of users, it said. To ensure EV drivers have the tools they need to confidently hit the road, the company has also announced the availability of information about EV charging stations on both Google Maps and Google Search in India. “To achieve this, we’re collaborating with leading EV charging providers in India ElectricPe, Ather, Kazam, and Statiq to add authoritative information for over 8,000 charging stations, representing a significant portion of available charging stations in India,” it said.

Sugar industry body proposes bio-refinery transition plan to Govt



Sugar industry body ISMA on Thursday said it has presented a plan to the government to transform sugar mills into bio-refineries, aiming to boost production of sustainable aviation fuel and other green energy sources. The representatives of the Indian Sugar & Bio-Energy Manufacturers Association (ISMA) met with Food Minister Pralhad Joshi to discuss a policy framework for the transition, which would expand beyond current ethanol, bioelectricity, and biogas production, a statement said. ISMA Director General Deepak Ballani said the initiative would help India meet international aviation blending targets set to take effect in 2027 under CORSIA mandates while supporting the country’s net-zero and

self-reliance goals. “We see a future where local resources drive national development,” Ballani said in the statement adding that “This aligns with the government’s vision for a self-reliant India.” The plan aims to create alternative markets for India’s estimated 55 million sugarcane farmers, building on the success of the current ethanol blending programme in increasing farmer incomes. The government launched 400 E-100 fuel pumps last year. Joshi stressed the need to promote E-100 use, particularly given India’s leadership of the Global Biofuels Alliance. ISMA pledged to work closely with the government on the swift implementation of the bio-refinery plan, which is expected to set new benchmarks in the sector and strengthen India’s energy security.

Indian cybersecurity startups poised for strong growth amid rising global spend, says Accel

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India’s cybersecurity market has posted a compounded annual growth rate of 25 per cent since 2019, crossing the USD 6 billion mark in 2023, and is projected to expand further with global spending touching USD 200 billion this year, Prayank Swaroop, partner at global VC fund Accel, said on Thursday. Cybersecurity startups in the country are poised to see a steady growth on the back of higher spending in the domestic market, he said at the Accel Cybersecurity Summit 2024 in Bengaluru. Highlighting the potential of the country’s cybersecurity market, Swaroop said Indian cybersecurity startups are poised to make a global impact, and continue their growth momentum amid a sharp rise in spending for cybersecurity globally. The Accel Cybersecurity Summit 2024, India’s largest cybersecurity summit, saw participation from across the world. The gathering included prominent founders, global cybersecurity experts and CISOs (chief information security officer) of major enterprises. “Our mission with this summit is to elevate the ecosystem of cybersecurity founders and operators by bringing together some of the best minds in the domain,” said Swaroop. Data available with IDC, Gartner, and other leading



research firms suggest that global spending in cybersecurity is expected to cross USD 200 billion in 2024. “Indian cybersecurity startups will impact the global landscape as the market proliferates significantly,” he said, adding that the country’s cybersecurity market witnessed a 25 per cent CAGR since 2019 and crossed USD 6 billion in 2023. Indian cybersecurity startups received USD 157 million funding in the past two years. Multiple reports attest to the spike in global spending for cybersecurity, with an IDC report projecting spends upwards of USD 36 billion in the Asia Pacific alone. This spike in spending, the growing importance of security awareness, a need to foster a robust security system and looking for solutions to the rising spectre of cybersecurity threats were the crux of Swaroop’s inaugural address at the summit. Despite growing interest, data

management, and reporting, thereby allowing cybersecurity practitioners to dedicate more time to strategic initiatives and strengthening defences against cyberthreats. The growing importance of AI in cyber defence, especially in areas such as early vulnerability detection, automated threat modelling, and real-time threat detection, was also emphasised. According to Swaroop, generative AI has emerged an indispensable tool in the war against cyber threats. “In the future, AI will play an increasingly pivotal role in cyber defence. It is reshaping the industry by enhancing key areas such as early vulnerability detection, automated threat modelling, and real-time threat detection. “Moreover, it improves vendor risk management, penetration testing, and addressing new attack surfaces created by AI technologies,” he said. The evolution of AI solidifies its status as an indispensable tool in the ongoing war against cyber threats. “We think it is important to secure the AI stack against threats like data poisoning and supply chain vulnerabilities while ensuring compliance and security,” Swaroop said. The Accel partner concluded his address by highlighting the importance of integrating AI technologies to create new opportunities and face more formidable challenges as the broader cybersecurity market expands.

