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REBELS IN PAKISTAN

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HEZBOLLAH FIRES OVER 200
ROCKETS INTO ISRAEL

MONEY 10
SENSEX, NIFTY HIT NEW
LIFETIME HIGHS

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12 SPORTS**



CHAMPION OF CHAMPIONS COME HOME

PNS ■ NEW DELHI/MUMBAI

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted the T20 World Cup-winning Indian cricket team for breakfast here on Thursday during which, he said, there were "memorable" conversations on the side's experiences through the marquee event co-hosted by USA and the West Indies, the team went to Mumbai for victory parade.

The Rohit Sharma-led squad, that won the title after defeating South Africa by seven runs in the final last week, arrived in Delhi early morning after being stranded in Bridgetown, Barbados for five days due to a category 4 hurricane.

The victory parade of the T20 World Cup winning Indian team commenced after a two-hour delay as complete crowd chaos along the stretch of South Mumbai brought the traffic to a halt after Rohit and his men touched down little after 5 pm here on Thursday.

As per the itinerary shared by the officials here, the two-hour open bus parade started from the National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA) in Nariman Point till the Wankhede Stadium started little after 7:30 pm in the evening as the Maximum City's stretch along the Marine Drive was drowned in an 'Ocean of Humanity'.

The Wankhede Stadium here was thrown open to fans, who filled up the stands within minutes to celebrate the Indian



Players of the T20 World Cup-winning Indian cricket team with the championship trophy acknowledge fans during their open bus victory parade, in Mumbai, on Thursday PTI

cricket team's title triumph last Saturday.

After arriving in the city, Rohit's team and its support staff made their way to the southern tip of the city which houses the

Wankhede Stadium. But not before their aircraft — a Vistara flight — got the famous 'Water Salute' after arriving here at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport's

Terminal 2. The players walked out of the airport with a sea of fans and media waiting for them for last several hours.

Meanwhile, here at the iconic

Wankhede Stadium which witnessed India's last ODI World Cup triumph in 2011, the stands got filled to the brim by passionate fans as thousand others waited outside the gates

which were closed around 5:00 pm. As the gates closed amid intermittent rain, extreme humidity and chaos of several thousand people arriving in the vicinity, those fortunate ones who were able to find their places inside Wankhede remained fixated to their seats even if there was scarcity of food and water.

As the fans ran in all directions to take their places in the stands amid a heavy burst of rain, several pairs of footwear got left behind in the rush while debris of all kind was also thrown around along the way.

While the wait extended, rain kept pelting down with breaks but it could not force the fans off their seats inside the stadium. The DJ kept entertaining with songs of all genres and at one instance it felt like Wankhede was hosting a rain-dance party with the stadium's speakers blurring out Vengaboys' party hit 'To Brazil' and country's unofficial sports anthem 'Chak de India'. Soon after, Wankhede came alive with its customary chants of 'Sachin... Sachin' followed by 'Mumbaicha Raja, Rohit Sharma' and 'India... India'.

Earlier in the day after meeting the world champions, Modi posted on 'X' along with pictures of him with the team.

"An excellent meeting with our Champions! Hosted the World Cup winning team at 7, LKM and had a memorable conversation on their experiences through the tournament," wrote Modi.



India script cricket history in England

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

While the Indian Men's Cricket team basked in their well-deserved T20 World Cup glory in Barbados, the cricketers of the Indian Deaf Cricket Team were quietly achieving a remarkable success of their own in England. Last week, they defeated host England by six wickets in a thrilling seventh and final T20 to claim the series 5-2 in Leicester.

Their triumph not only highlights inclusivity in sports but also serves as an inspiration, showcasing that with determination and perseverance, no barrier is insurmountable, said experts and differently-abled individuals as they expressed immense happiness and pride over this achievement.

Sumit Jain, president of the Indian Deaf Cricket Association (IDCA), said, "The victory in this bilateral series against England is not just a win on the field but a testament to the perseverance and skill of our hearing-impaired players."

BJP vs Cong over Rahul's 'incorrect' remarks in LS



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A day after the Centre on Thursday said any MP trying to mislead Parliament will not get away easily and the "rules will get them", a war of words between the ruling BJP and the Opposition Congress escalated. This comes after the Congress wrote to Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, alleging that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP MP Anurag Thakur made "factually incorrect, inaccurate and misleading statements" in the Lok Sabha and sought appropriate action in the matter.

The BJP has already submitted a notice against Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi in the Lok Sabha over alleged inaccuracies in his speech. Congress Lok Sabha MP Manickam Tagore has written to Speaker Birla, requesting that provisions of direction 115(1) be invoked over the statements made by Modi and Thakur.

"Nobody can expect to escape. There is no special privilege for anyone just because he comes from a privileged family. If anybody wants to misuse the position in the House to mislead the House, he will not easily get away. Rule will get them," Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju said. Rijiju was in fact referring to a notice submitted in the Lok Sabha by BJP member Bansuri Swaraj urging the Speaker to take cognisance of her notice against certain inaccuracies in Rahul's speech on the Motion of Thanks on the President's address.

"When the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha kept on lying on many things, including facts and figures, a notice was put to the Speaker and we have requested the Speaker to take appropriate action. We are waiting for the action," Rijiju said in response to questions on the issue.

The Minister said rules apply equally to everyone as no

member is above the Chair in the House.

In his letter to Speaker, Tagore flagged that Prime Minister Modi in his reply to the Motion of Thanks to the President's address had said the Congress made a "false promise" of ₹8,500 per month to women, when the party's promise was conditional to victory and Government formation.

He also challenged Modi's claim that the Congress vote share has gone down in 16 States in which it had contested alone. "This is factually incorrect. The Congress vote share increased in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Karnataka, Telangana etc.," Tagore was quoted as saying in the letter.

He also termed as "grossly misleading" Modi's remarks that "no bullet proof jackets [were provided] for the Army during the Congress' time." "There was a shortage of jackets, not that jackets were not there. Even police had bullet proof jackets like in Mumbai attacks," Tagore said.

He also challenged the Prime Minister over the claim that the Congress didn't give fighter jets to the Army. "We had Jaguar, Mig 29, SU-30, Mirage 2000," the letter read. Tagore also pointed out alleged inaccuracies in Thakur's July 1 speech in the Lok Sabha.

The Congress MP said Thakur claimed that the Army was not given arms and fighter jets when the party ruled the country.

CBI files first FIR under new laws in Capital

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The CBI has registered its first FIR under newly enforced Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) against two Delhi Police officers for allegedly demanding ₹10 lakh bribe to help the release of a person lodged in Tihar Jail. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) has replaced the British era Indian Penal Code (IPC). The FIR registered on Wednesday evening booking Head Constables Ravindra Dhaka and Parveen Saini both posted in Narcotics Cell, Maurice Nagar, under BNA 61(2) related to alleged criminal conspiracy and provisions of bribery under the Prevention of Corruption Act.

Naidu bats for raise in Andhra's Central aid

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Ahead of the full annual Budget of third tenure of BJP-led NDA Government at the Centre, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the national Capital on Thursday and described their discussions on key development issues concerning the State as "constructive". Naidu's assertion has come a week after another significant ally of the NDA, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar-led JD(U) had pressed for special package and grants for Bihar during the meeting of party's national executive. Sources said during the



Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu meets Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi on Thursday PTI

meeting at the PMO, Naidu advocated for increased assistance to Andhra Pradesh in lieu of special category status. The Chief of Telugu Desam Party (TDP), which is

an important ally in the BJP-led NDA Government, presented several crucial proposals for the State's development and sought the Union Government support, sources said.

Following the meeting, he expressed confidence in Andhra Pradesh's potential to "re-emerge as a powerhouse among States" under Modi's leadership. "Today, I had a constructive meeting with the Prime Minister to address important matters concerning the welfare and development of Andhra Pradesh. I am confident that under his leadership, our State will re-emerge as a powerhouse among States," Naidu took to social media to share the details.

Hathras stampede site reeks of death, destruction

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ HATHRAS

A teddy bear, a few lunch boxes, slippers and handbags lying on the ground at the spot where the Hathras stampede tragedy unfolded on Tuesday continue to tell of the horrors of the day when devotion to a self-styled godman Narayan Saakar Hari alias 'Bhole Baba' turned into a ghastly affair as more than 120 devotees lost their lives. However, locals, who were witness to the mayhem, said the number of the dead is not less than 400.

In the sobbing town of Hathras many are seen grieving for their loved ones who lost their lives in one of the worst stampedes in the country, cursing the cop-turned-godman who claims to heal and even bring the



Family members sitting at a house after the Hathras stampede. Over 120 people were killed and several injured in the stampede, according to officials Ranjan Dimri/Pioneer

dead back to life.

"Itne hi bade bhagwan the to wapis kyo nahi aaye apne bhakto ke liye? (If he is such a big God why didn't he come back for his devotee?)," said a man identified Ramesh Kashyap who lost his mother in the tragic incident.

Meanwhile, the Uttar Pradesh police on Thursday arrested six 'sevadars' including two women in connection with the Hathras stampede. However, the preacher has not been

Victims rue medical neglect

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ HATHRAS

Relatives of those injured in the tragic stampede incident at a 'satsang sabha' led by self-styled godman Narayan Saakar Hari, also known as 'Bhole Baba', have voiced their grievances at the Sikandrarao district hospital in Hathras. They complained of inadequate medical treatment for the injured, with many patients being discharged prematurely despite still experiencing significant pain.

mentioned as accused in the FIR lodged at the local Sikandra Rao police station. The only accused named in the FIR is at large. The preacher 'Bhole Baba' will be questioned if required during investigation, a senior officer said.

"A reward of ₹one lakh will be announced soon and non-bailable warrant (NBW) will also be issued against the key accused Devprakash Madhukar," Inspector General of Police (Aligarh Range) Shalabh Mathur said. In the village of Sokhana, four people lost their lives including three from a single family. Binod, a 40-year-old labourer, was in Bareilly in search of a job when he heard the news of his mother's death in the stampede.

Jaishankar for isolating countries harbouring terrorists

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/ASTANA

With tension persisting at the border for the last five years, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar told his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi on Thursday that the Line of Actual Control (LAC) must be "respected." He also asked the international community to "isolate and expose" those countries that harbour terrorists, provide safe havens and condone



terrorism, saying if left unchecked, terrorism can become a major threat to regional and global peace, in a veiled jibe at China and Pakistan. Delivering Prime Minister Narendra Modi's remarks at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Council of Heads of State Summit in the Kazakhstan capital Astana, Jaishankar, who was physically present at the meeting, recalled that one of the original goals of the SCO is to combat terrorism.

"Many of us have had our experiences, often originating beyond our borders. Let us be clear that if left unchecked, it can become a major threat to regional and global peace. Terrorism in any form or manifestation cannot be justified or condoned," he told the summit, which was attended by Chinese President Xi Jinping, Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Russian President Vladimir Putin among others.

Hemant Soren back in saddle

PNS ■ RANCHI/NEW DELHI

Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) executive president Hemant Soren on Thursday took oath as the 13th Chief Minister of Jharkhand, a day after Champai Soren stepped down from the post months ahead of the Assembly election. He was administered the oath of office and secrecy by



Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) leader Hemant Soren takes the oath of office and secrecy as the 13th Chief Minister of Jharkhand during the swearing-in Ceremony at the Raj Bhavan, in Ranchi PTI

Governor C P Radhakrishnan at the Raj Bhavan here. Hemant's father and JMM supreme Shibu Soren, his mother Rupri Soren, wife Kalpana Soren and senior leaders of the JMM-led alliance were present at the swearing-in ceremony. Chamapi Soren, who resigned as the Chief Minister on Wednesday, was also present on the occasion.

Amritpal parole granted with 10 conditions; No Photo or Videography, Can meet family

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Even as the jailed radical Sikh preacher Amritpal Singh, who recently won the Khadoor Sahib Lok Sabha seat, has been granted parole to take his oath as a Member of Parliament on Friday, it comes with a set of 10 stringent conditions. Amritsar, who is currently lodged at Assam's Dibrugarh jail under the stringent National Security Act (NSA), will be allowed to meet his family, but his movements will be strictly confined to the territorial jurisdiction of New Delhi — ensuring he remains under tight surveillance throughout his temporary release.

The conditions of his parole, laid down by Amritsar District Magistrate, prohibit Amritpal and his family and relatives from making any public statements or interacting with the media in any form. The measure is designed to prevent any potential misuse of his temporary release for political or propaganda purposes.

The parole, starting from July 5, comes with stringent conditions like security escort, no home visits and confining to Delhi, allowed to meet relatives but no videography, no issuance of public statement, no media interaction, among others

— ensuring that his activities remain under strict surveillance during the four-day period.

Thirty-one-year-old Amritpal Singh, currently detained in Dibrugarh jail under NSA, will be brought to Delhi specifically for the oath-taking ceremony.

As per the conditions, from the date and time of his temporary release from Dibrugarh jail to his return, Amritpal will be accompanied by a number of police personnel deemed appropriate by Amritsar Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) to ensure continuous custody and surveillance.

While Amritpal is present within the precincts of the Parliament, he will be accompanied by as many police or security personnel as permitted by the Secretary General, Lok Sabha. During the period of temporary release, Amritpal will not enter any area other than New Delhi, and his movements are strictly confined to the capital.

The upto four-day parole period, starting from July 5, includes the time required for Amritpal's travel from the central jail in Dibrugarh to New Delhi and back. When not required in the Parliament, Amritpal will be housed at a location in New Delhi deemed

appropriate by the Amritsar (Rural) SSP considering security needs.

According to the conditions, Amritpal is allowed to meet his relatives during his stay in New Delhi, as defined under Section 2 (c) of the Punjab Detenuue (Condition of Detention) Order, 1981. Amritpal must refrain from making any public statements or engaging in activities that could be deemed harmful to national security.

Neither Amritpal nor his relatives are allowed to videograph any statement or circulate any such content electronically. The expenses for Amritpal's travel, local transportation, and accommodation in Delhi will be covered by the departmental budget available to the Director General of Police (DGP), Punjab.

Amritsar (Rural) SSP will coordinate with the Secretary General, Lok Sabha, to ensure smooth compliance with these conditions during Singh's temporary release.

Details of His Travel Undisclosed

The exact details of Amritpal's transportation to Delhi have been kept confidential for security reasons. It remains undisclosed whether he will travel by air, rail, or

road. The Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC) Gursimranjeet Kaur said that Amritpal would only be in Delhi for the oath-taking ceremony, and the logistics of his travel would be determined by the police administration.

Family Demand Punjab Visit to Thank Voters

Following the announcement of his parole, Amritpal's parents — Balwinder Kaur and Tarsem Singh — have requested that he be allowed to visit Punjab to thank his constituents in Khadoor Sahib and address their concerns. However, given the stringent parole conditions, this request appears unlikely to be granted.

Oath-Taking Today

Amritpal's oath-taking ceremony is scheduled for July 5. Amritpal will take his oath in the Speaker's room in the Parliament. Alongside him, Kashmiri leader Sheikh Abdul Rashid, who has been jailed since 2017 in connection with a Jammu and Kashmir terror funding case, will also take his oath. Both individuals have received the necessary permissions from the National Investigation Agency (NIA) and other government authorities.

Political storm on compensation to Punjab's Agniveer Ajay Kumar

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

A political storm has erupted across the country over the compensation awarded to the family of Punjab's Agniveer, Ajay Kumar, who sacrificed his life in Rajouri earlier this year. Amid conflicting claims, the controversy intensified after the family initially asserted receiving no assistance from the Central Government but later on Thursday acknowledged receiving Rs 98 lakhs, including Rs 50 lakhs from an insurance policy.

The issue gained traction when Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, in his inaugural address as Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, alleged that the Centre had not provided the promised compensation to Ajay Kumar's family, raising concerns over the Agnipath scheme.

In response, Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh refuted these allegations on the parliamentary floor, stating that Rs 98.39 lakhs had indeed been disbursed to the family — a claim dismissed as "lie" by Rahul Gandhi, who circulated a video purportedly showing Ajay Kumar's father denying any financial assistance.