Budget proposals for marine sector to boost India’s aquaculture, seafood exports: MPEDA

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Budget announcements for the marine sector such as rationalisation of customs duties and financing facilities will help boost the country’s India’s aquaculture and seafood exports, MPEDA said on Thursday. The Marine Products Export Development Authority (MPEDA) also said the Budget includes a range of strategic measures aimed at bolstering the competitiveness of marine products, with a particular focus on shrimp production and export. Various inputs used in the manufacture of shrimp and fish feed will now enjoy customs duty exemptions, it said adding a number of feed inputs such as mineral and vitamin pre-mixes, krill meal, fish lipid oil, crude fish oil, algal prime, algal oil are fully exempted from any import duty. Artemia and Artemia cysts which are key nutritional inputs in aqua hatchery were also fully exempted from any import duty. The Basic Customs Duty (BCD) on essential aquafarm/hatchery inputs such as Vannamee and black tiger broodstock, polychaete worms, and fish/shrimp feed has been



reduced to 5 per cent. Import duty for insect meal and single-cell protein has been cut down to 5 per cent. “These announcements made in the Union Budget 2024-25 are set to significantly enhance aquaculture and seafood export sectors,” the authority said. It also said that the government has committed to providing substantial financial support to establish a network of Nucleus Breeding Centres (NBCs) for shrimp broodstocks. “This initiative is anticipated to drastically reduce India’s reliance on imported broodstock, potentially saving the industry up to Rs 150 crore annually,” it said adding hatchery operators are expected to benefit significantly, with projected savings of 50 per cent on broodstock costs.

Indians eye double-digit medal haul as Paris Olympics set for grand start

PTI ■ PARIS

Some would be carrying a huge burden of expectations, some others would look to spring a surprise and a few more would be eyeing the perfect closure to their glittering careers as the 117-strong Indian contingent aims for a better-than-before performance in the Olympic Games, starting here on Friday.

India returned from Tokyo with seven medals, and it is only natural that a double-digit performance is now desired in Paris.

Except for wrestlers, who have waded through a highly controversial build-up, athletes in all disciplines have had no complaints about their preparations.

Whether it was training abroad or getting the best of facilities to sharpen their skills, there was planning in place.

But will the hard work, the strategies and the unbridled support translate into medals?

THE BIG PICTURE

It will be a Herculean task to match the Tokyo figures of seven medals, given that except for reigning Olympic champion Neeraj Chopra, not many are top contenders in their respective disciplines.

More than half of the 117-member contingent is from three sports -- athletics (29), shooting (21) and hockey (19). Of these 69 athletes, 40 are debutants.

In other sports too, there are debutants like tennis player N Sriram Balaji and wrestler Reetika Hooda. They are not exactly inexperienced, but largely, India's campaign will be driven by the



athletes, who will be competing on a stage this grand for the first time. Then there are the seasoned ones who would be expected to raise their game suitably.

Two-time medallist shuttler PV Sindhu, tennis player Rohan Bopanna, legendary table tennis player Sharath Kamal and hockey goalkeeper PR Sreejesh are certainly playing their last Olympics.

The hockey team has endured patchy form in the build-up to the Games, the boxers and wrestlers are lacking in real competition time. The shooters too have notched up mixed results heading

into the Olympics. The track and field athletes, especially Avinash Sable, have done well of late, but compared to their global rivals, their performances don't seem enough to put them in the bracket of medal hopefuls.

For instance, steeplechaser Sable has been consistently bettering his own national record. His best stands at 8:09.94 but there are seven international runners who have achieved better timing than that in the run-up to the Games. Given this, Even making the finals will be considered a huge achievement.

BEST CHANCE

India's hopes for podium finishes largely hinge on Neeraj, despite concerns around his adductor niggle, and the in-form badminton duo of Chirag Shetty and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy. The coveted 90m mark has eluded Neeraj from Tokyo to Paris but the ace javelin thrower seems to be doing just enough, and most importantly, consistently, to land global titles.

On big competition days, Neeraj has fared better than his other fancied rivals and if he is fit, the javelin thrower from Panipat will have a chance to become only the

third athlete in India's sports history to win back-to-back Olympic medals.

Only Sindhu (2016 Rio and 2012 Tokyo) and wrestler Sushil Kumar (2008 Beijing, 2012 London) have managed to win two consecutive medals.

Rankireddy and Chirag have grown into one of India's most formidable men's doubles teams and they are being seen as certain medal winners.

Talking about Sindhu, she is not in the best of form and has also got a tough draw but if she can come through the initial rounds, the vast experience could help her make

the medal round.

HOCKEY: The men's hockey team has been inconsistent. It lost all five games in Australia recently after a mixed run in the Pro League. It was a far cry from the Asian Games in Hangzhou where the team emerged champion.

Penalty Corner conversion and maintaining the tempo throughout a match remain a concern.

And if that's not enough, the Indian team has been clubbed with heavyweights Australia, Belgium, Argentina, New Zealand and Ireland. There is no room for error if the team has to make the top-four from this pool.

SHOOTING: It's been a quiet build-up for the 21-member shooting contingent, the biggest ever, compared to London and Tokyo where stars such as Manu Bhaker and Saurabh Chaudhary had raised medal hopes with their exceptional performances in the run-up to the Games.

Even Divyansh Panwar and Elavenil Valarivan were hailed as future superstars but all of them have flattered to deceive.

There is hardly any spotlight on shooters but still Sift Kaur Samra (50m three position), Sandeep Singh (10m air rifle) and Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar (men's 50 m rifle) have it in them to end the 12-year wait for a medal.

Gagan Narang, who is now India's Chef de Mission, was the last Indian shooter to climb the podium when he won the 10m air rifle bronze in the 2012 London Games.

WRESTLING: The sport has delivered a medal for India in the last four editions. The hopes of winning four to five medals were

raised for the Paris Games but the protest against the Wrestling Federation of India brought the sport to a standstill.

There was no national camp, and no competition for a long time. The qualified wrestlers have trained on their own at the centres of their choice -- both in India and abroad.

Fitness status of many is not known, but going into the Games, Anshu Malik, Antim Panghal and Aman Sehrawat are considered India's best bets. Reetika Hooda, the U-23 world champion, will be a dark horse.

OTHERS: The archers and TT players have qualified for the Games on the basis of their rankings. While it is a huge achievement for TT players, the same can't be said about the archers.

They have promised a lot in the past too but have not been able to deliver. The recent episode of their coach being denied the Games accreditation means the campaign has started on a negative note.

Weightlifter Mirabai Chanu, the Tokyo Games silver-medallist, has struggled with injury and form of late and is perhaps not in the best frame of mind. There are question marks if she will be able to repeat her success.

Experienced boxer Nikhat Zareen and Nishant Dev will be watched keenly as their latest results have been encouraging. So far, India have won 35 medals at the Olympics with shooter Abhinav Bindra (2008) and Neeraj Chopra (2021) being the only two individual gold medal winners.

It's time to turn aspirations into achievements. Let the Games begin.

Ankita best-placed Indian at 11th in individual event

PTI ■ PARIS

Debutant Ankita Bhakat left behind seasoned campaigners like Deepika Kumar to emerge as the best-placed Indian archer at 11th in the Paris Olympics' women's individual recurve qualifications as the country secured a quarterfinal spot in the team event by finishing fourth here on Thursday.

The 26-year-old Ankita was the top-ranked Indian woman with 666 points, followed by Bhajan Kaur (22nd with 559 points) and Deepika Kumari (23rd with 658 points).

In the team event, India grabbed the fourth spot by scoring 1983 points. South Korea topped the standings with 2046 points. China finished runners-up while Mexico grabbed the third spot. The top four in the team standings directly advance to the quarterfinals, while those ending between 5th to 12th play the Round of 16 fixtures.

India will face the winner of the contest between France and Netherlands in the quarterfinals. If they clear the quarters, India could be headed for a



semifinal showdown with heavyweights Korea. The Korean women's team has been invincible in the Olympics, winning a ninth straight medal in Tokyo three years ago.

In the individual section, Korea's Lim Sihyeon smashed a world record score of 694 to top the standings, while her compatriot Suhyeon Nam scored 688 points to finish second. China's Yang Xiaolei was third with 673.

Ankita, who hails from Bengal and represents Tata

Academy, was the surprise package on the day from the Indian perspective, even as four-time Olympian Deepika faltered to return her worst ever qualification result at the Games.

Deepika will, for the first time, miss out on the mixed team berth as Ankita topped among the Indians.

Ankita will partner the top Indian finisher in the men's qualification in the mixed team finals.

The men's qualifiers get underway in the afternoon session.

There's a lot of improvement, you will see that on court: Sindhu

PTI ■ PARIS

From spending time in a hypoxic chamber to sparring with a variety of partners to adapt to different styles, Indian badminton ace PV Sindhu has left no stones unturned to be battle-ready for the Paris Games, where she will be chasing an unprecedented third consecutive Olympic medal.

Sindhu's form has been patchy of late but she says the hat-trick of medals is very much possible because the last eight months spent with mentor Prakash Padukone has instilled confidence in her.

No Indian player has won three Olympic medals on the trot and a podium finish will make Sindhu arguably India's greatest athlete.