Clarifying the situation, the Indian Army's Additional Directorate General of Public Information (ADGPI) released a statement affirming that Rs 98.39 lakhs had been paid to the family. "Ex-Gratia and other benefits amounting to approximately Rs 67 lakhs, as applicable according to the provisions of the Agniveer Scheme, will be paid on Final Account Settlement shortly post Police verification. The total amount will be Rs 1.65 crore approximately," the Army said in a statement.

Amidst the blame-game over compensation and the growing controversy, Ajay Kumar's family on Thursday sought the scrapping of the Agnipath scheme, besides demanding pension, which jawans inducted in the forces through the normal channel get, and a canteen card.

At the same time, the family maintained that no amount of compensation can replace Ajay Kumar.

Till a day before, Agniveer's family has been claiming that they did not get compensation from the Army. However, on Thursday, Ajay Kumar's father Chanatjit Singh said that they have received Rs 98 lakh, but only Rs 48 lakh came from the Indian Army, and remaining Rs 50 lakh was an insurance amount — contradicting the Army's claims of paying Rs 98.39 lakh.

"First, we got Rs 50 lakh insurance money from the ICICI bank shortly after the incident. Then we got Rs 48 lakh from the Army on June 10. We haven't received the full amount yet. The Army has told us that they will give us Rs 60 lakh more. We haven't received that money yet though. Don't know when we will get it," he said.

The father said that he had received a compensation of Rs one crore from the Punjab Government, "but nothing from the Central Government as compensation".

"We want the Agniveer scheme to be scrapped and we should get pension and canteen card," said the father.

Echoing his sentiments, Ajay Kumar's sister questioned the adequacy of the compensation, emphasizing the challenges faced by the family in sustaining themselves without him. She urged a reevaluation of the Agniveer scheme, citing its limitations in providing essential benefits to families of short-term service personnel in the armed forces.

Introduced in 2022, the Agnipath scheme aimed to enlist individuals for short-term military service, targeting age profile adjustments across the armed forces. Known as Agniveers, these personnel and their families do not currently qualify for conventional benefits such as pension in case of service-related fatalities.

Rahul Gandhi, in the run up to the June 1 Lok Sabha elections in Punjab, had visited the family on May 29. The village falls under Ludhiana district's Payal assembly constituency, once represented by former Chief Minister late Beant Singh, who was the grandfather of Minister of State for Railways Ravneet Singh Bittu.

Cong could field candidate in RS bypoll in Haryana, says Hooda

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Politics in Haryana could take an interesting turn as Congress leader Bhupinder Singh Hooda on Thursday indicated that the party may think of fielding its candidate in the bypoll to a Rajya Sabha seat in the state if JJP leader Dushyant Chautala assures that he has all 10 MLAs of his party on his side.

If the Congress announces its candidate for the Rajya Sabha bypoll, it will throw a big challenge for the BJP in the state as the ruling party has 41 MLAs in the 90-member House having its effective strength of 87. The BJP also enjoys support of the lone legislator of the Haryana Lokhit Party and Independent member Nayan Pal Rawat.

The Rajya Sabha bypoll was necessitated after Congress leader Deepender Hooda was elected to the Lok Sabha from Rohtak. The Election Commission is yet to announce the date for the bypoll.

"The Congress has 29 MLAs and three independents support us. We need 13-14 more. But first Dushyant should present his 10 MLAs, then we will think," Bhupinder Hooda told a programme "Meet the Press" at the Press Club of Chandigarh here.

The former chief minister was replying to a query about JJP leader Dushyant Chautala's

recent offer of support in case the Congress fields its candidate for the Rajya Sabha seat. Hooda's remarks came amid reports that a couple of JJP MLAs have expressed their support to the BJP recently.

To another question, Hooda reiterated that the Congress will fight the Assembly polls on its own and said the alliance with the AAP was for Lok Sabha elections. On the BJP's charge that he only wants to promote his son, Hooda said it is about people's acceptability. With the Assembly polls due later this year, Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini and other BJP leaders have targeted Hooda, saying he was working to promote his son. They have also claimed that this time people will reject the "babu-beta" (Hooda and his MP son Deepender) and the Congress in the polls. When asked to respond to the nepotism charge by BJP leaders, Hooda said, "There is no point in making baseless allegations".

"If I say 'guru-chele' ki sarkar (an apparent reference to former chief minister Manohar Lal and his protegee Saini), does that have any meaning," he said. "Ultimately, it is about people's acceptability. No one can be thrust in the name of family. Opportunity may be there, but rest is up to people," said Hooda, whose son Deepender Hooda recently

won the Rohtak Lok Sabha seat for the fourth time.

When asked if the upcoming assembly polls will be his last election, the 76-year-old veteran leader quipped in a lighter vein, "Very good question, but I won't answer". Asked if the Congress will go into the polls with a CM's face, Hooda said the party will fight collectively.

"Chief minister will be decided by MLAs, this has been the (party) tradition, there is nothing new in this," he said. Alleging that the BJP government in Haryana has been hit by many scams during the past decade, Hooda said the ruling dispensation had set up various SITs too, but their reports were not made public.

"We will not only take out these reports and in those cases where action needs to be taken we will take action when the Congress comes to power," he said. Referring to Congress wrestling the five Lok Sabha seats from BJP in Haryana, Hooda said, "the results of Lok Sabha elections is a clear indication that people have given preference for Congress. People have made up their mind to form a Congress government when assembly polls are held."

About infighting in Congress Haryana unit, Hooda said, "Our party is a democratic party. There can be differences of opinion...but what the party decides, that is acceptable to all."

Punjab Sees 15% Surge in DSR adoption

Chandigarh: Punjab's ongoing Kharif sowing season has reached its midpoint, witnessing a significant 15 percent increase in the adoption of the water-conserving Direct Seeding of Rice (DSR) technique. This year, over two lakh acres have been sown using DSR, compared to 1.72 lakh acres during the entire Kharif season the previous year. Crediting the increase to the persistent efforts by the Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, Punjab Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Minister Gurmeet Singh Khudian on Thursday hailed this as a great success and expressed optimism about achieving the target of five lakh acres under DSR this season, as set by the Agriculture Department.

Punjab to set up Women's Empowerment Hubs in every District

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Punjab Government has launched 'District Hubs' for women's empowerment in every district. Announced by the Minister of Social Security, Women and Child Development Dr Baljit Kaur on Thursday, these hubs aim to boost women's skills, job opportunities, digital literacy and economic growth.

Dr Baljit emphasized that the Government's commitment to women's empowerment, security, welfare, and health through various programs. The District Hubs will give rural women access to essential resources for skill development, employment, digital literacy, economic empowerment, and better health and nutrition.

"The District Hubs will play a crucial role in empowering rural women and helping them take full advantage of government schemes," said Dr Kaur.

The Minister added that to support this initiative, a 100-day awareness campaign started on June 21. This campaign will inform people about different schemes and laws designed to protect and empower women and children, encouraging widespread participation.

She explained key schemes highlighted in the campaign include the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, which

offers financial assistance to lactating mothers (Rs 5000 for the first child and Rs 6000 for the second child if it's a girl), the Palna Scheme, which sets up crèches for the children of working women to help mothers work without worry, the Sakhi One Stop Center Scheme, providing free services to women victims of violence and promoting the Women Helpline 181 and the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao initiative, which will see intensified promotional efforts in the coming week.

The campaign will run until October 4, 2024, ensuring that the government's efforts for women's empowerment are widely recognized and fully utilized.

Govt committed to welfare of all communities: Haryana CM

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini on Thursday said that following the mantra of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Prayas, and Sabka Vishwas," the state government is dedicated to the welfare of every section of society. The government is committed to ensuring equal development across all areas, involving all 36 communities, and will continue to work for their welfare in the future, he added.

The Chief Minister made these remarks while interacting with people at his residence in Chandigarh. Former Minister Kiran Chaudhary and former MP Shruti Chaudhary were also present on this occasion.

Saini said that women also play a very crucial role in the country's development. Women contribute significantly not only to building a civilized family but also to creating a civilized society. The Prime Minister Narendra Modi has honored women by granting them 33 percent representation in Parliament. He also acknowledged the contributions of former Chief Minister Late Chaudhary Bansi Lal, who provided a new direction for Haryana's development. Bansi Lal was dedicated to the devel-



opment of every individual, tirelessly working to ensure that every village received electricity, water, and roads. Under his leadership, Haryana became a leader in rural infrastructure development, he added.

The Chief Minister accused the Congress Party of misleading people by spreading false propaganda about changing the Constitution. The Constitution is not merely a book but a systematic process for governing the country. PM Modi has run the country while adhering to the Constitution over the past 10 years. The Chief Minister also demanded that the Congress apologize to the people of the country for insulting the Constitution.

'People of Vimukta and Nomadic Castes to get housing facility under

Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana'

Addressing representatives of the Banjara community, Saini said that people of Vimukta and nomadic castes will receive housing facilities under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban and Rural). For this, all families must register themselves on the portal to fulfill their dream of having a roof over their heads.

On the occasion, the Chief Minister paid floral tributes to Baba Lakkhishah Banjara on his birth anniversary. He also declared that Vimukta Diwas will be officially celebrated on August 31.

Saini said that the list of Vimukta, Ghumantu, and Tapriwas (De-notified) castes includes 20 Scheduled Castes and 13 Backward Classes. He said that to ensure the welfare

of these castes and integrate them into the mainstream, the state government has constituted a separate board. In the future, members of this board will be nominated from these communities. The Chief Minister also assured the constitution of the Denotified Tribes Development Corporation.

In response to the representatives' demand for reservation benefits equal to those of Scheduled Tribes, the Chief Minister assured them that a letter would be written to the Central Government regarding this issue. He said that the government is working for the extremely backward castes, implementing numerous welfare schemes with the spirit of Antyodaya. He also highlighted the initiatives by the central and state governments to provide health facilities to citizens, urging them to take advantage of the Ayushman Bharat and Chirayu Haryana Yojana.

The Chief Minister further said that for the convenience of the people, the government has instructed all Deputy Commissioners to listen to and resolve public issues daily from 9 to 11 am. If there are income or other errors in the Parivar Pehchan Patra, people can write them on plain paper and submit the same to the Deputy Commissioner.

'Be on your toes to tackle flood-related contingency', Punjab CS tells DCs

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Punjab Chief Secretary Anurag Verma on Thursday directed all the Deputy Commissioners to be on their toes during the monsoon season so that the public does not face any inconvenience.

Verma, while holding a video conference meeting, directed all the Deputy Commissioners to again visit the vulnerable spots in their districts and ensure that the flood protection works have been satisfactorily completed there.

He directed the Deputy Commissioners to remain in touch with the local population in the villages near the vulnerable points during the entire monsoon season.

At the same time, the Chief Secretary directed the Deputy Commissioners to check that the cleaning of the sewerage system had been done in the cities. Besides, direction were also issued to ensure genset along with de-watering pumps.

Deputy Commissioners were also directed to make arrangements of generators at water pumping stations. They were also directed to review the electricity arrangements with the PSPCL authorities so

that there is minimum disruption of electricity during rains.

Verma stated that this year, flood protection works amounting to Rs 252 crores were being done which was almost 1.5 times the average work taken up during the last two years.

During the meeting, the state Principal Secretary (Water Resources) Krishan Kumar informed that as on date, the level of Bhakra Dam is 1590 feet, which is eight feet lower than the level last year. Similarly, Pong Dam is 30 feet lower and Ranjit Sagar Dam is 34 feet lower than last year.

Kumar informed that about 8.5 lakh EC bags have been procured and made available close to the vulnerable points in the various districts.

Deputy Commissioners informed that they are ready with the evacuation plans to be executed in the case of emergency. Flood Control Rooms have been established in all the districts, and shelters have also been identified for humans and animals in case of emergency.

Verma said that the entire state machinery will work day and night to ensure that the public does not face any inconvenience due to floods.

BRIEFS

HRY CABINET MEETING ON JULY 12
Chandigarh: Haryana Cabinet meeting will be held under the Chairmanship of Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini at the Haryana Secretariat in Chandigarh on July 12, a Government spokesperson said on Thursday.

VI TO ENHANCE NETWORK CAPABILITIES IN PUNJAB AND HARYANA
Chandigarh: Vi (Vodafone Idea) on Thursday said it is committed to delivering superior network connectivity and experiences in Punjab and Haryana and will prioritize these circles in its ongoing network enhancement initiatives after successfully raising Rs 18,000 crore in an FPO. In a press event in the city, the company shared that it will first focus on adding L 900 and L 2100 spectrum, aimed at enhancing indoor network experiences for telecom users across the state. This deployment of spectrum will improve coverage and connectivity in urban areas with dense building infrastructure, as well as in suburban and rural areas where signal penetration can be difficult. It will enhance voice call quality, support better messaging and improve data browsing (internet) experience indoors. Vi's network currently covers 97.7% of population in the two states. To further expand and enhance its network capabilities, it will soon start expanding L900 spectrum covering towns like Ludhiana, Amritsar, Jalandhar, Patiala, Ambala, Panipat, Yamunanagar, Sonapat, Karnal and Kurukshetra in Punjab and Haryana.

HRY POLICE SECURES TOP POSITION IN CCTNS RANKING FOR JUNE 2024
Chandigarh: Haryana Police has once again excelled in the monthly ranking by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. According to the Crime and Criminal Tracking Network and Systems (CCTNS) ranking for June 2024, Haryana Police has secured the top position, an official spokesperson said on Thursday. He said that over the past two and a half years, Haryana Police has held the first position for 20 months. Haryana Police achieved the highest score, surpassing Uttar Pradesh and Delhi. The CCTNS system enables the police to manage tasks such as FIR registration, non-cognizable reports, medico-legal cases, missing persons, lost property, missing livestock, foreign registration, C-forms, abandoned property, unidentified persons, preventive actions, supervision reports, unnatural death registrations, investigation work, complaint registrations, and database services, he added.

TWO BUSES FLAGGED OFF FOR PERSONS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES
Chandigarh: Ajay Chagti, Secretary, Medical Education & Research, Chandigarh UT, flagged off two buses, a 52-seater and a 32-seater, on the premises of Government Rehabilitation Institute for Intellectual Disabilities (GRIID), Sector 31-C, Chandigarh today to facilitate the movement of persons with intellectual disabilities. Dr A K Attri, Director-Principal of Govt. Medical College and Hospital cum Director GRIID; Dr Priti Arun, Joint Director GRIID and other GRIID officials were also present on the occasion.

SWACHH SAFAI APNAO, BIMARI BHAGAO CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED IN HRY
Chandigarh: Haryana Minister of State for Urban Local Bodies Subhash Sudha on Thursday said that urban local bodies are fully prepared to deal with monsoon challenges. For which the Swachh Safai Apnao, Bimari Bhagao (SABB) campaign has been formally launched in the state. He said that this initiative will be active from July 1 to August 31, 2024, aiming to mitigate health risks associated with heavy rainfall. It focuses on maintaining high levels of cleanliness, effective waste management, regular cleaning of all community and public toilets, ensuring safe drinking water, water quality assessment, maintaining water facilities, implementing an Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) plan, conducting door-to-door awareness campaigns, and promoting cleanliness in urban local bodies (ULBs).

EXPEDITE COMPLETION OF ALL PENDING WORKS AT HISAR AIRPORT: HRY MINISTER
Chandigarh: Haryana Civil Aviation Minister Kamal Gupta on Thursday instructed all departments to expedite licensing procedures for Hisar Airport to enable the commencement of flights in the days to come. Gupta was chairing a review meeting with officials from the Civil Aviation Department, Public Works (Buildings and Roads), Environment, Forest, and Wildlife Department, Home, Fire Services, and HSIIDC regarding the commencement of flights from Hisar Airport here in Chandigarh.

HRY GOVT LAUNCHES VOLUNTARY DISCLOSURE SCHEME-2024 FOR DECLARATION OF UNAUTHORIZED LOAD OF TUBEWELL CONNECTION FOR AGRICULTURAL CONSUMERS
Chandigarh: Haryana Government has launched the Voluntary Load Disclosure Scheme-2024 for agricultural tubewell connections for agricultural consumers in the state. Under this scheme, consumers will require to deposit Rs 100 per kilowatt to increase their load. Additionally, the usual service connection fee of Rs 1500 per BHP will be waived, and their load will be regularized without any penalty. This scheme will be in effect from July 1, 2024, to July 15, 2024.

444 WOMEN TO BE HONORED WITH "BEST MOTHER" AWARD IN HRY
Chandigarh: Haryana Minister of State for Women and Child Development Aseem Goel on Thursday said that the state government is committed to ensuring the health and comprehensive development of women and children in the state. The government is paying special attention to their nutrition to achieve this objective. On July 15, at a state-level ceremony in Ambala, 444 mothers who have made outstanding contributions in taking care of their newborns and themselves will be honored with the "Best Mother" Award, said the Minister after presiding over a review meeting of the Women and Child Development Department in Chandigarh.

CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR FRUITS AND VEGETABLES TO BE ESTABLISHED IN PANCHKULA: HRY MINISTER
Chandigarh: Haryana Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare Minister Kanwar Pal Gujjar on Thursday announced that a Centre of Excellence for the management of fruits and vegetables will be established in Panchkula with the cooperation of England (UK) at a cost of Rs. 115 crore. A MoU has been inked in this regard. This centre is expected to be completed by the year 2026.

HARYANA GOVERNMENT NOTIFIES TIMELINES FOR 9 SERVICES OF HOUSING BOARD
Chandigarh: The Haryana Government has notified the timelines for 9 services of Housing Board under the Haryana Right to Service Act, 2014, within which these are to be provided to the citizens. These services include demarcation of plot, issue of duplicate allotment/copy of any document, conveyance deed (with and without General Power of Attorney), no dues certificate, permission of transfer in case of sale, transfer of property in case of death (uncontested), permission for mortgage, change of ownership/ re-allotment letter after execution of sale deed, and transfer of property before conveyance deed, said the government official spokesperson.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Litmus test

With the UK deeply divided on key issues, the outcome of this election could alter its direction and shape its future

The UK voted yesterday to elect 650 representatives to the House of Commons who in turn would elect its next prime minister. The UK is at a crucial juncture. It is battling myriad issues ranging from economic downslides, healthcare and post Brexit hardships. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has made a fervent appeal to voters, urging them to put an end to what he describes as Labour's dominance in British politics. Interestingly, for the last 14 years, the Conservative Party has been in power but has not delivered on its promises in full measure. The centre-right Conservatives took power amid the global financial crisis. However, their tenure has been plagued by economic stagnation, declining public services, and multiple scandals, leaving them vulnerable to criticism from both the left and right. The general election marks a pivotal moment in UK politics, with the Conservative Party, led by Rishi Sunak, pitted against the Labour Party under the leadership of Keir Starmer. The two parties have diametrically opposite views on tackling the country's problems. The UK is still coming to terms with Brexit which did not go well for it and led to many hardships for the Government and the people. Besides, once a world power, the UK is reduced to just another ally of the US in the world arena seriously jeopardizing its international standing. So the battle is not just for seats in Parliament but for the very direction of the nation.

Rishi Sunak's campaign has centred on themes of stability and continuity. He has emphasised the need for a steady hand to navigate the complex challenges facing the UK, including economic recovery post-COVID-19, ongoing trade negotiations, and maintaining national security. Sunak's message to voters is: build a stronger, more prosperous Britain together. Sunak has vehemently criticised Labour's policies, which left the country vulnerable and economically fragile. He has positioned himself as the leader capable of delivering a balanced approach that protects jobs, supports businesses, and ensures a sustainable path to growth. The Conservative manifesto promises tax cuts, increased investment in infrastructure, and a commitment to maintaining a firm stance on immigration and national security. This of course is a litmus test for Rishi Sunak himself. He became the first Prime Minister of colour itself speaks volumes about his calibre as a politician. But right now the biggest challenge for him is to manage the economy and relieve people of tax burden. On the other side, Keir Starmer's Labour Party is campaigned for change and renewal. Starmer has highlighted the need for comprehensive reform of the welfare system and has promised to tackle the cost-of-living crisis through targeted support for low-income families and significant public sector pay rises. For Rishi Sunak, the election is a chance to solidify his leadership and set a course for a post-Brexit Britain that he believes can thrive globally. The results of this election will not only determine the next government but will also shape the trajectory of the UK for years to come.

PICTALK



Villagers catch fish in flood water, in Morigaon district

The rise of radical rebels in Pakistan



BHOPINDER SINGH

This alarming rise in extremism has prompted Pakistan to initiate Operation Azm-i-Istehkam, an ambitious effort aimed at eradicating terrorism

Clergy has always played a pivotal role in the Pakistani narrative. The indelible impact of the 'Mullahs' has historically cut across institutions of power like the Military establishment, political parties, civilian society, academia et al. Each has, in their own way succumbed to puritanical displays and appropriations to posture alignment befitting the 'land of the pure' or Pakistan. However, it must be said that many of these institutions have also privately harboured the exact opposite instincts and preferences, from what has been prescribed by the clerical order. These institutions have pandered to religiosity only to tick in the box their own false, and publicly fronted sense of piety to legitimise their relevance, whilst indulging in vices, degeneracies, and excesses. A cursory look at the long list of the Pakistani infamous in the Pandora Papers or Panama List is a veritable who's-who of the Pakistani elites, who posture simplicity, austerity, and god-fearing honesty in the public sphere. This has led to the elites leading notoriously duplicitous lives with ill-gotten properties and excesses across the world, whilst injecting toxic-religiosity and religious extremism back home.

The bunny of religion is essentially for public consumption to be invoked whenever everything else fails e.g., beseeching Arab Sheikhs or Turkey for life-sustaining aid in the name of a "brotherly muslim nation". The personal lives of the ruling Sharif family and the feudal Bhuttos are hardly the modicum of religious idyls, and the same discomfort applies to the Westernised Generals who are increasingly facing the wrath of the angry, long-bearded, armed, and madrasa-educated tribals. Today, it seems the ability of Pakistan's ruling elite to successfully play the patented double game has run its course. Not only have the radicalized masses (generously fanned by the elites in 'Olive Green' or Servants) refused to take orders, but far worse, they have turned on their begetters! Creations like the 'Taliban' which was a joint



project between the wily politicians, amoral Generals, and unhinged clergy, simply refuse to take orders from their progenitor. The product i.e., Taliban, which was made for the export market, is getting unwantedly imported back to its original source. The elite finally realise that it cannot differentiate between "Good Taliban" and "Bad Taliban", for at the end of the day it is "Taliban", an unhinged outcome of affording extra generous space to religion in governance. Terrorism has gripped Pakistan with elements 'within', going rogue. Elites now sense that not only must they take on the terror elements directly (as they have done multiple times, still terrorism worsened), but it must also snuff out the oxygen that breeds and nurtures the terror industry i.e., religious insurances and outreach, in every sphere of Pakistani reality. Pakistani dispensation has come up with Operation Azm-i-Istehkam which seeks to eradicate terrorists, and religious extremism, and deradicalize society, in a holistic and comprehensive manner. It is easier said than done, given the deep-rooted grip of religiosity.

This refreshing acceptance (though time will tell if it is sincere or posturing) of religious overload needs to be unloaded. For starters, it will diminish the



THE ELITE FINALLY REALISE THAT IT CANNOT DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN 'GOOD TALIBAN' AND 'BAD TALIBAN', FOR AT THE END OF THE DAY IT IS 'TALIBAN', AN UNHINGED OUTCOME OF AFFORDING EXTRA GENEROUS SPACE TO RELIGION IN GOVERNANCE

role of Islamist political parties like Maulana Fazlur Rehman's Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F), or even the various militias and formations of sectarian denominations who have contributed to the morass. Such parties have not only imported strains of alien Wahhabism or Salafism but have been instrumental in ensuring that the Pakistani 'establishment' goes slow on anti-terror operations in restive areas. Caught between offering perfunctory platitudes towards the integrity of Pakistan and the safety of its citizens - they are also simultaneously offering mealy-mouthed suggestions to not partake in militaristic operations. They are truly caught between the devil and the blue sea, for their wishy-washy stand will neither endear them to the frustrated Pakistani Government (which they are no longer a part of the ruling coalition), nor to organisations like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) who would want them to be bolder and indulge in plain-speak in favour of religious and radical bodies. Nonetheless, these religious parties are mulling putting together an ostensible 'resistance movement' against Operation Azm-i-Istehkam, and they are unlikely to find too many partners to go along with them. Forces that are key to bailing out Pakistan eco-

nomic from sure 'failed-state' status e.g., China, international multilateral agencies (IMF, World Bank etc), Western Powers or even Arab Sheikdoms are pitted against the agendas and outcomes of religious parties. The so-called 'iron brother' Chinese have invested over \$62 billion in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridors (CPEC) and they cannot allow the religio-extremist Baluch insurgents to attack Chinese interests as part of their 'sacred' duties. Middle Eastern countries too have had their own trust with the likes of the Muslim Brotherhood and their offshoots from Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait to Saudi Arabia, and have clamped down on the same. Now with the Taliban Government in Kabul thawing relations with outsiders and no longer surviving on Pakistani doles, Afghans also cock a snook at historical equations and madrasa-fed ranks from Pakistan. All this diminishes the relevance of religious parties in Pakistan and if the Pakistanis grasp the opportunity, they may just be able to overcome their history and instincts.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Bowing to elders is a sign of respect



Recently, political strategist Prashant Kishore criticized Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar for touching the feet of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, describing it as a 'sale of dignity of the people of Bihar'. While Kishore's comments reflect a certain perspective, it's important to recognize that showing respect to elders, even political rivals, is a personal choice deeply rooted in Indian culture. Touching the feet of elders is a gesture of humility and respect, irrespective

of the individual's public standing or knowledge. It's a tradition that underscores the significance of age and wisdom. Such practices are part of a cultural ethos that teaches younger generations to respect their elders. In a recent incident, opposition leader Rahul Gandhi criticized Om Birla, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, for bowing before Prime Minister Modi, claiming it compromised the dignity of the Speaker's office. Gandhi cited Mahatma Gandhi's views on the impartiality and dignity of the Speaker. However, the gesture by Birla was a personal one, reflecting respect for an elder, not a political statement. It's crucial to separate personal respect from political actions. In Hindu culture, it's customary for the younger to show respect to the older, irrespective of their positions. Rahul Gandhi's criticism may stem from a place of political rivalry, but it overlooks the cultural context of such gestures.

K V Seetharamaiah | Bengaluru

PM'S REMARKS ON MANIPUR

Madam — The Congress has strongly criticized Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his remarks in the Rajya Sabha, where he claimed that the situation in Manipur was returning to normal. The Congress argues that this statement is far from the reality on the ground, pointing out that the Prime Minister has yet to visit Manipur since violence erupted between the Meitei and Kuki communities in May of the previous year. Congress MP Jairam Ramesh accused the Prime Minister of making light of the situation and not acknowledging the continuing violence and tension in Manipur.

Despite more than 200 deaths and thousands of people displaced due to ongoing ethnic violence, the Prime Minister's comments suggested a lack of serious engagement with the issue. The Congress also criticized the Prime Minister for not listening to voices from Manipur and for focusing more on political jobs than addressing the concerns of those affected by the violence. The party emphasized that the Prime Minister's response is insufficient given the severity of the crisis in Manipur and accused him of turning a blind eye to the plight of the state's residents.

Bhagwan Thadani | Mumbai

HATHRAS TRAGEDY

Madam — The recent stampede in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, resulting in numerous deaths, is a tragic reminder of the consequences of poor crowd management. A stampede, or crowd crush, occurs when an area becomes dangerously overcrowded and mismanaged, leading to fatal accidents. If crowd densities exceed four to six people per square meter, the risk of such incidents significantly increases. Authorities must not downplay their role in these tragedies by labeling them as mere accidents. Effective crowd management requires meticulous planning, including venue

selection, emergency response preparation, and public awareness initiatives. The lack of a culture of safety among authorities is evident in such incidents. Learning from this tragedy, it's imperative to adopt a proactive approach to safety and crowd management to prevent future incidents. This includes mandatory safety provisions and increased public awareness to ensure the well-being of participants at public events. Authorities must prioritize the safety of citizens to avoid repeating such devastating outcomes.

K V Chandramouli | Mysuru

UNSUNG HEROES IN INDIAN CRICKET

Madam — Last Saturday, Indian cricket fans witnessed the celebration of Team India's T20 World Cup victory in Bridgetown, Barbados. Among the jubilant players, a lesser-known figure, Raghu Raghavendra, stood out. Known affectionately as Raghu, he has been a pivotal part of the Indian cricket sup-

port staff since 2011, specializing in throwdowns to help batsmen practice against fast bowling. Raghu's ability to deliver balls at speeds exceeding 150 km/h using a sidearm device has been instrumental in preparing Indian batsmen for international challenges. While his name may not be widely recognized, his contributions to the team's success are immense. Raghu represents the behind-the-scenes dedication and skill that supports every win by Team India. His work exemplifies the importance of support roles in sports, highlighting how essential unsung heroes are to the success of prominent athletes and teams. As India celebrates its cricketing triumphs, it's important to acknowledge and appreciate the efforts of individuals like Raghu, who play a crucial role in these victories.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Balancing motivation and misuse in India's research landscape



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

Many students opt for PhD programme for reasons unrelated to research. This hinders the nation's intellectual progress

A higher academic degree like a PhD is often considered a symbol of quality. PhD training emphasizes innovation and the ability to tackle complex problems. Graduates are expected to think independently, identify gaps in existing knowledge, and propose novel solutions, making them valuable assets in both academic and industry settings. The more PhD holders a country produces, the more productive a country will be. Countries with more PhD holders tend to produce more scientific publications and patents. This intellectual output can lead to technological advancements and improvements in various industries, driving innovation and economic growth. Despite having the advantages of higher enrolments for the nation, the current system of registering for PhD as an escapism will not reap any benefits for the student or the country. Many students register for PhD as a stop-gap arrangement before their marriage, a permanent government job, or as a fashion to be called 'Dr.'. They never assess their moti-



vation for pursuing a PhD degree. Are they passionate about the research topic? Or have they reflected on their career goals? If the alignment is strong, it might justify pursuing a research degree that is highly demanding and time-consuming. The most successful PhD candidates are often driven by intrinsic motivations such as intellectual curiosity, passion for their field of study, and a desire to contribute new knowledge. These motivations sustain them through the challenges of research work. Recently, it has been observed that many scholars registering for PhD through national-level competitive fellowships like CSIR, UGC etc, try to prolong their study for the sake of fellowship amount.

In many colleges in Tamil Nadu, college teachers work for a salary as low as Rs. 4000- 8000 per month. Qualifying for a national test will at least provide a scholar with a decent salary for 3 to 5 years. The sole motive of the scholar is financial support. For some, the academic environment may provide a refuge from societal expectations of marriage, family responsibilities, and other traditional roles. Unfortunately, even today, female students are not provided the freedom to make decisions. Our society gives a girl's marriage more importance than acquiring knowledge. Earning a doctorate requires extensive study, self-sufficiency, and intellectual development, which are priceless assets to the community. Even in a highly literate society like Kerala, many women, even after getting a PhD degree, are forced to stick to societal norms and move away from active research. Many students with PhD degrees ultimately land in job sectors where their research has no role, like clerical jobs in

government sectors, banks, or even as a school teacher, to cite a few.

To change people's minds, we must keep fighting for equal rights for women, spreading the word that education should be accessible to everyone and dispelling myths about women's abilities and goals. It's essential for prospective PhD candidates to carefully consider their motivations and the potential impact of their research. Pursuing a PhD solely for recognition or prestige, without a genuine commitment to contribute meaningful research or knowledge, offers little benefit to society or the nation. People who do research for name sake are involved in many unethical practices, like outsourcing the work and outsourcing their thesis writing and paper writing to other agencies. Unfortunately, these people reach higher positions through their influence, overtaking genuine researchers who have toiled their lives for research.