"I am aiming for a medal, definitely, yes. Whether it's one or two or three, it doesn't matter. I've won two medals and I don't want to take pressure by thinking that, oh, what is the third one," she said after a training session at Porte de la Chapelle Arena here.

"Every time I play Olympics, it's a new Olympics for me. So every time I go out there, I want to get a medal and hopefully, I will do that hat trick soon."



Sindhu had won silver and bronze in the last two Olympics at Rio de Janeiro and Tokyo respectively.

Before coming to Paris, Sindhu trained at Sportcampus Saar in Saarbrücken, Germany where the altitude, the weather, and the conditions are similar to the French capital.

There she created a hypoxic chamber (low oxygen) in her room and slept for a couple of days. Hypoxic chambers help prepare an athlete's body to function at higher-altitude places.

"I couldn't go to the high

altitude training center. I didn't have much time and obviously, there I couldn't have been playing. So I just thought, it would be good for me instead of going somewhere, getting it here and doing some changes and sleeping that way," she explained.

So, if the conditions demand the maximum from an athlete, with such training they feel ready to negotiate the challenge.

Sindhu said she has improved her strokes and is more consistent during the long rallies.

"Being much more confident in strokes," she replied when asked what difference she finds after training with Padukone.

"In women's singles now, there are a lot of long rallies and long matches, being consistent. I am confident in that now," she said.

"With every opponent, it's a different style and, you need to play the right stroke at the right time. And that's what Prakash sir also keeps saying. We've been working on that. And that's almost there. There's a lot of improvement. You will see that on court."

The 29-year-old also shared her training regime in Germany, where she sparred with all kinds of players and sometimes competed against two players at the same time.

"Saarbrücken training was really good. I was there for almost a couple of weeks and I got my own sparring partners as well. I got an opportunity to train with different people. One was like a left-hander and one was an attacking player, a rally player.

"And I had a Nigerian guy, who also was sparring with me. And one was a German singles player who was also playing with me for a couple of days."

Sindhu was an underdog in the 2016 Olympics, while she competed at Tokyo Games as an experienced player.

Talking about her journey, Sindhu said: "I've experienced two different kinds of Olympics where, in one, a lot of people shouted and cheered, but there was no pressure. In the second one, there were a lot of responsibilities and pressure, everybody wanted you to get a medal, but there was no crowd.

"But now it's a mixture of both (in Paris). I'm hoping for the best medal to come out there."

I watch clips of my goals to boost confidence ahead of Olympic debut: Hockey forward Sukhjeet

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian hockey forward Sukhjeet Singh is unfazed by the pressure of playing at the highest level and is watching the clips of his international goals to boost his confidence ahead of his Olympic debut at the Paris Games.

"I made my debut in the Indian team in 2022 and scored a goal in my debut match against Spain in the FIH Pro League. The journey so far has been good and I try to do my best in every match," he told PTI Bhasha in an interview before departing for Paris.

Having scored 22 goals in 70 international matches so far, Sukhjeet is prepared physically and mentally to face the pressure of the Olympics.

He is one of the five debutants -- Sanjay, Abhishek, Rajkumar Pal, and Jarmanpreet Singh -- who have joined the 11 members of Tokyo Olympic bronze medalist team for the Paris Games.

"I am not feeling any pressure



at all. We have played big tournaments, so we know how to handle pressure. We are confident of playing well against big teams in the pool as our preparation has been really good," said the 27-year-old.

The team will begin its campaign on July 27 against New Zealand, followed by matches against Argentina (July 29), Ireland (July 30), Belgium (August 1) and Australia (August 2).

India and Australia have clashed on the hockey field a

total of 43 times since 2013, according to data from the FIH Data Hub.

Australia have emerged victorious 33 times, while India have won 8 games and 7 matches ended in a draw. Similarly, India has 8 wins, 16 losses and 6 draws in 30 matches against Tokyo Olympic champion Belgium in the last 10 years.

Sukhjeet had scored six goals in his debut tournament -- FIH Pro League -- in 2022. After this, he scored three goals in the 2023 World Cup

held in India. He was also part of the Indian team that won the gold medal in the Asian Games in Hangzhou.

"I watch my clips of the matches in which I scored goals before big matches. This increases my confidence and I try to do better in the next match. My previous performance makes me mentally stronger," he said when asked about mental preparations for the Olympics.

"Apart from this, talking to a sports psychologist before the semi-finals or finals in the Asian Games and also during the Asian Champions Trophy has benefited a lot. They tell us how to handle pressure. The tips I get from them are very useful.

"Senior players in our team, Shree Bhai (PR Sreejesh), Manpreet, Harmanpreet have a lot of experience. They tell us about their experiences and motivate us to perform well. If we have any problem, we talk to them."