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



FIRST COLUMN STRATEGIC DYNAMICS AT THE SCO SUMMIT

As China asserts its influence within the SCO, the interplay of geopolitics becomes increasingly visible



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation or SCO held its 24th meeting for heads of State this week. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, otherwise known for promoting Bharat to crucial allies at bilateral and multilateral forums, skipped this regional dialogue citing parliamentary responsibilities back home. However, many also point out that, the frosty relationship with Pakistan and China both of whose top leadership were present for the SCO summit, was one of the reasons PM Modi avoided travelling to Astana in Kazakhstan. India was represented by External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar for the summit, where he held separate bilateral meetings with several SCO Central Asian member countries.

The SCO as a Eurasian intergovernmental group was announced in China in June 2001. India and Pakistan joined the SCO as full members in 2017. Currently, SCO has 9 member states, 3 observer states and 14 dialogue partners, which represent an entire swathe of emerging economic geographies, that occupy the theatre of current geopolitical developments. Russia and China along with four neighbouring Central Asian states form the founding members. However with Iran later joining in as a member state along with Kuwait, Qatar, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Bahrain, Myanmar, and Maldives as dialogue partners, one can see why, SCO is an important platform for shaping the current geo-political landscape. Russia is engaged in a long war with Ukraine, while much of Middle Eastern and West Asia nations are intimately engaged in the Israel-Hamas war. China has been trying to dominate the dialogue since its inception and could be seen by many, as one of the diplomatic extensions of its sovereignty-threatening foreign policy. In the past few years, it has managed to bring a weakened Russia under its wings and is portraying SCO as an alternate multilateral dialogue platform challenging the US control of world affairs. In the run-up to the Astana SCO summit, the Chinese state mouthpiece Global Times carried a few reports extolling the virtues of the summit. "It sends a message to the Western world that there are many different voices from the emerging economies that need to be heard and represented, and the mainstream trend of global cooperation won't



be reversed by their obstruction," wrote Zhou Rong, a senior researcher at the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China. "Chinese President Xi Jinping also clubbed the SCO summit with two state visits to Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, thereby, expanding its footprints in the Central Asian states. State media reminded global audiences that Kazakhstan, was where China's Belt and Road initiative was proposed in 2013, which in the past decade managed to get China to secure strategic infrastructure footprints in landlocked Central Asia. Quoting a few analysts Global Times reported "Central Asia, as one of the key areas in the implementation of the BRI, offers a vivid example of how the China-proposed global public good has been transforming the landlocked region into a land-linked region, transforming it into a bridge connecting the Eurasian continent." Central and West Asia has been PM Modi's focus in the past decade. Even though PM Modi avoided the Astana summit, he is expected to travel to Russia for a "post-Ukraine" bilateral meeting with President Putin, followed by a stopover in Austria, a first in nearly four decades.

The meeting with President Putin and PM Modi, both of whom have returned to power after elections would be closely followed, since, it would be one of the first face-to-face meetings post Russia's isolation by Western countries following the Ukraine war. It will also be the first, where regional issues including the ongoing Israel offensive on Gaza and, the evolving geo-political situation in a conflict-ridden, post-COVID world are likely to be taken up. From a regional platform perspective, India China and Russia, also interact closely at BRICS. The unfolding engagement in the next few weeks will be closely followed.

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

Railway accidents expose neglect, systemic failures



SHIVAJI SARKAR

The latest report from the CAG highlights a troubling decline in funding for crucial track renewal projects amidst an alarming rise in train accidents



Railway accidents not only cause significant loss of lives and severe financial setbacks but also undermine public confidence in the system. A recent incident near New Jalpaiguri, where a train collided with another, resulting in eleven fatalities and 40 injuries, has once again highlighted the issue of signal failures. The railways have received less scrutiny since the decision to discontinue the presentation of a separate Railway Budget. This change has allowed many faults within the railways, including outdated equipment and complex signal failures, to go unnoticed. While accidents draw attention, derailments are equally frequent and damaging.

The full extent of the losses is challenging to estimate, as they not only impact the railways but also disrupt the movement of goods and people, with far-reaching consequences. The CAG audit found that while the Gross Budgetary Support of Rs 15,000 crore had been contributed, the Railways' internal resources fell short of the target for funding the remaining Rs 5,000 crore per year to Rashtriya Rail Sanraksha Kosh (RRSK), set up in 2017. The report highlighted a decline in the allotment of funds for track renewal works, from Rs 9,607 crore in 2018-19 to Rs 7,417 crore in 2019-20. The railways' Rs 2.55 trillion budget is self-generated. Ignoring critical signal and track safety issues it has allocated Rs 24470 crore to be spent for 508 of the 1300 stations planned to be demolished and rebuilt in 16 states.

The buildings may need some repairs and refurbishing but demolition is outrageous under Amrit Bharat Station Scheme. Many stations are already on the block though these hardly need demolition. The railways should have prioritised its operational safety issues and utilised the station rebuilding funds for safety. According to the CAG report 2022, an Analysis of 1129 'Inquiry Reports' of derailment accidents in 16 Zonal Railways (ZRs) revealed 24 factors

responsible for derailments in the selected cases/accidents. The total damages/loss of assets in these cases was reported as Rs 32.96 crore. The report adds that nearly 75 per cent of the consequential train accidents between 2017-18 and 2020-21 were caused by derailments. Out of 217 consequential train accidents, 163 (around 75 per cent) were due to derailments. The goods train ramming into the Kunchenjunga Express between Rangapani and Chattar Hat, off New Jalpaiguri, has almost the same pattern as the triple train accident near Balasore that killed 296 persons and injured 1100 people a year back. Like the Balasore, this one is also blamed on manual failure at the initial stages.

It was routine for Rail Board chairman Jaya Varma Sinha and two zonal chief public relations officers to blame it on the deceased train driver for "disregarding" signals and speed limits. The signal failure in both cases is responsible for the accidents as scrutiny of the system reveals. The Rangapani goods train was issued a manual authorisation paper chit signal, called a paper-line clear ticket (PLCT). It allowed goods train drivers to pass all inoperative automatic signals.

As per procedure the driver should have stopped for a minute at each signal and restricted speed at 10 to 15 km. Now it is being told that restriction should have been imposed on each of the trains in the section. The document of the railways says that all trains had the PLCT issued suggesting major signal failure. The rail officials said that the track circuits had failed due to the lightning and thunderstorms,

rendering the automatic signals defunct since 5.50 am.

In such a situation absolute block comes under restriction. When signals are not operational it is covered with paper or a piece of cloth. Railway Minister Ashwani Vaishnav had told Rajya Sabha on July 21, 2023, that the rear collision at Balasore was due to lapses in the signalling-circuit alteration carried out in the past and during the execution of the signalling work related to the replacement of the electric lifting barrier for a level-crossing gate. Two months before this, the Railway Board had flagged the issue of signalling staff resorting to short-cut methods. Referring to five alarming incidents where trains entered the wrong path due to short-cut methods adopted by the signalling staff, the Railway Board in a letter to General Managers of Zonal Railways expressed "serious concern" that despite repeated instructions the ground situation was not improving and "signalling staff continue with short-cut methods for clearing signals".

In another incident of collision between two passenger trains, the Commissioner of Railway Safety (CRS) has found the Indian Railways administration at fault for not implementing, and harmonising safety norms and protocols, the lack of which led to the collision of two passenger trains in Andhra Pradesh on October 29, 2023. The collision claimed 17 lives including three crew members. The CRS noted that senior officers continuously overlooked such violations in the recent past. The CRS found five flaws in the safety system:

1. Officials Overlooked Multiple Violations Earlier,

2. Employees in Crucial Safety Posts are Incompetent, and not aware of basic safety rules, and assistant loco pilots should be trained on simulators even on brake use,

3. Mismatch of Two Sets of Rules – general rules peg speed at 10km in case of signal failure and subsidiary rules at 15 km,

4. Every Passenger Train's Last Two Coaches Need Crash-Worthy Features,

5. Record Walkie-Talkie Conversations Between Station Masters and Loco Pilots In yet another incident the South Western Railway Zone official wrote: "on 08.02.2023 the loco pilot of Up Train No: 12649 Sampark Kranti Express, had stopped the train before Point No: 65 A, while observing that the point was set to down main line (wrong line), while as per PLCT, the train was supposed to pass through Up main line."

An audit report of the last year flagged serious lapses in rail safety. In a 2022 report focusing on derailments within Indian Railways, the CAG sought to investigate how preventive measures were implemented by the railway ministry against derailments and collisions. The Kavach system of bringing the trains to a halt has a cost of Rs 50lakh per km and Rs 70 lakh per locomotive. It may take longer than the railway has planned. The eastern region alone needs Rs 3000 crore. Even if Kavach implemented the railways to improve on signal and track maintenance, accidents would not be easy to prevent. Even now it is not too late to divert funds from station demolitions to safety aspects.

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



THE KAVACH SYSTEM OF BRINGING THE TRAINS TO A HALT HAS A COST OF RS 50LAKH PER KM AND RS 70 LAKH PER LOCOMOTIVE. IT MAY TAKE LONGER THAN THE RAILWAY HAS PLANNED

Women suffer in silence as violence against them keeps increasing

Despite the high prevalence of such crimes, many women are unable to report these incidents due to societal pressures and lack of support

Violence against women remains a critical issue in our society, hindering both their physical development and mental well-being. According to the 2022 annual report by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), crimes against women increased by four per cent in 2022 compared to 2021. Over 5.8 million cases of crime were registered across the country in 2022, with nearly 450,000 involving crimes against women. This translates to an alarming average of around 51 FIRs registered every hour for violence against women. The report highlights that the highest number of cases of violence against women were recorded in Delhi, the capital city, while Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan,



KAVITA DHAMEJA

was listed as the fourth most unsafe city for women. Rajasthan is the third state with the highest number of cases of violence against women in 2022.

Notably, Rajasthan had the highest number of recorded rape cases, with over 31,000 incidents reported across the country and 5,399 cases registered in the state. The report also reveals that most incidents of violence or discrimination against women are

perpetrated by their husbands or close relatives. Gender-based violence encompasses physical, mental, sexual, and economic abuse, with intimate partner violence being the most widespread form. Women often experience sexual or physical violence from an intimate partner at some point in their lives.

Despite the prevalence of violence, many women do not report these incidents due to several factors. First, the burden of the family's honour is disproportionately placed on women, instilling fear and preventing them from reporting the abuse, even to close family members. Second, many women lack access to support groups where they can confide and seek help. Third, and perhaps most crucially,

there is a widespread unawareness of the support systems and legal frameworks established by the government to aid women affected by violence. However, some women – who are a little aware and have found support groups – raise their voices against the violence they face and report it to the police.

One example of this courage is found in Baba Ramdev Nagar Kachhi Basti in Jaipur, Rajasthan, where gender discrimination and violence are prevalent. Meena Devi (name changed), a 38-year-old resident, shared her experience: "I collect trash, and my husband works as a laborer. We have six children, including four daughters. Our financial situation is dire, and my husband sometimes does not find work.

To contribute to the household income, my two daughters and I collect trash daily, and I had to stop their schooling." She further revealed, "My husband used to beat me after getting intoxicated, which also affected my daughters.

One day, I gathered the courage to call the police, and since then, he has significantly reduced the violence." This settlement, predominantly inhabited by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, is located about 10 kilometres from the city in the Gurjar Ki Thadi area.

With a population of over 500 people, many residents engage in occupations such as blacksmithing, scavenging, drumming at weddings, bamboo crafting, and daily wage labour.

Meena mentioned that it is so common for women to be subjected to violence by their husbands that it does not bother anyone in the settlement. Most men indulge in substance abuse and mistreat their wives.

Although several non-government organizations are working in the area to raise awareness among women to stand up against this violence, the problem has not been completely eradicated. Another woman, who preferred to remain anonymous, recounted her story: "My husband works as a scrap dealer, while I stay busy with household chores." She explained that her husband gets intoxicated every day and abuses her. Her hands bore burn marks, evidence of the physical violence she endured. She said that other women in the settlement often protect her from her husband's violence and have advised her to seek help from the police, but she does not wish to do so. Such control by partners leaves women without access to a safe space to share their experiences and seek advice.

Social worker Akhilesh Mishra, who has been working on the health of women and children in this area explains, "The government has enacted several laws to protect women from gender-based violence and women can file complaints against the violence they face. Various NGOs are also working here to raise awareness among women about gender discrimination and violence."

This effort has started showing results, as women in the settlement have now started to stand up against the violence and seek support from the police. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach. Cultural norms that place the burden of family honour on women must be challenged and redefined.

Efforts to increase awareness of support groups and governmental resources must be intensified, ensuring that all women have access to the help they need. Only through collective societal effort can we hope to build a capable, equal, and violence-free society for all women.

(The author is a social worker; views expressed are personal. Charkha Features)

Hezbollah fires over 200 rockets into Israel

AP ■ BEIRUT

The Lebanese Hezbollah group said it launched over 200 rockets on Thursday at several military bases in Israel in retaliation for a strike that killed one of its senior commanders. The attack by the Iran-backed militant group was one of the largest in the months-long conflict along the Lebanon-Israel border, with tensions escalating in recent weeks.

The Israeli military said "numerous projectiles and suspicious aerial targets" had entered its territory from Lebanon, many of which it said were intercepted. There were no immediate reports of casualties. It said about 200 "projectiles" were launched toward the occupied Syrian Golan Heights and over 20 drones into Israeli territory, but that it had intercepted some of them.

Israel after Hezbollah's attack struck various towns in southern Lebanon. The Israeli military said it struck Hezbollah's



"military structures" in the southern border towns of Ramyeh and Houla. Lebanon's state-run National News Agency reported an Israeli drone strike of Houla killed at least one person. Israeli jets also broke the sound barrier over

the Lebanese capital and other areas in the country. Israel on Wednesday acknowledged that it had killed Mohammad Naameh Nasser, who headed one of Hezbollah's three regional divisions in southern Lebanon, a day earlier.

Hours after the killing, Hezbollah launched scores of Katyusha rockets and Falq rockets with heavy warheads into northern Israel and the occupied Syrian Golan Heights. It launched more rockets on Thursday and said it had also sent exploding drones into several bases.

Nasser was of great importance to Hezbollah, which said he took part in battles in conflicts in Syria and Iraq from 2011 until 2016 and fought in the group's last war with Israel in 2006. Two other senior Hezbollah commanders have also been killed.

The US and France are continuing to scramble to prevent the skirmishes from spiraling into an all-out war, which they fear could spillover across the region. Washington in its shuttle diplomatic efforts initially hoped for calm along the Lebanon-Israel border in a deal that is not linked to the war in Gaza. However, since the US has called for Hamas to agree to a cease-fire proposal

presented by President Joe Biden, it has said that an end to the war in Gaza would lead to calm in Lebanon and northern Israel as well.

The relatively low-level conflict erupted shortly after the outbreak of the war in Gaza. Hezbollah says it is striking Israel in solidarity with Hamas, another Iran-allied group that ignited the war in Gaza with its October 7 attack into southern Israel. The group's leadership says it will stop its attacks once there is a cease-fire in Gaza, and that while it does not want war, it is ready for one.

Israeli officials, meanwhile, say they could decide to go to war in Lebanon if efforts for a diplomatic solution fail.

Hezbollah's retaliation comes a day after a senior adviser to US President Joe Biden, Amos Hochstein, met with French President Emmanuel Macron's Lebanon envoy, Jean-Yves Le Drian, in Paris.

The fighting has displaced tens of thousands of people on both sides of the border. In northern

Israel, 16 soldiers and 11 civilians have been killed. In Lebanon, more than 450 people — mostly fighters but also dozens of civilians — have been killed. Israel sees Hezbollah as its most direct threat and estimates that it has an arsenal of 150,000 rockets and missiles, including precision-guided missiles.

In 2006, Israel and Hezbollah fought a monthlong war that ended in a draw.

Meanwhile, the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said Thursday that the Palestinian death toll from nearly nine months of war has surged past 38,000. The ministry said that in the last 24 hours, the bodies of 58 people had been brought to hospitals, bringing the overall death toll to 38,011. It said more than 87,000 people have been wounded in the fighting.

The ministry does not distinguish between fighters and noncombatants in its count, but many of the dead are said to be women and children.

Israel weighs Hamas' latest response to Gaza cease-fire proposal

AP ■ TEL AVIV

Israel's Cabinet was set to convene Thursday to discuss Hamas' latest response to a US-backed proposal for a phased cease-fire in Gaza, as diplomatic efforts aimed at ending the nine-month war stirred back to life after a weeklong hiatus.

Fighting, meanwhile, intensified between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah, with the militant group saying it fired more than 200 rockets and exploding drones into northern Israel to avenge the killing of a senior commander in an Israeli airstrike the day before. The relatively low-level conflict has literally set the border ablaze and raised fears of a potentially even more devastating war in the Middle East. Hezbollah has said it will halt its attacks if there is a cease-fire between Hamas — a fellow Iran-backed ally — and Israel.

The United States has rallied world support behind a plan that would see the release of all of the scores of hostages still held by the militant group in return for a lasting truce and the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza. But until now, neither side appears to have fully embraced it.

Hamas suggested "amendments" to the proposal last month, some of which the US said were unworkable, without providing specifics. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has confirmed that the original proposal was an Israeli one, but has raised doubts over whether it would end the war — a key Hamas demand. Hamas confirmed Wednesday that it had sent another response to Egypt and Qatar, which are mediating the talks, without providing details. A US official said the Biden administration was examining the response, calling it constructive but saying more work needed to be done.

The official, who wasn't authorized to comment publicly, spoke on condition of anonymity.

An Israeli official said Netanyahu would convene a Cabinet meeting Thursday to discuss the latest develop-

ments surrounding the negotiations. The official, who wasn't authorized to discuss the meeting with media, spoke on condition of anonymity. Israel would likely hold additional consultations before making a final decision on any amended proposal.

As cease-fire talks appeared to be gaining new steam, the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said the death toll in the war had climbed past 38,000. Hamas political official Bassem Naim said that the group has neither accepted nor rejected the American proposal, and has "responded with some ideas to bridge the gap" between the two sides, without elaborating. Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas' top political leader, has shared suggestions with Egyptian, Qatari and Turkish officials, the group said in a statement late Wednesday.

US officials have said the latest proposal has new language that was proposed to Egypt and Qatar on Saturday and addresses indirect negotiations that are set to commence during the first phase of the three-phase deal that US President Joe Biden laid out in a May 31 speech.

The first phase calls for a "full and complete cease-fire," a withdrawal of Israeli forces from all densely populated areas of Gaza and the release of a number of hostages, including women, older people and the wounded, in exchange for the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners.

The proposal called for the parties to negotiate the terms of the second phase during the 42 days of phase one. Under the current proposal, Hamas could release all of the remaining men, both civilians and soldiers, during the second phase.

In return, Israel could free an agreed-upon number of Palestinian prisoners and detainees. The releases would not occur until "sustainable calm" takes effect and all Israeli troops withdraw from Gaza.

The third phase would see the return of the remains of hostages.

Suspect in attempted assassination of Slovakia's PM now faces terror charges

Bratislava (Slovakia): The suspect in the attempted assassination in May of Slovakia's populist prime minister, Robert Fico, is now facing terror charges as part of an investigation by authorities, the country's prosecutor general said Thursday.

Maros Zilinka said in a statement that the suspect identified only as JC, who was originally charged with attempted murder, now faces the additional charges. Zilinka said the change is based on evidence the investigators obtained, but didn't immediately give further details.

The government officials originally said they believed it was a politically motivated attack committed by a "lone wolf" but announced later that a "third party" might have been involved in "acting for the benefit of the perpetrator." Fico has currently been recovering at home from mul-

iple wounds he suffered in the assassination attempt on May 15 when he was shot in the abdomen as he greeted supporters after his government's session in the town of Handlova.

The assailant was immediately arrested and a court ordered him to remain behind bars.

Fico has long been a divisive figure in Slovakia and beyond. He returned to power for the fourth time last year after his leftist party Smer, or Direction, won the parliamentary election last September, after campaigning on a pro-Russia and anti-American message. His critics worry that Slovakia could abandon its pro-Western course and follow the direction of Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Thousands have repeatedly rallied in the capital and across Slovakia to protest Fico's policies

Voting begins in UK polls; Future of Rishi Sunak as PM hangs in balance

PTI ■ LONDON

The future of Rishi Sunak as Britain's Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party hangs in the balance as polling booths opened across the UK on Thursday, with the British Indian leader and the man who wants his job — Keir Starmer — out early to cast their votes along with millions across the country.

Sunak and his wife Akshata Murty walked hand-in-hand to their local polling booth on a sunny day in his constituency of Richmond and Northallerton in Yorkshire, northern England. A little later, Starmer and wife Victoria were at their polling station in Camden, north London, sporting Labour red colours.

As is customary, there is no campaigning or party political canvassing on polling in the UK.

Sunak, 44, is up against voter angst towards the incumbent Tories after 14 years in power



and has had to contend with trailing far behind 61-year-old Keir Starmer-led Labour Party throughout the six-week campaign.

Both leaders wrapped up their poll pitches with contrasting messages — Sunak urging voters not to hand "tax-raising" Labour a "supermajority" and Starmer playing down the prospect of a landslide win for fear of a low turnout impacting the final outcome.

Candidates are being fielded for 650 constituencies across England, Scotland, Wales, and

Northern Ireland, with 326 required for a majority in the first past the post system.

Besides the two main parties, voters will be choosing from a list of candidates representing the Liberal Democrats, Green Party, Scottish National Party (SNP), SDLP, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Sinn Fien, Plaid Cymru, the anti-immigration Reform Party and several contesting as Independent.

Around 40,000 polling booths opened across the country at 7 am local time as an estimated 46 million registered voters began turning out to mark a cross next to their chosen candidate on a paper ballot.

Since this year, carrying an identification document to the polling booth has become compulsory in UK elections, which are open to all registered adult voters resident in the UK including Indians as Commonwealth citizens.

Several voters have already cast their vote in a postal ballot, which can also be handed in to

their local councils if pending. Once the votes are cast and the booths officially close at 10 pm local time, the focus shifts to the definitive exit poll soon after which gives a fair snapshot of what can be expected UK-wide. Counting commences up and down the country right away, with the first results expected just before midnight local time.

"Stop Labour's supermajority" is the central message British Prime Minister Sunak was trying to drive home as he wrapped up his campaign, even as most of the incumbent Conservatives all but conceded defeat in the general election.

"Labour will put up your taxes. Again and again and again," posted Sunak on social media as the catch-all message to wind up the campaign trail. The British Indian leader and his team's strategy in the final hours was to canvass their traditional voters to narrow the gap of a widely expected defeat after clear Tory majorities in the last three general elections.

Hurricane Beryl roars toward Mexico after leaving destruction in Jamaica

AP ■ PLAYA DEL CARMEN

Hurricane Beryl ripped off roofs in Jamaica, jumbled fishing boats in Barbados and damaged or destroyed 95 per cent of homes on a pair of islands in St. Vincent and the Grenadines before rumbling toward the Cayman Islands and taking aim at Mexico's Caribbean coast after leaving at least seven dead in its wake.

What had been the earliest storm to develop into a Category 5 hurricane in the Atlantic, weakened slightly but remained a major hurricane. Its eye was forecast to pass just south of the Cayman Islands overnight.

Mexico's popular Caribbean coast prepared shelters, evacuated some small outlying coastal communities and even moved sea turtle eggs off beaches threatened by storm surge, but in nightlife hotspots like Playa del Carmen and



Tulum tourists still took one more night on the town. Mexico's Navy patrolled areas like Tulum telling tourists in Spanish and English to prepare for the storm's arrival.

Early Thursday morning, the storm's centre was about 500 miles (800 kilometres) east-southeast of Tulum, Mexico. It had maximum sustained winds of 125 mph (205 kph) and was moving west-northwest at 21

mph (32 kph). Beryl was forecast to make landfall in a sparsely populated area of lagoons and mangroves south of Tulum in the early hours of Friday, probably as a Category 2 storm. Then it was expected to cross the Yucatan Peninsula and strengthen over the warm Gulf of Mexico to make a second strike on Mexico's north-east coast near the Texas bor-

der. The storm had already shown its destructive potential across a long swath of the southeastern Caribbean.

Beryl's eye wall brushed by Jamaica's southern coast Wednesday afternoon knocking out power and ripping roofs off homes. Prime Minister Andrew Holness said Jamaica had not seen the "worst of what could possibly happen."

"We can do as much as we can do, as humanly possible, and we leave the rest in the hands of God," Holness said.

Several roadways in Jamaica's interior settlements were impacted by fallen trees and utility poles, while some communities in the northern section were without electricity, according to the government's Information Service. The worst perhaps came earlier in Beryl's trajectory when it smacked two small islands of the Lesser Antilles.

Cost of living could trump pride in Sunak for British Indian voters

PTI ■ LONDON

The UK's historic general election on Thursday marks the first real test at the ballot box for Rishi Sunak when pride in Britain's first Prime Minister of Indian heritage might be trumped by the cost-of-living crisis and sheer fatigue with 14 long years of a Conservative Party-led government. Exactly how the votes stack up will start to unfold only once polling closes but YouGov's final large-scale poll for 'The Times' on the eve of the election suggests the Opposition Labour could be handed a so-called "supermajority" — indicating a 212-seat parliamentary majority and the highest in decades. But whatever the final outcome, this pattern is more a reflection of the political turmoil that ultimately brought Sunak into 10 Downing Street than a vote against his own leadership.

"I think for British Indian voters, in particular, this election is similar to the rest of the electorate; they've been given a chance to choose to keep or remove the government and after 14 years of a Conservative government, the mood is much more for change than for maintaining it," reflected Sunder Katwala, Director

of the British Future think tank.

"There'll be a sense, I think, of regret and disappointment that this didn't go better for Rishi Sunak as there was great pride... but people aren't going to make their voting choice on that basis. And that's why I think, more British Indian voters are going to vote for change than vote for keeping Rishi Sunak, even though they appreciate his historic achievement in being the first British Prime Minister of Indian heritage," he noted. Against this backdrop, the issues that would influence British Indian voters would echo wider concerns such as the cost-of-living crisis, the National Health Service (NHS) waiting lists and getting a grip on illegal migration.

While Sunak did meet his pledge to bring down inflation from the soaring levels he inherited in the aftermath of the chaotic terms of predecessors Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, it may not prove enough to get him over the line at the ballot box.

"I don't know why he's not going around to every single member of the Tory party inside of the government saying, 'I told you so...' We've now reduced inflation down from the high of 11 per cent down to 2 per cent. We've seen the underlying

economic outlook for the country improving since Sunak took office in October 2022. "But the problem we have is that people have long memories of a time when we forgot what it was to be a Conservative," Andrew Boff, Tory Chair of the London Assembly, said during an election debate hosted by 'Eastern Eye' earlier this week. "Rishi Sunak, at one level, was a breath of fresh air because he's clearly an extremely bright, decent man attempting to do his best... [but] not much has changed since he became Prime Minister," said Lord Richard Newby, Leader of the Lib Dems in the House of Lords, during the event. For Anneliese Dodds, Labour Party chair and shadow secretary of state for women and equalities, Sunak's term marked a "huge amount of continuity" with his embattled predecessors.

However, if the outcome of the election indicates a definitive shift among British Indian voters towards Labour, it would be seen more as a vote in favour of change rather than a decisive ballot in favour of party leader Keir Starmer — who is simply being viewed as a "choose-able alternative," according to poll analysts.

Indian-origin schoolgirl chess prodigy to be youngest in England team

PTI ■ LONDON

Bodhana Sivanandan, a nine-year-old Indian-origin schoolgirl is set to make chess history after she became the youngest person selected to represent England internationally in any sport. Bodhana, from Harrow in north-west London, will join the England Women's Team at the Chess Olympiad in Budapest, Hungary, in September. The others in her team are all in their 20s, 30s or 40s. "I found out yesterday after I came back from school when my dad told me. I was happy. I hope I'll do well and I'll get another title," she told the BBC on Wednesday.

Malcolm Pein, manager of the England chess team, described the schoolgirl as one of the most remarkable British chess prodigies he has ever seen. "It's exciting — she's on course to be one of the best British players ever," he said. Her father, Siva Sivanandan,



says he remains mystified about where his daughter got her talent. "I'm an engineering graduate, as is my wife, but I'm not good at chess," he said. Bodhana first picked up chess during the pandemic lockdown when Siva's friend was going back to India and gave her a few bags which also had a chess board. "I was interested in the pieces, so I started playing," she recalls. Last December, Sivanandan won the European Blitz Chess Championship in Zagreb,

Croatia, and was dubbed "super talented" at the time. Soon after, she was among a group of young chess enthusiasts invited by British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to 10 Downing Street to mark the government's major new GBP 1 million investment package for the game. The package has since been in place to support children attending schools in disadvantaged areas across England to learn and play chess, improve the visibility and availability of the game, and fund elite playing. As part of the package, the UK's Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) said it would invest GBP 500,000 in the English Chess Federation (ECF) over two years to develop the next generation of world-class talent. Funds will support expert coaching, training camps and cutting-edge computer analysis for international events to assist current grandmasters and up-and-coming players.

Verdict expected for Iranian-born Norwegian man charged in Oslo LGBT+ festival attack

PTI ■ LONDON

Copenhagen (Denmark) (AP): A verdict is expected on Thursday in the case of an Iranian-born Norwegian man who is charged with terrorism in a 2002 attack at an LGBTQ+ festival in Oslo, Norway, in which two people were killed and nine seriously wounded at three locations. The Oslo District Court is to rule on whether Zaniar Matapour fired 10 rounds with a machine gun and eight with a handgun into the crowd, chiefly outside the London Pub, a popular gay bar, on June 25, 2002.

Prosecutors said Matapour, 45, a Norwegian citizen originally from Iran, has sworn allegiance to the Islamic State group. Extensive video material of the attack was presented in court. The verdict will not be read in court but will be sent out electronically. Matapour will have the verdict read to

him in prison, the court said. Matapour was overpowered by bystanders after the attack and arrested. Following the attack, a Pride parade was cancelled, with police saying they could not guarantee security. The shooting shocked Norway, which has a relatively low crime rate but has experienced a series of "lone wolf" attacks by individuals in recent decades, including one of the worst mass shootings in Europe. In 2011, a right-wing extremist killed 69 people on the island of Utøya after setting off a bomb in Oslo that left eight dead.

Six days before the attack, Norway's external intelligence agency, E-Tjenesten, learned from an undercover agent that a possible action was expected in a Nordic country and the information was passed to the domestic security service.

Keir Starmer: Human rights lawyer turned Labour Leader

PTI ■ LONDON

Keir Starmer, the human rights barrister turned Labour Party Leader, has made it a manifesto pledge to pursue a "new strategic partnership" with India, including an FTA, if handed a mandate to form a Labour-led government in Thursday's general election.

Sir Keir, who was knighted by the late Queen Elizabeth II for his services to law and criminal justice, spent much of his career in the legal profession before stepping into the world of politics, first elected as Labour's member of Parliament from London in 2015.

The 61-year-old father of two teenage kids, who he and his National Health Service (NHS) employee wife Victoria have chosen to keep out of the political spotlight, has been credited with reversing the



party's fortunes from one of its worst poll performances in the 2019 general election to the edge of government. The other turnaround Starmer worked on was to try and rebuild Labour's connect with the Indian diaspora, alienated under former leader Jeremy Corbyn over a perceived anti-India stance on Kashmir.

"I have a clear message for you all today: this is a changed Labour Party," declared Starmer at the India Global Forum (IGF) last year, setting the tone for the party's India-UK outlook.

"What my Labour government will seek with India is a relationship based on our shared values of democracy and aspiration. That will seek a free trade agreement (FTA), we share that ambition, but also a new strategic partnership for global security, climate security, economic security," he said.