Sukhjeet was introduced to hockey by his father Ajit Singh when he was six years old. Former Punjab Police

hockey player Ajit could not play for the national team but he wanted his son to don the India jersey.

"My father used to play for Punjab Police and he always had a dream to see his son represent India. It is because of his support that I am at this stage. It will be a proud moment for him and my entire family when I step on the field in Paris," he said.

Asked which players he is eager to meet in the Olympic Games Village, Sukhjeet said that at present the focus is on his preparation.

"I am looking forward to meeting Australian hockey team forward Blake Grovers, against whom I have played many matches. But the focus is on our preparation, not on the glamour of Games Village.

"There is a good coordination between young and experienced players in the team and we are sure that the trend started in Tokyo will continue further in Paris," said Sukhjeet, who loves to listen to Punjabi songs to relax and unwind amid rigorous training.

PTI ■ PARIS

Experienced table tennis player Harmee Desai believes the Indian men's TT team has "a very good chance" of reaching the optimum level of performance at the Paris Olympics and beat any side on its day, having prepared in earnest for the Games.

The Olympics will begin in the French capital on Friday with a grand opening ceremony in the iconic Seine river.

"On a given day, I think we really have a very good chance of beating any team. We have won against top teams in the world in the past and it is possible this time also if we give our best.

"In the Olympics, if all three of us can put on the best show then anything is possible," the 31-year-old said during an interview with Ultimate Table Tennis.

He played an important role in helping India clinch Commonwealth Games gold medals in 2018 and 2022.

Desai is part of the Indian men's team along with Achanta Sharath Kamal,



Manav Thakkar and Sathiyar Gnanasekaran. He will also be competing in the individual events.

Desai's confidence stems from the fact that the Indian men's team had defeated the mighty Japan in the quarter-finals to clinch the bronze medal at the 2018 Asian Games.

Speaking about the rise of Indian table tennis on the world stage, Desai credited the government's various schemes and the launch of Ultimate Table Tennis in 2017

for the development of the sport.

"UTT has helped us get more experience and exposure to play with international players and get guidance from foreign coaches. That was not the case before 2017.

"So, this kind of experience has helped the players get more self-belief and perform well in the international arena," he said.

The Indian table tennis contingent created history earlier this year when both the men's and women's teams qualified for the Olympics for the first time and the preparatory camps, in Bengaluru from June 7-16 and in Saarbrücken, Germany earlier this month, were focused on working out the perfect combinations for the team events.

The Indian men's team will face China in the opening round while the women's side will open their campaign against Romania. The individual events will be played from July 27 to August 4 whereas the team events are scheduled from August 5 to 10.

GAMBHIR'S FIRST HEADACHE: PANT OR SAMSON FOR T20I SERIES

PTI ■ COLOMBO

New India head coach Gautam Gambhir will have the onerous task of choosing between Rishabh Pant and Sanju Samson during the three-match T20I series against Sri Lanka starting on Saturday. While most of the key stars of the T20 World Cup winning side sans the retiring duo of Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli are in the Island nation, the choice between two flamboyant wicketkeeper batters Pant and Samson won't be an easy one. Worse, even with two slots vacant, one can't fit in both the hard-hitting batters. Pant with 171 runs was the third highest run-getter for India in the T20 World Cup in the Americas but Samson, though was part of the team, didn't get into any game. A bilateral series against Sri Lanka, of late, has become a low-stakes affair with the two countries often engaged in inconsequential series, some of which India plays to help other international cricket boards stay afloat. One such series was supposed to be the upcoming one against Sri Lanka but it has assumed greater significance



after Gambhir took over as the coach and Hardik Pandya, a sure-shot candidate for captaincy was surpassed by Suryakumar Yadav. In this backdrop, the presence of Gambhir, a fiercely opinionated former India opener and a successful franchise-level mentor, will certainly have a broader say in the team composition, something that will be built over two years in the run-up to the next T20 World Cup. The choice of a keeper-batter



in T20Is hasn't exactly been a straight forward one for India, especially during the time Pant was out of action due to a horrific car accident in December, 2022. Ishan Kishan was around for some time before he fell out of favour after leaving the tour of South Africa midway. Samson has featured in some games, so has Jitesh Sharma and Dhruv Jurel in the interim. Samson, one of Pant's contemporaries, has so far played 28 T20I games with a