This approach has been entrenched in the party's 2024 election manifesto, which commits to seeking a "new strategic partnership with India, including a free trade agreement, as well as deepening cooperation in areas like security, education, technology and climate change."

Putin, Xi among others attend SCO summit



From left, front row, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani pose for a photo at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) plus summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, on Thursday

AP ■ MOSCOW

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping on Thursday attended the summit of a security grouping created by Moscow and Beijing to counter Western alliances. Putin and Xi joined the leaders of other countries that are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation at its annual meeting in Kazakhstan's capital of Astana. The grouping was established in 2001 by China, Russia and the four ex-Soviet Central Asian nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to promote regional security and economic cooperation. It was later joined by India, Pakistan and Iran. Russia's western neighbour and ally, Belarus, joined the SCO on Thursday. Observer states and dialogue partners include Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Addressing the summit, Putin emphasised the group's focus on ensuring security of its members and said the SCO will form a dedicated centre that will coordinate response to various security challenges. He added that the group's members will also endorse a special program to fight separatism and extremism. Xi called on the SCO members to show solidarity in the face "the real challenges of intervention and polarisation," according to a readout of his speech by the official Xinhua news agency. "In the face of the real threat of the Cold War mentality, we

have to safeguard the security bottom line," he added. Besides Putin and Xi, and summit host Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, attending Thursday's meeting are Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif of Pakistan, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan, President Emomali Rakhmon of Tajikistan, President Sadyr Zhaparov of Kyrgyzstan and President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus. Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India has sent his foreign minister S Jaishankar. Iran is still choosing a successor to President Ebrahim Raisi, killed in a helicopter crash in May, with a runoff election Friday, so acting President Mohammad Mokhbar is attending. Other guests of the SCO include President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Türkiye and President İlham Aliyev of Azerbaijan. Also present is UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who is visiting Central Asia. For Putin, the summit offered another venue to demonstrate the failure of Western efforts to isolate Russia over its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Speaking Thursday at the summit, Putin mentioned his statement in June that the hostilities could end if Ukraine withdraws its troops from the four regions that Moscow annexed in 2022 and abandons its bid to join NATO. Kyiv and its allies have rejected the idea. Putin also thanked SCO members for their proposals for a peace settlement, adding that Moscow will take them into

account. Moscow has hailed a peace plan for Ukraine offered by China last year that was rejected by both Ukraine and the West for failing to call for Russia to leave occupied parts of Ukraine. At a meeting with Xi on Wednesday, Putin hailed the SCO as "one of the key pillars of a fair, multipolar world order," and said ties between Moscow and Beijing are "experiencing the best period in their history." It marked their second meeting in as many months following Putin's visit to China, which underscored Beijing's political support for Moscow amid Western sanctions and China's role as a top market for Russian oil and gas. Russia also has relied on Beijing as a main source of high-tech imports to keep its military machine running. The SCO helps China project its influence, especially across Central Asia and the Global South. Xi called for "bridges of communication" between countries last week and wants to further promote China as an alternative to the US and its allies. For host Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian nations, the meeting is a way to further their cooperation with bigger, more powerful neighbours. Kazakhstan, for instance, frequently engages with both neighbouring Russia and China, while also pursuing links with the West. Speaking in opening remarks at the summit, Tokayev hailed the SCO as "one of the most authoritative and influential international structures."

Shehbaz raises terror concern

PTI ■ ASTANA

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Thursday raised the issue of terrorism as a major concern for member states at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and called for "meaningful" engagement with the Afghan Taliban government. Shahbaz, who arrived in Kazakhstan's capital of Astana on Wednesday for a two-day official visit, represented Pakistan at the SCO meeting where leaders and diplomats from countries including China, India, Türkiye, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan have gathered to discuss economic and security cooperation. The prime minister, during his address, emphasised the importance of maintaining peace in the region as a precondition for economic development, Dawn News reported. "Achieving lasting peace in Afghanistan is a linchpin to this common objective," he said, adding that the interna-

tional community "meaningfully engage with the Afghan government to meet their genuine economic and development needs". Sharif also said the Afghan Taliban must also "take concrete measures" to ensure its soil is not used for terrorism against any other state. "Terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, including state terrorism, must be condemned in clear and unambiguous terms," he said, adding that there was "no justification for killing innocent people or using the bogey of terrorism" for political point-scoring. He also touched on the topic of globalisation and highlighted that leaders had the responsibility to rise above partisan geopolitics and join hands to secure a prosperous future for our people. Regarding Pakistan's role in regional trade connectivity, the premier said the country's location made it an "ideal trade conduit" for the region and added that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

supplemented "SCO's vision of regional connectivity and economic interaction". Shehbaz also advocated for the promotion "of national currencies for mutual settlements within the region" to avoid "global financial shocks". He said alternative funding mechanisms would "give impetus to different development projects in the SCO region". The prime minister said Pakistan would do "its utmost to provide impetus to collective efforts to raise living standards in the SCO region" while talking about the rise in political and military conflicts across the globe and consequent hike in food and fuel prices, which have "seriously affected members' ability to address poverty". Pakistan and India became a member of SCO in June 2017 at a summit in Kazakhstan. Recalling how Pakistan and Russia used to have a bilateral trade and a barter system in the 1950s and 1960s, Shehbaz, on Wednesday, during his

interaction with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the sidelines of the summit, called for overcoming financial and banking issues between the two countries by renewing and expanding trade under a barter system. "I think today is the time we can overcome financial and other banking issues by renewing our trade and expanding our trade under a barter," Shehbaz told Putin. "That will be very beneficial to Pakistan and we will be able to overcome many problems." Putin said both countries could enhance their cooperation in energy and agriculture and expressed his readiness to promote cooperation with cash-strapped Pakistan in the field of food security. Meanwhile, Shehbaz also proposed to establish tripartite institutional mechanisms, particularly in economic and investment areas to strengthen Pakistan-Türkiye-Azerbaijan economic and commercial cooperation.

Sweden protests against death penalties to 3

Copenhagen (Denmark): Sweden's Foreign Ministry said on Thursday it will summon the Iraqi charge d'affaires in Stockholm to protest against death sentences received by Swedes in Iraq. Last month, Stockholm protested over a death sentence given to a Swede. On Thursday, two more cases were confirmed, bringing the total to at least three Swedes who have been sentenced to death in Iraq in recent weeks. All were related to a deadly shooting earlier this year, the Foreign Ministry said. The ministry said it has also received information that a fourth Swedish citizen has received a death sentence that could be drug related. However, "there are certain uncertainties regarding the person's identity, which is why the Ministry of Foreign Affairs cannot confirm the sentence at the moment", it said. "We are acting to ensure that the sentences are not carried out," the ministry said.

Floated rise in gasoline prices may spark new protests in Iran

AP ■ DUBAI

As Iran's runoff presidential election nears, comments by an official in the campaign of reformist Masoud Pezeshkian raised the possibility of his government increasing government-set gasoline prices — a move that has sparked nationwide protests in the past. While still tentative, economists long have warned Iran needs to overhaul its system of subsidies, estimated to cost the Islamic Republic tens of billions of dollars a year. In 2019, a similar hike triggered mass demonstrations and a bloody crackdown that grew even more intense after the 2022 protests over the death of Mahsa Amini. On Saturday, Pezeshkian campaign head Ali Abdolalazadeh told journalists that his possible presidency would see price hikes for fuel and other items handled without any outcry. "Don't worry, petrol at any ... price, you will see that it would be allowed with calmness and cooperation by the people," Abdolalazadeh said. Hard-liners immediately accused Pezeshkian of planning to increase fuel prices by a factor of eight. Pezeshkian's camp claimed the price under Saeed Jalili, a former nuclear negotiator Pezeshkian is facing in Friday's election, would be 12

times higher, based on remarks by those close to the hard-liner. That official, Majid Karimi, suggested Iranians should be paying the "world price" at the pump. People gathered at a Jalili rally carried a sign warning against any price hike, saying: "We do not want petrol at price of 250,000 Rial" a litre. That would be 40 cents a litre, or USD 1.55 a gallon. But no matter who is elected, it is likely Iran will see fuel price hikes. Iran raised minimum gasoline prices by 50 per cent to 15,000 rials per litre in 2019 — or 12 cents a litre, or about 50 cents a gallon. But with Iran's currency crashing since then, that's now 2 cents a litre, or 9 cents a gallon. After a monthly 60-litre quota, it costs 30,000 rials a litre. That had been nearly 24 cents a litre or 90 cents a gallon then, but now is nearly 5 cents a litre, or 18 cents a gallon. By comparison, an average gallon of regular gas in the US costs USD 3.50, according to AAA. Iran spent USD 52 billion on oil subsidies in 2022, according to the Paris-based International Energy Agency, the most of any country in the world. Iran spent 36 per cent of its overall gross domestic product, or USD 127 billion, that year on oil, electricity and natural gas



Reformist candidate for the Iranian presidential election Masoud Pezeshkian clenches his fists during a campaign rally in Tehran, Iran

subsidies. Though it costs the Iranian government tens of billions of dollars in subsidies, cheap gasoline is practically considered a birthright in the country, home to the world's fourth-largest crude oil reserves despite decades of economic woes since its 1979 Islamic Revolution. Gasoline there remains among the cheapest in the world, in part to help keep costs low for its underemployed, who often drive taxis to make ends meet. The 2019 hikes led to demonstrations across some 100 cities and towns across Iran, with gas

stations and banks burned down. The crackdown that followed included at least 321 people killed, according to Amnesty International. Thousands were detained. During the 2022 protests over the death of Amini, after she was arrested for wearing her hijab not to the liking of security forces, over 500 people were killed and 22,000 locked up — part of a pattern of widening unrest in the Islamic Republic. On the streets of Tehran, people have grown increasingly anxious about the price of fuel

rising. "Do you know what that means? I may buy fuel to set fire to everything," said taxi driver, Rasool Kashani, 45. "I will not vote at all. Both plan to slaughter ordinary people." Shahrooz Imani, a 41-year-old mother of three, said she planned to vote for Jalili as she believes he cares more about the poor given Pezeshkian's apparent plan to raise prices. "This will deprive us of our daily needs — even vegetables and bread — if price of fuel hikes up," she said. A bookseller on Tehran's famed Enghelab — or "Revolution" — Street also worried about the poor. "We cannot tolerate this again, maybe we need to flee to neighbouring countries to work," said Abbas Irani. Mahdi Robati, a business analyst and CEO of an Iranian brokerage firm, warned that Jalili's economic policies and hard-line positions could bring about economic damage on the scale of China's Mao Zedong. "The output of this thinking is the complete destruction of the rial, the spread of absolute poverty throughout the country, the deprivation of all political and social freedoms, famine and the complete coupisation of the economy, and many other nightmarish consequences," he wrote on the social media platform X.

Ukraine army retreats, Russia closer to seizing Chasiv Yar

Kyiv (AP): A spokesperson for Ukraine's military said its army has retreated from a neighbourhood in the outskirts of Chasiv Yar, a strategically important town in the eastern Donetsk region which has been reduced to rubble under a months-long Russian assault. Chasiv Yar lies a short distance west of Bakhmut, which was captured by Russia last year after a bitter 10-month battle. For months, Russian forces have focused on capturing Chasiv Yar, a town which occupies a strategic, elevated location. Its fall would put nearby cities in jeopardy, compromise critical Ukrainian supply routes and bring Russia closer to its stated aim of seizing the entire Donetsk region. The Ukrainian army retreated from a northeastern neighbourhood in the town of Nazar

Voloshyn, the spokesman for the Khortytsia ground forces formation, told The Associated Press in a written message on Thursday. Ukraine's defensive positions in the town were "destroyed," he said, adding that there was a threat of serious casualties if troops remained in the area and that Russia did not leave "a single intact building." Months of relentless Russian artillery strikes have devastated Chasiv Yar, with homes and municipal offices charred, and a town that once had a population of 12,000 has been left deserted. The intensity of Russian strikes on Ukraine's defensive line in the area of Chasiv Yar has increased over the last month, Voloshyn said. In the past week alone, Voloshyn said Russia has carried out nearly 1,300 strikes, fired

nearly 130 glide bombs and made 44 ground assaults. Other Russian attacks in recent weeks have focused on capturing nearby settlements that would allow them to advance to Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, the biggest cities in the Ukrainian-controlled part of the Donetsk region. Ukrainian commanders in the area say their resources remain stretched, largely due to a months-long gap in military assistance from the United States which threw Ukraine's military onto the defensive. In June, members of the artillery brigade in Chasiv Yar reported that supplies of American ammunition had started to arrive. Elsewhere in Ukraine, the governor of the northern Chernihiv region, Viacheslav Chaus, said Russia launched 22 drones over Ukraine last night.

Hasina to travel to China next week

Beijing (PTI): China on Thursday announced that Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will visit Beijing early next week and meet China's top leadership, including President Xi Jinping, which will facilitate political mutual trust, and push bilateral relations to a new level. Hasina's visit from July 8 to 10, days after her India visit, is being seen as an apparent attempt to balance ties between India and China, one of Dhaka's biggest investors. "This is her (Hasina's) first visit to China since she started her new term. It is also her second visit to China in five years," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a media briefing here. During her visit, she will meet President Xi, Premier Li Qiang and attend the signing ceremony of cooperation documents together, Mao

said. The leaders of the two countries will have an "in-depth exchange of views" on deepening traditional friendship, expanding mutually beneficial cooperation and international and regional issues of common concern, the spokesperson said, adding that Hasina will also attend the China-Bangladesh Business Trade and Investment Conference. "The visit will facilitate political mutual trust, strengthen the development strategies, promote high-quality joint construction of the 'Belt and Road', accelerate the implementation of the three major global initiatives, and push China-Bangladesh relations to a new level," Mao said. Hasina's China visit was expected to focus on more Chinese investments in Bangladesh under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Sri Lanka strikes private debt restructuring deal

PTI ■ COLOMBO

Sri Lanka has reached a debt restructuring deal with the international sovereign bondholders after protracted negotiations, state finance minister Shehan Semsinghe said on Thursday, calling it a "crucial step" in the cash-strapped country's efforts to restore debt sustainability. In a statement, State Minister of Finance Semsinghe said that an agreement on restructuring terms was reached on Wednesday, completing Sri Lanka's debt restructuring process. "ISBs (International Sovereign Bonds) account for USD 12.5 billion out of the total external debt of USD 37 billion. This agreement is a crucial step in our efforts to restore debt sustainability," Semsinghe said.

He added that the agreement with private bondholders was subject to the approval by the official creditor committee of nations, including India. "This marks another key milestone in our journey towards economic revival and strengthening," he said. Officials said the expected haircut agreed upon would amount to 28 per cent, with an upfront payment to ISB holders commencing from September this year. Officials said this completes Sri Lanka's debt restructuring process, which came as a prerequisite for debt sustainability in the ongoing International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout of USD 2.9 billion extended in March 2023 over a period of four years. It follows the finalisation of debt restructuring agreements

with bilateral lenders, including India and China, in Paris on June 26, which President Ranil Wickremesinghe described as a "significant milestone" for bolstering international trust in the debt-ridden economy. Sri Lanka declared its first-ever sovereign default in mid-April 2022, having run out of its foreign exchange reserves. The halt to the debt services meant that the multilateral creditor nations and commercial lenders could not extend fresh financing to the country. The government faced criticism from the main Opposition after last week's announcement on bilateral debt restructuring, who claimed that the government had failed to achieve the best solution for the country.