couple of fifties and strike rate of 133 plus. But it will be fair to say that 27 of those matches have come in the period between 2020 to present, having made his debut back in 2015. So in three and half years, 27 matches sporadically isn't a lot of games to build on confidence. While average is a slightly less important aspect in the shortest format, the Kerala star would himself admit that 21.14 doesn't do justice to his immense potential. On the other hand, Pant from his 74 T20I games has three fifties and a strike-rate of a shade below 127. Samson's average is thus pretty similar to the Delhi Capitals skipper, who scored at 22.70 per game. In terms of sheer numbers there is not much to choose between the two. Both are audacious stroke-makers, Pant's falling pull shots are fascinating while Samson on his day can hit the fastest of bowlers over extra cover for maximums. It will also purely depend on what the new team management feels. When it came to Rohit Sharma, he has blind faith in Pant's capabilities and Samson despite being in the squad wasn't even up for discussion during the T20 World Cup. However, in the next tour following the T20 World Cup when most first XI boys were rested, Samson played the last three games in Zimbabwe and was also appointed vice-captain to Shubman Gill. In terms of keeping, Pant is a far better keeper to spinners like Ravi Bishnoi but in T20Is, keeping skills aren't that important as there are very few balls that would pose trouble for the glovesmen. Gambhir was Pant's first first-class captain and has seen him as an 18-year-old even before he played for the India U-19s. But he has also been a big advocate of Samson's T20 prowess and vocal about his inclusion during his days as a TV pundit. It will be a very tough choice and even if Pant is picked for the series, he knows that he would have to not only score quick but also play a few big innings to stack up the numbers and keep Samson at bay.



F1 driver Esteban to join American Haas team from next season

AP ■ KANNAPOLIS (US)

Frenchman Esteban Ocon will drive for Haas from next season as a replacement for Kevin Magnussen, the American Formula 1 team said on Thursday. Details of the deal were not announced, with Haas only saying that the 27-year-old driver committed to a "multi-year contract starting with the 2025 FIA Formula 1 World Championship." Ocon, the only driver to win a race for Alpine since it rebranded from Renault at the end of 2020, has picked up just three points this season and had already announced he was leaving the French-owned team. His Alpine contract is expiring at the end of the season. Ocon made his F1 debut in 2016 with Manor and joined the then-Renault team for 2020. His sole career win came at the Hungarian Grand Prix in 2021 for Alpine after a crash in wet conditions took out much of the field. "I am thrilled to embark on this new chapter in my Formula 1 career," Ocon said. "I'll be joining a very ambitious racing team, whose spirit, work ethic, and undeniable upward trajectory has really impressed me." Haas announced last week that Magnussen would leave Haas at the end of the season when his contract expires. On the eve of the Belgian Grand Prix, team principal Ayao Komatsu said Ocon will bring crucial experience to the team after 19-year-old Oliver Bearman also joined. The British driver will take the seat vacated by German driver Nico Hulkenberg, who is joining Sauber at the end of the year ahead of its rebranding to Audi for 2026.

Djokovic, Nadal could meet in 2nd round at Paris Olympics, Swiatek faces Begu first

AP ■ PARIS

Top-seeded Novak Djokovic could meet his longtime rival Rafael Nadal in the second round of the Paris Olympic tennis tournament. Djokovic was drawn Thursday against Australian Matthew Ebden and Nadal faces Hungary's Marton Fucsovics, with the winners of those matches meeting in Round 2. The 38-year-old Nadal won a record 14 of his 22 major trophies at the French Open. He won gold in singles at Beijing in 2008, and in doubles with Marc López at Rio de Janeiro in 2016. "Roland Garros as everybody knows is the most special place in tennis for me. I am enjoying the fact I am back for the Olympics," Nadal said on stage after the draw. "I am just trying to enjoy every single moment." French Open champion Carlos Alcaraz takes on Lebanese player Hady Habib. Top-ranked Iga Swiatek of Poland faces Irina-Camelia Begu of Romania in the opening round of the women's draw with second-seeded American Coco Gauff taking on Australian Ajla Tomljanovic. Gauff is the reigning US Open champion and is making her Olympic debut. She is a flag bearer for the US team at Friday's opening ceremony along with basketball star LeBron James.



She will be the first tennis athlete to carry the US flag. Djokovic and Swiatek have not won Olympic gold. Djokovic owns 24 Grand Slam trophies, more than anyone else in tennis apart from Margaret Court, but his only Olympic medal was a bronze in Beijing in 2008. Swiatek has won the French Open four of the past five years on the same clay courts at Roland Garros. Four-time major winner Naomi Osaka of Japan takes on three-time major champion Angelique Kerber of Germany. Men's and women's first-round play begins Saturday, and the top-ranked man won't be playing. Jannik Sinner pulled out on Wednesday because of tonsillitis. The 22-year-old from Italy posted on X that he took medical advice to sit out the Summer Games. Tokyo Games champion Alexander Zverev of Germany plays Australian Alex de Minaur.

WOMEN'S ASIA CUP SEMI-FINAL India start firm favourites against Bangladesh

PTI ■ DAMBULLA

Shafali Verma will be aiming to come out all guns blazing while Smriti Mandhana will be more than motivated to get a big one as India start overwhelming favourites against Bangladesh in the semi-final of the women's Asia Cup here on Friday. Shafali, with 158 runs, has been the second highest run-scorer in the tournament so far and against Nigar Sultana's team, which has a host of slow bowlers, she will have to give India a good start. The 'Women In Blue' pummeled the opposition in all three games -- winning by seven wickets against Pakistan, 78 runs against UAE and by an 82-run margin against Nepal.



However, skipper Harmanpreet Kaur knows that in Asia Cup, it is only the semi-final and final matter the most and they would not miss the fact that Bangladesh on select days can be a dangerous side. The start will be very important for India and Shafali will want her senior opening partner Mandhana to also fire in unison. The elegant left-hander was in great nick during her 45 against Pakistan, which could have been a bigger one in terms of volume. With UAE and Nepal being two of the three opponents during the group league stage, the Indian team would certainly face a sterner test against a bunch of decent slow bowlers in the Bangladesh

ranks. Slow left-arm orthodox Nahida Akhter and young leg-spinner Rabeya Khan have both claimed five wickets apiece. While Nahida with a parsimonious economy rate of 3.25 would like to build the pressure on an experienced batting line-up while leg-break bowler Rabeya is likely to push for wickets. The medium pace department comprises veteran Jahanara Alam along with Ritu Moni, who also has chipped in with three wickets. However, with Harmanpreet, Richa Ghosh and Jemimah Rodrigues coming in the middle-order and all-rounders Deepti Sharma and Puja Vastrakar to complement them, India have a lot of quality in their ranks. With pitches at the Dambulla Stadium slowing down considerably during the second half, India would like to defend a total on the big day. The semi-final will, however, be an afternoon game. Off-spinner Deepti has been very consistent with the ball taking eight wickets in three games so far. The economy rate of 4.66 has been equally impressive compared to Radha Yadav, who has been on the slightly expensive side. The Indian new ball duo of Renuka Singh Thakur and Vastrakar have been on target during the games. For Bangladesh, they haven't had too many impactful batters and if India can post anything in the range of 140-plus, it could well be enough for a place in the final.

Former AICF chief Sanjay Kapoor elected FIDE India zone president

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former All India Chess Federation (AICF) chief Sanjay Kapoor has been unanimously elected the president of FIDE India Zone, the sport's apex body in the country said on Thursday. The announcement was made during the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of AICF in Ahmedabad. Kapoor has been elected as the zone president for four years, and FIDE president Arkady Dvorkovich congratulated the Indian administrator. Kapoor's new role marks a pivotal moment for chess governance in India, entrusting him with the responsibility of overseeing the game's growth and development across the globe. Speaking on his appointment, Kapoor said, "It is an immense honour to be elected as the FIDE India Zone President. I am committed to the growth of chess in every corner of our country and ensuring that we produce Grandmasters from each and every state." "My experience with the 44th Chess Olympiad has shown me the incredible potential we have, and I am excited to work towards a bright future for chess in India and internationally," he added. Kapoor has been at the forefront of successfully staging the 44th edition of the Chess Olympiad in India. He was the AICF president when India hosted the event. Meanwhile, On International Chess Day (July 20) last week, FIDE also launched its Guinness World Record attempt for the most games played online and over-the-board in 24 hours.

Indian athletes' confidence has reached new high: Gagan

PTI ■ PARIS

Olympic medalist shooter Gagan Narang said Indian athletes' mindset has changed over the years and their confidence has touched unprecedented levels, encouraging them to set their sights on a gold medal. The London Games bronze medalist, who is serving as India's Chef-de-Mission at the Paris Olympics, felt the Indian athletes are now not intimidated by their counterparts from other countries. "There is a huge change in the motivation and the level of thinking our athletes have today. We used to feel scared, under-confident because other countries were better. But slowly that's changed, the mindset (has) changed," Narang told reporters here. "People started watching sports, playing it, then we had great performances. The confidence is at a new high. Today's athletes don't go just to participate, they go to perform." "Someone in the top 8 or 5 wants to win a medal today and not just any medal but a gold. That's the difference in thinking of the athletes today. "They don't think anyone is above them. They rate competitors at par and that's a very positive sign for Indian sport," Narang added. The 41-year-old said there has been an "unprecedented coordination" between the Sports Ministry, Indian Olympic Association (IOA) and the national federations. "The support we have got from the government (this time) we never got before. The support has increased in the past few years, TOPS' players have increased, they have got all the facilities they wanted."

Paris aims to reset Olympics with audacious games and wow opening

AP ■ PARIS

Paris has long been a city of dreamers: Just look at the Eiffel Tower, for decades the world's loftiest structure. Audacity also underpins the French capital's plans for its first Olympic Games in a century, which open Friday with an opening ceremony for the ages. The most sprawling and elaborate Olympic opening ever — a gala spectacular Friday evening on the River Seine that even French President Emmanuel Macron says initially felt like "a crazy and not very serious idea" — kicks off 16 days of competition that promise to be ground-breaking, with nearly every corner of the city hosting some aspect of competition. After two toned-down, pandemic-hampered Olympics, expect a bold celebration. The heady marriage of sports and



France's world-renowned capital of fashion, gastronomy and culture could also help secure the Olympics' longer-term future. Olympic organizers were struggling to find suitable host cities for their flagship Summer Games when they settled on Paris in 2017, enticed by its promise of innovations and the potential for the city of romance to rekindle love for the Olympics, especially with younger audiences that have so many other entertainment options. But Paris' challenges are huge, too. Past and present sorrows hang over the Games. The city that has been repeatedly struck by deadly extremist attacks has to safeguard 10,500 athletes and millions of visitors. The international context of wars in Ukraine and Gaza add layers of complication for the gargantuan security effort. French elite special forces are

Paris also hopes to reassure climate-conscious Generations Z and beyond by staging Games that are less polluting, more sustainable and more socially virtuous than their predecessors. Many of the sports venues are temporary, because Paris didn't want to repeat the mistake of previous Olympic host cities that built new arenas and then had no use for them. With iconic Paris monuments as backdrops — beach volleyball in the Eiffel Tower's shadow — and breakdancing added to a growing list of Olympic sports that target young audiences, expect plenty of viral moments on Instagram, TikTok and elsewhere. Crowds will be back for the first time since the coronavirus pandemic forced Tokyo to push back its Games to 2021 and keep spectators away, and the Beijing Winter Games in 2022, when China was locked down. Prize-winning French theater director Thomas Jolly is turning central Paris into an open-air stage for the opening ceremony that will run through sunset and showcase France, its people and their history. The 330-meter-tall (1,083-foot-tall) Eiffel Tower will surely feature prominently. Hundreds of thousands of people, including 320,000 paying and invited ticket-holders, are expected to line

the Seine's banks as athletes are paraded along the river on boats. During the extravaganza, a no-fly zone extending for 150 kilometers (93 miles) around the capital will close Paris' skies, policed by fighter jets, airspace-monitoring AWACS surveillance flights, surveillance drones, helicopters that can carry sharpshooters and drone-disabling equipment. Helping Parisians move past the attacks of 2015. Showcasing and celebrating Paris could be joyously cathartic for the city that was plunged into mourning by extremist attacks in 2015. Guesses about the identity of the person or people who might get the honor of lighting the Olympic cauldron include soccer icon Zinedine Zidane and other French sporting heroes, but also survivors of Islamic State-group gunmen and suicide bombers who killed 130 people on Nov. 13, 2015. Paris is also taking gambles in hopes of leaving an indelible impression on the Olympics' global audience of billions. The decision not to stage the opening ceremony in the traditional setting of France's biggest stadium — the Stade de France that was among the 2015 attackers' targets and is now the venue for Olympic track and field and rugby sevens — and to host skateboarding, archery and other sports in temporary arenas in the heart of Paris have made safeguarding the Games more complex. Rights campaigners and Games critics worry about the broad scope and scale of Olympic security, including the use of AI-equipped surveillance technology. Paris' reach stretches to the Pacific. The furthest venue is on the other side of the world in the French Pacific territory of Tahiti, where Olympic surfers will compete on famously giant waves that first form in storm belts off Antarctica. Up to 45,000 police and gendarmes, plus 10,000 soldiers, are safeguarding Paris and its suburbs that together are hosting most of the 32 sports that will crown Olympic champions in 329 medal events. The gold, silver and bronze medals they'll hand out are inlaid with a hexagonal, polished chunk of iron taken from the Eiffel Tower. The Seine's banks and riverside roads and more than a dozen of its bridges were fenced off nine days ahead of the opening ceremony, creating a no-go zone for people who haven't applied in advance for passes and making it tough for Parisians and visitors to get around and see the sights in the city of 2 million. Owners of restaurants and other businesses inside the security fence are howling about fewer customers.