Russian-linked cybercampaigns put bullseye on France

AP ■ PARIS

Photos of blood-red hands on a Holocaust memorial. Caskets at the Eiffel Tower. A fake French military recruitment drive calling for soldiers in Ukraine, and major French news sites improbably registered in an obscure Pacific territory, population 15,000. All are part of disinformation campaigns orchestrated out of Russia and targeting France, according to French officials and cybersecurity experts in Europe and the United States. France's legislative elections and the Paris Olympics sent them into overdrive. More than a dozen reports issued in the past year point to an intensifying effort from Russia to undermine France, particularly the upcoming Games, and President Emmanuel Macron, who is one

of Ukraine's most vocal supporters in Europe. The Russian campaigns sowing anti-French disinformation began online early last summer but first became tangible in October 2023 when more than 1,000 bots linked to Russia relayed photos of graffitied Stars of David in Paris and its suburbs. A French intelligence report said the Russian intelligence agency FSB ordered the tagging, as well as subsequent vandalism of a memorial to those who helped rescue Jews from the Holocaust. Photos from each event were amplified on social media by fake accounts linked to the Russian disinformation site RRN, according to cybersecurity experts. Russia denies any such campaigns. The French intelligence report says RRN is part of a larger operation orchestrated by

Sergei Kiriyenko, a ranking Kremlin official. "You have to see this as an ecosystem," said a French military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to reveal information about the Russian effort. "It's a hybrid strategy." The tags and the vandalism had no direct link to Russia's war in Ukraine, but they provoked a strong reaction from the French political class, with denunciations in the legislature and public debate. Antisemitic attacks are on the rise in France, and the war in Gaza has proven divisive. The Stars of David could be interpreted either as support for Israel or as opposition. The effect was to sow division and unease. French Jews in particular have found themselves unwittingly thrust into the political fray despite, at just 500,000 people, making up a

small proportion of the French population. In March, just after Macron discussed the possibility of mobilising the French military in Ukraine, a fake recruitment drive went up for the French army in Ukraine, spawning a series of posts in Russian- and French-language Telegram channels that got picked up in Russian and Belarusian media, according to a separate French government report seen by The Associated Press. On June 1, caskets appeared outside the Eiffel Tower, bearing the inscription "French soldiers in Ukraine." The larger disinformation efforts show little traction in France, but the Russian audience may have been the real target, officials said, by showing that Russia's war in Ukraine is, as Putin has said, really a war with the West.

Among the broader goals, the French military official said, was a long-term and steady effort to sow social discord, erode faith in the media and democratic governments, undermine NATO, and sap Western support for Ukraine. Denigrating the Olympics, from which most Russian athletes are banned, is a bonus, according to French officials monitoring the increasingly strident posts warning of imminent unrest ahead of the Games. On June 9, the French far-right National Rally trounced Macron's party in elections for the European Parliament. The party has historically been close to Russia: one of its leading figures, Marine Le Pen, cultivated ties to Putin for many years and supported Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. And its leading contender for prime minister,

Jordan Bardella, has said he opposes sending long-range weapons to Kyiv. In more than 4,400 posts gathered since mid-November by antibot4navalny, a collective that analyses Russian bot behaviour, those targeting audiences in France and Germany predominated. The number of weekly posts ranged from 100 to 200 except for the week of May 5, when it dropped near zero, the data showed. That week, as it happens, was a holiday in Russia. Many of the posts redirect either to RRN or to sites that appear identical to major French media, but with the domain — and content — changed. At least two of the more recent mirrored sites are registered in Wallis and Futuna, a French Pacific territory 10 time zones from Paris. A click on the top of the fake

page redirects back to the real news sites themselves to give the impression of authenticity. Other posts redirect to original sites controlled by the campaign itself, dubbed Doppelganger. The redirects shifted focus for the European elections and continued after Macron called the surprise legislative elections with just three weeks to spare. Three-quarters of posts from the week ahead of the June 30 first-round legislative vote that were directed toward a French audience focused on either criticising Macron or boosting the National Rally, antibot4navalny found in data shared with The Associated Press. One post on a fake site purported to be from Le Point, a current affairs magazine, and the French news agency AFP, criticising Macron. "Our leaders have no idea how

ordinary French people live but are ready to destroy France in the name of aid for Ukraine," read the headline on June 25. Another site falsely claimed to be from Macron's party, offering to pay 100 euros for a vote for him — and linking back to the party's true website. And still another inadvertently left a generative AI prompt calling for the re-write of an article "taking a conservative stance against the liberal policies of the Macron administration," according to findings last week from Insiqt Group, the threat research division of the cybersecurity consultancy Recorded Future. "They're scraping automatically, sending the text to the AI and asking the AI to introduce bias or slants into the article and rewrite it," said Clement Briens, an analyst for Recorded Future.

Sensex, Nifty hit new lifetime highs

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ticked higher to scale fresh all-time high levels on Thursday, following buying in market heavyweights ICICI Bank, Infosys and TCS amid a largely positive trend in global equities.

The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 62.87 points or 0.08 per cent to settle at a new closing peak of 80,049.67. During the day, it rallied 405.84 points to hit a fresh all-time high of 80,392.64.

The Nifty rose 15.65 points or 0.06 per cent to settle at a record closing peak of 24,302.15. Intra-day, it surged 114.5 points to hit a fresh lifetime high of 24,401.

Among the Sensex pack, HCL Technologies, ICICI Bank, Tata Motors, Sun Pharmaceuticals, Tata Consultancy Services, Infosys, Kotak Mahindra Bank and Mahindra and



Mahindra were the gainers. In contrast, HDFC Bank, Bajaj Finance, Larsen & Toubro, Tech Mahindra, UltraTech Cement and IndusInd Bank were among the laggards.

In Asian markets, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Seoul ended in the positive territory, while Shanghai closed in the red. European markets were trading in the green territory in mid-session deals. US markets ended higher on Wednesday during the

shortened trading session. Stock exchanges will remain closed on Thursday on account of Independence Day.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude fell 0.52 per cent to USD 86.89 a barrel.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth Rs 5,483.63 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. On Wednesday, the 30-share index hit the historic 80,000 mark for the first time intra-day trade. It surged 632.85 points or 0.79 per cent to a record intraday high of 80,074.30. The index later closed near the 80,000 level at 79,986.80, up by 545.35 points or 0.69 per cent over the last close.

The Nifty climbed 162.65 points or 0.67 per cent to end at an all-time high of 24,286.50. During the day, it zoomed 183.4 points or 0.76 per cent to hit a fresh intraday record peak of 24,307.25.

Sebi mandates institutional mechanism for fraud prevention in stock broking

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Sebi on Thursday issued a circular requiring stock brokers to establish an institutional mechanism for prevention and detection of fraud or market abuse in a bid to protect the interest of investors in securities market. The circular mandates the implementation of systems for the surveillance of trading activities and internal controls, introduction of a whistle-blower policy, among other obligations.

These requirements are part of Sebi (Stock Brokers) (Amendment) Regulations, 2024, which aim to ensure higher standards of market integrity and investor protection.

The standards for implementation of the same, including operational modalities will be formulated by the broker's Industry Standards Forum (ISF), in consultation with the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), the regulator said in the circular. The implementation will be based on the size of the stock brokers. Brokers with more



than 50,000 active Unique Client Codes (UCCs) are required to comply by January 1, 2025. Further, those with 2,001 to 50,000 active UCCs have to comply by April 1, 2025, and brokers with up to 2,000 active UCCs must comply by April 1, 2026.

In addition, qualified stock brokers must comply with these requirements by August 1, 2024, considering their existing obligations for governance and client behaviour surveillance.

Sebi directed the stock exchanges to bring the provisions of this circular to the notice of stock brokers and also disseminate the same on their websites.

It also directed them to amend their bye-laws, and ensure that brokers notify the obligation/ requirement on the stock brokers to follow the standards adopted by the ISF, and issue a joint notice which indicates the date of applicability of the circular to various stock brokers based on the criteria.

The provisions of this circular shall come into force in a risk-based, staggered manner to ensure smooth adoption, and effective implementation for all the stock brokers by providing enough time for stock brokers, based on their size, for making necessary changes, Sebi said.

Coal recorded 10.2 per cent growth among eight key infra sectors in May

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The coal sector has registered a growth of 10.2 per cent among all eight core industries of the economy in May, the government said on Thursday.

The index of coal industry has reached 184.7 points during May as compared to 167.6 points during the same month last year.

"The coal sector has demonstrated highest growth of 10.2 per cent (provisional), following the electricity industry among the eight core industries for the month of May, 2024 as per the Index of Eight Core Industries (ICI) (Base Year 2011-12) released by Ministry of Commerce & Industries," the coal ministry said in a statement.

The driving force behind growth can be attributed to a considerable rise in coal production during May.

This increase in production underscores the sector's capacity to meet growing demand of energy and manufacturing industries.

SBI announces initiatives to mitigate risks in agri loan portfolio

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The country's largest lender SBI on Thursday announced 11 new initiatives -- including enhancement of its digital banking features and opening of 35 new Agricultural Centralised Processing Cells -- to mitigate risks in its agricultural loan portfolio.

On the occasion of the 69th Foundation Day, State Bank of India announced these initiatives to widen the bank's accessibility to address the banking needs of its potential customers, the lender said in a statement.

SBI has enhanced its digital payment

experience, with the introduction of two exciting features like tap-and-pay on the BHIM SBI PAY app and end-to-end digital loans against mutual funds on the YONO app, it added.

The bank has also announced an initiative, which is a fully digital end-to-end journey for SBI Surya Ghar Loan, it said, adding that the users can opt for credit to install solar rooftops under the central government's PM Surya Ghar Scheme, offering loans for up to 10 KW capacity.

The entire process will be managed on SBI's digital platform from applicant registration on the MNRE/REC portal to



loan disbursement.

Acknowledging the significant contributions and global presence of the Indian diaspora in shaping the nation's growth story, SBI opened a second Global NRI Centre (GNC) in Patiala, Punjab.

To enhance its service to NRI clients, its Chairman Dinesh Khara inaugurated the second Global NRI Centre (GNC) in Patiala on Bank Day. SBI's dedicated GNCs reflect the bank's unwavering commitment to strengthening its ties with the global Indian community.

"These centres serve as hubs of

excellence, providing specialised services to NRI customers. With a network of 434 specialised NRI branches in India, foreign offices in 29 countries, and partnerships with 45 exchange houses and 5 banks in GCC countries, SBI is well-equipped to offer comprehensive services to its NRI clientele worldwide," the statement said.

In another move, SBI has launched comprehensively redesigned High Court branches aimed at enhancing services for the legal community.

This initiative underscores SBI's commitment to providing tailored financial solutions that cater specifically

to the unique needs of lawyers and legal professionals, it added.

The redesigned branches are equipped to offer top-tier services, including financial management, transaction facilitation, and personalised financial advice.

With regard to home loans, the bank has made processing such loans more transparent. Home loan borrowers will now receive automated email and SMS notifications regarding the status of their loan application at various processing stages. This initiative aims to enhance customer satisfaction and convenience, it said.

Rupee falls 1 paisa to close at 83.50 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee pared its initial losses and settled for the day on an almost flat note at 83.50 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, resisting pressure from elevated crude oil prices.

Forex traders said a positive trend in domestic equities, wherein benchmark indices touched all-time high levels, and significant foreign fund inflows supported the rupee and restricted the fall.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.52 and hit the intraday high of 83.48 and a low of 83.56 against the American currency during the session.

It finally settled at 83.50 (provisional) against the dollar, 1 paisa lower than its previous close.

On Wednesday, the rupee settled 1 paisa lower at 83.49 against the US dollar.

"We expect the rupee to trade with a slight positive bias on softness in the US dollar amid weak economic data and rise in risk appetite in global markets," said Anuj



Choudhary — Research Analyst at Sharekhan by BNP Paribas.

"However, elevated crude oil prices may limit the gains. Investors may remain cautious ahead of the US non-farm payrolls report tomorrow," Choudhary said, adding that USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 83.20 to Rs 83.80.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.15 per cent lower at 105.24.

Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, were trading 0.47 per cent lower at USD 86.93 per barrel.

In the domestic equity market, Sensex breached the historic 80,000-mark and

Nifty scaled a fresh lifetime high. The 30-share BSE Sensex ended the day 62.87 points, or 0.08 per cent, up at its all-time high of 80,049.67 points. The broader NSE Nifty settled 15.65 points, or 0.06 per cent, higher at a fresh peak of 24,302.15 points.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net buyers in the capital markets on Wednesday, as they purchased shares worth Rs 5,483.63 crore, according to exchange data.

Meanwhile, according to an official of S&P Global Ratings, a sovereign rating upgrade for India in the next 24 months is possible if the central government is able to prudently manage its finances and bring down the fiscal deficit to 4 per cent of GDP.

S&P Global Ratings Director, Sovereign Ratings, YeeFarn Phua, said the trigger for an upgrade would be the government (Centre + states) deficit falling below 7 per cent of the GDP, and a lot of this would have to be driven by the Central Government.

Bright future for air cargo sector; need to ensure faster turnaround time: Official

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

To tap the potential of the country's air cargo sector, the focus should be on further improving processes as well as ensuring faster turnaround time, a senior government official said on Thursday.

The government is working on developing logistics hubs. Piyush Srivastava, Senior Economic Advisor at the Ministry of Civil Aviation, said the air cargo sector has a bright future and the number of freighters in the country is expected to rise.

Currently, Indian carriers have around 18 freighters. There will be a focus on further improving the ease of doing business and faster turnaround time in the air cargo sector, he said while speaking at the conference organised by the ACFI (Air Cargo Forum India) in the national capital.

While passenger traffic has recovered after being hit by the coronavirus pandemic, air cargo is yet to fully recover to the pre-Covid levels.

In 2023-24, the air cargo handled in the country was a little over 3.36 million tonnes.



Surendra Kumar Ahirwar, Joint Secretary at DPIIT, a lot of movement is happening on the logistics side, including the skilling of people.

He also said there is sub-optimal utilisation of existing air cargo facilities and emphasised the need for developing hubs as part of the logistics infrastructure.

According to ACFI President Yashpal Sharma, the air cargo sector accounts for nearly 10 per cent of domestic carriers' revenues.

Citing market research reports, he said the country's air freight market is estimated to grow to USD 16.37 billion by 2027.

Also, the plans to establish air transport shipment hubs at major airports are expected to drive the industry's growth, he added.

Kolkata office leasing absorption in April-June jumps 33 per cent

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Office space leasing absorption in Kolkata surged 33 per cent year on year to 0.4 million square feet in the April-June quarter of 2024, according to the CBRE India Office Figures Q2 report. The key sectors driving absorption in Q2 2024 were technology (40 per cent), BFSI (21 per cent), and flexible space operators (10 per cent).

"The office space leasing absorption in April-June 2024 was 0.4 million square feet against 0.3 million square feet in the YoY period, a CBRE official said.

Another real estate consultant, Knight Frank India, also said that Kolkata's office market saw a significant increase in office leasing volume, with 0.7 million square feet of office space transacted in H1 2024 (January-June 2024). This represents a 23 per cent growth compared to H1 2023, according to Knight Frank India's report "India

Real Estate: Residential and Office" (January-June 2024).

Average office space rents increased by 6 per cent year-on-year (YoY) during H1 2024, it said.

Knight Frank also reported that Kolkata's residential real estate market experienced strong homebuying demand, with 9,130 residential units sold in H1 2024, marking a 25 per cent YoY growth in sales volume.

The continued stamp duty rebate and new launches across various price segments contributed to the market's sustained upward sales momentum. However, the state government withdrew the stamp duty and 10 per cent rebate in circle rate effective July.

According to CBRE, pan-India office leasing remained robust, with gross office leasing reaching 32.8 million square feet during Jan-Jun'24, a 14 per cent increase year-on-year across nine cities.

Healing hands, caring hearts



On the occasion of National Doctor's Day Anil Agnihotri RH (Delhi South) visited Lady Harding Medical College and met with Dr Sarita Beri, director of institute, Rajeshwar Lal, Dy Director (Admin), Dr Anupam Parkash (CMO) many other doctors, greeted them with a flower bud and a small gift as a token of love.

India among most active countries for Meta's Threads

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India is one of the most active countries for Threads, which has notched over 175 million monthly active users globally, according to social media giant Meta.

The update assumes significance as it marks the completion of nearly one year since Meta officially launched rival to Twitter (now X).

"With a 175 million actives, we're seeing Threads become a place where people feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas. India is one of the most active countries for Threads globally," the release said.

Among the other major takeaways are creation of 50 million topic tags on Threads till date, globally.

popular tags and topics on Threads are centred around film, TV and OTT content, celebrity-related conversations and sports.

Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced that Threads has over 175 million monthly active users as the social media giant asserted that Threads was launched with the belief that "everyone has something valuable to say".

"It's been a year now, and we're seeing it become a place where people feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas. In fact, India is one of the most active countries for Threads globally," the release said.

Among the other major takeaways are creation of 50 million topic tags on Threads till date, globally.



"Cricket has been reigning on Threads in India, with players from the current Indian squad like Rishabh Pant and Ravindra Jadeja, to

former cricketers like Akash Chopra and Suresh Raina, experts like Riddhima Pathak and international cricketers like AB de Villiers sharing their passion for the game," Meta said.

The T20 Cricket World Cup, IPL, and Women's Premier League 2024 have been some of the moments that have sparked cricket conversations on Threads this year, it further said, adding that over 200 creators shared updates about the concluded IPL season on Threads. Threads scaled highs immediately after it was unveiled in July 2023 — it snapped up 100 million user sign-ups within a week of its launch.

The initial euphoria, however, wore off and according to industry watchers, the app struggled subsequently with steady decline in engagement metrics.

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AI-powered ROI calculator introduced

PNS ■ Mumbai

Jaro Education, a name in online higher education and upskilling, recently introduced a game-changing tool: The AI-powered ROI (Return on Investment) calculator for upskilling.

This innovative feature is designed to help working professionals make informed choices about their upskilling journey. This is one of the first innovations of its kind launched by any online higher education and upskilling company in India.

In today's fast-paced world, staying updated with the latest skills is more important than ever, according to the company.

Office leasing in Gurugram

PNS ■ New Delhi

Leading real estate developer M3M has leased 220,000 sq ft in Gurugram to Flexible workspace provider Incuspaze in their boutique office project - M3M Urbana Premium on the Golf Course Extension Road, people aware of the deal said.

"M3M is looking at Office leasing as a major drive this year and aims to lease 20 lakh sq ft of Grade-A office space in the most sought after locations in Gurugram. As part of this focus, we have signed a mega deal with Incuspaze - a leading flexible workspace provider where 2,20,000 sq ft space has been provided on lease to them," said Sudeep Bhatt, president M3M.

RONALDO VS MBAPPÉ: CLASH OF GENERATIONS AT EURO 2024

AP ■ HAMBURG (GERMANY)
A clash of soccer icons. A They'll go head to head when Portugal plays France in the Euro 2024 quarterfinals on Friday, and this heavyweight meeting might have got just that little bit bigger. "It is, without doubt, my last European Championship," the 39-year-old Ronaldo said after his tearful, emotionally charged performance in Portugal's penalty-shootout victory over Slovenia in the last 16. That may have just confirmed what many were presuming anyway. Still, there's now a definitive specter of finality to Ronaldo's long, headline-grabbing Euros adventure that could be brought to an end by Mbappé, the heir apparent to Ronaldo and Lionel Messi after their long-time dominance of the sport. Mbappé grew up with pictures of Ronaldo on his bedroom wall. A photo is inevitably

doing the rounds on social media of what is apparently their first ever meeting, at Real Madrid's training ground at Valdebebas in 2012 when a 13-year-old Mbappé stood beside Ronaldo after a visit to the Spanish club where his sporting hero was the star player. In 2020, Mbappé posted on Twitter, now X, that Ronaldo was his "idol." And only a few months ago, Ronaldo reacted to Mbappé clinching a highly anticipated move to Madrid by writing on Instagram: "Excited to see you light up the Bernabeu." That Mbappé can now end Ronaldo's European Championship career - who knows, it might even be his last ever major tournament - adds an intriguing subplot to a match that will be watched around the world. "Let's go, let's go to war," Ronaldo said of the match against France, whom he considers as the top contender at Euro 2024 along with Spain.

He said he was driven to tears against Slovenia not at the prospect of elimination but because his main motivation these days is "making people happy" and he had a penalty saved in extra time. "I'm moved by all that football means - by the enthusiasm I have for the game, the enthusiasm for seeing my supporters, my family, the

affection people have for me. "It's not about leaving the world of football. What else is there for me to do or win?" Ronaldo heads into Friday's game having failed to score in

eight straight matches at major tournaments - Portugal's last four at the 2022 World Cup and its four games at Euro 2024 - and with growing concerns about

whether he deserves what appears to be a guaranteed spot in the team under Roberto Martinez. Things haven't been straightforward for Mbappé, either, at Euro 2024. He sustained a broken nose in France's group opener against Austria and has since been wearing a vision-limiting protective facemask during games. Mbappé has scored one goal and that was from the penalty spot against Poland - it's the only goal scored by a France player at these Euros. "He will have to get used to it," France coach Didier Deschamps said of Mbappé and his mask, "because, to protect (his nose), he will have to wear it for a few weeks - or even a few months." Few would have predicted the top scorer at the last World Cup (Mbappé) and the record scorer in men's international soccer (Ronaldo) to have just one goal between them heading into the quarterfinals. But no one will be surprised if

they come alive in Hamburg, with the pressure on and the occasion so big. Mbappé, remember, scored a hat trick in the World Cup final and has been logging Ronaldo-esque scoring numbers in the first part of his career. He's already on 48 goals for France at the age of 25, and is also on 48 goals in the Champions League from 73 appearances. He is chasing down Ronaldo's scoring records at both international (130) and Champions League (140) level and will likely only succeed by showing the same undimmed passion and desire as the player he used to copy as a kid. As their countries' respective captains, they'll shake hands and embrace before kickoff. You can bet they'll do the same after the match. By that time, one of them will be on his way home. For Mbappé, there will surely be more European Championships down the road.



Germany star Kroos aims to disappoint Real Madrid teammates at Euro 2024

AP ■ BERLIN
Germany great Toni Kroos hopes the next game isn't his last. Heavyweights Germany and Spain clash at the European Championship on Friday, when the winner will advance to the semifinals. Kroos is ending his playing career after Germany's last game at Euro 2024. He hopes that will be the final in Berlin's Olympiastadion. But he knows it could be as soon as Friday if Spain - the most impressive team so far - knocks out the host nation in Stuttgart. "I'm not nostalgic at all," Kroos said Wednesday at potentially his last press conference as a player. He said he wasn't assuming Spain "will be my last game. So, I think we can all look forward to seeing each other again." Kroos has played a key role in lifting the pre-tournament gloom surrounding the German team and turning it to optimism that the hosts can go on to win Euro 2024. It would be a fitting sendoff for a player who has already signed off on a glittering club career by winning the Champions League and Spanish league with Real Madrid. "It's pretty difficult to plan a European

already in 2021, after Germany lost to England in the last 16 of the pandemic-delayed Euro 2020 tournament. But one of the first things Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann did after his appointment in September 2023 was ask the cool-headed midfielder if he'd consider returning to help Germany's title bid in its home tournament. Fortunately for Germany - which was really struggling with two defeats and a draw from Nagelsmann's first four games - Kroos said yes. It's arguably the single biggest factor in the team's upturn as Kroos' experience and calmness under pressure gave confidence to the players around him. The 34-year-old returned to help Germany beat France and the Netherlands in friendlies in March, and Greece before Euro 2024, then he helped Germany progress from the group stage with wins over Scotland and Hungary, and a draw with Switzerland. Kroos maintained a calm, assured presence in a turbulent win over Denmark in the last 16, helping Germany get further than it had in the last edition. "We're now finally in the stages of the

tournament that we really wanted to be in, and we can be happy with that," Kroos said. "We're motivated, however, in the team and in the locker room, to get much further. And we're convinced we can manage that." Kroos will face former Real Madrid teammates Dani Carvajal, Nacho and Joselu on Friday. The latter said he wants to send him into retirement, but Kroos took it with good humor. "I know him very well. I know how he meant it," Kroos said. "So, I'll let him wish and do everything I can so that it doesn't come true." Kroos said his future involves kids, both his own and young players at an academy he plans to open in Madrid. Seemingly unflappable on the field, Kroos appeared at peace with the fact that Friday's game could be his last, comforted because the decision is not dependent on the whims of anyone else. "There will never be anything I can do as well as playing football. And this phase will be over," Kroos said. "On the other hand, I'm really looking forward to this new phase, because at some point this day comes for every active player. And I'd rather pick this day out for myself.

Championship title but having it as a goal is of course the case," Kroos said. "I think it will be really difficult to finish more successfully than I left it with Madrid. And now of course I'm trying to do the same here." Kroos retired from the national team

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I am going to Olympics at 14, all sacrifices were worth it: Swimmer Dhinidhi

PTI ■ BENGALURU
At times, she misses the care-free pleasures her peers enjoy and occasionally experiences a sense of solitude, but all of that has been worth it for 14-year-old swimmer Dhinidhi Desinghu, who is gearing up to fulfil her dream of competing at the Olympics later this month. The Bengaluru swimmer, who studies in class ninth, is set to be the youngest member of the Indian contingent at the Paris Olympics. "Sometimes I miss the fun generally kids of my age have. I do not go out much with friends and feel lonely. But then I wanted to swim and I wanted to go to the Olympics," Dhinidhi told PTI Bhasha in an exclusive interview at her residence. "I am the one who chose this path for me. With that comes a lot of sacrifices but I do feel different, extraordinary and proud. At 14, I am going to the Olympics, so all the sacrifices are worth it," she added. The Olympic cycle has been an underwhelming one for Indian swimming as none of the swimmers were able to breach either the 'A' or 'B' qualification time. But Dhinidhi has been on a roll, winning medals at the National

Games and the senior National championships last year. Her performances this season made her the top-ranked Indian female swimmer with the Swimming Federation of India handing her one of the two Universality places and an opportunity of a lifetime. "I knew that I had a chance (of making the Olympics) because I have been working really very hard but it was surprising that I got this chance so early in my career. Being the youngest one in the Indian contingent is a big honour." "I am super excited to be a part of the Indian Olympic contingent as I will get a chance to meet the greatest athletes," said Dhinidhi, who will compete in the women's 200m freestyle event. Having got the opportunity to compete at the Olympics at such a young age, Dhinidhi wants to soak in everything and gain experience. "This is just the beginning and I have a long long way to go. I am really excited to know what more I can do in 2028 and 2032. "I want to experience the feeling of staying at the Olympic village. What kind of races are being held there as the competition in India is totally differ-

ent from what we get at international level. I want to see the dedication, the focus and the preparation of world class athletes. "I am not thinking about performance as it is just about learning this time. I am sure whatever learnings I have here, that will make me a better athlete." She is excited to meet her idol -- seven-time Olympic gold medalist swimmer Katie Ledecky. "I made a greeting card last year for her. I used to think that whenever I get a chance to meet her, I will give this to her. I looked up at her from a very young age and luckily, I got this chance. Hopefully I can give it to her in Paris. I will be on the seventh moon if I get a chance to even see her," she said.

Indian-origin schoolgirl chess prodigy to be youngest in England team

PTI ■ LONDON
Bodhana Sivanandan, a nine-year-old Indian-origin schoolgirl is set to make chess history after she became the youngest person selected to represent England internationally in any sport. Bodhana, from Harrow in north-west London, will join the England Women's Team at the Chess Olympiad in Budapest, Hungary, in September. The others in her team are all in their 20s, 30s or 40s. "I found out yesterday after I came back from school when my dad told me. I was happy. I hope I'll do well and I'll get another title," she told the BBC on Wednesday. Malcolm Pein, manager of the England chess team, described the schoolgirl as one of the most remarkable British chess prodigies he has ever seen. "It's exciting - she's on course to be one of the best British players ever," he said. Her father, Siva Sivanandan, says he remains mystified about where his daughter got her talent. "I'm an engineering graduate, as is my wife, but I'm not good at chess," he said. Bodhana first picked up chess during the pandemic lockdown when Siva's friend was going back to India and gave her a few bags which also had a chess board. "I was interested in the pieces, so I started playing," she recalls. Last December, Sivanandan won the European Blitz Chess Championship in Zagreb, Croatia, and was dubbed "super talented" at the time. Soon after, she was among a group of young chess enthusiasts

invited by British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to 10 Downing Street to mark the government's major new GBP 1 million investment package for the game. The package has since been in place to support children attending schools in disadvantaged areas across England to learn and play chess, improve the visibility and availability of the

game, and fund elite playing. As part of the package, the UK's Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) said it would invest GBP 500,000 in the English Chess Federation (ECF) over two years to develop the next generation of world-class talent. Funds will support expert coaching, training camps and cutting-edge computer

analysis for international events to assist current grandmasters and up-and-coming players. Alongside the support committed to elite players, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) will provide GBP 250,000 to 85 local authorities across England to install 100 new chess tables in public parks and outdoor green spaces to allow more people to play, connect, tackle loneliness, and develop problem-solving skills. In addition, the outgoing Sunak-led government set out plans to encourage more primary school children, particularly girls, to learn to play the game. The UK Department for Education offered grants of up to GBP 2,000 to at least 100 schools in disadvantaged areas across England, subject to interest.

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Haas F1 team signs teenage British driver Oliver Bearman on multi-year deal from 2025

AP ■ KANNAPOLIS (US)
Oliver Bearman has been signed on a multiyear deal by the Haas Formula 1 team from 2025 onward. Haas announced the signing in a statement Thursday, without giving more details. The 19-year-old 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. "It's hard to put into words just how much this means to me. To say out loud that I will be a Formula 1 driver for (the) Haas F1 Team makes me so immensely proud," Bearman said. "To be one of the very few people who get to do the thing that they dreamed of as a child is something truly incredible." Bearman impressed with a stunning seventh-place finish at the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix in March, when he stood in for Carlos Sainz Jr. He got the

unexpected F1 debut after Sainz was diagnosed with appendicitis and needed an operation. Bearman, who was 18 at the time, became the third-youngest driver in F1. He had only had two practice sessions with Haas - in 2023 - yet produced a commanding drive on a tricky circuit that was way beyond his limited experience. He is currently competing in the F2 championship and is a reserve driver for both Ferrari and Haas - which uses a Ferrari engine. He won the Austrian GP sprint race last weekend driving for Prema Racing in F2.

Bearman signed for the prestigious Ferrari academy in 2021 after being earmarked as a rising star. "I wouldn't be here without you," he told Ferrari. "Thank you for preparing me since F4 for this incredible opportunity and know I will give it everything I have." Haas team owner Gene Haas has high hopes for Bearman. "He's undoubtedly an exciting rookie prospect, not just based on what he showed in Saudi Arabia but also through his time developing his relationship with our team," Haas said. "I'm personally excited to see how he grows as a driver, and we look forward to seeing him deliver for (the) Haas F1 Team next season and beyond." Bearman's promotion means there will be four British drivers on the F1 grid next year, with Lewis Hamilton (who is joining Ferrari), George Russell (Mercedes) and Lando Norris (McLaren) the others.



Novak Djokovic, Rafael Nadal, Andy Murray, Iga Swiatek and Coco Gauff lead the Olympics entry list

AP ■ LONDON
Novak Djokovic, Rafael Nadal and Andy Murray all were included on the entry list for tennis at the Paris Olympics released by the International Tennis Federation on Thursday, as was Daniil Medvedev, who technically will be competing as a "neutral" athlete rather than representing Russia because of that country's ongoing war in Ukraine. Djokovic (Serbia) and Murray (Britain) are both 37, and Nadal (Spain) is 38, and all own multiple Grand Slam titles. Djokovic holds a men's record of 24 major trophies - but has never won a gold medal at the Olympics. Nadal, next on the men's Slam list with 22, won golds in singles in 2008 and in doubles in 2016. He skipped Wimbledon, which is currently being played, to prepare for the Olympics.

Murray won three major championships and is the only tennis player with consecutive singles gold medals at the Summer Games. He has said he plans to retire after the Paris Olympics, which will hold tennis matches from July 27 to August 4 on the clay courts at Roland Garros, the site of the French Open - where Nadal is a 14-time champ. The leading women on the entry list are No. 1 Iga Swiatek (Poland), No. 2 Coco Gauff (United States) and No. 4 Elena Rybakina (Kazakhstan). No. 3 Aryna Sabalenka decided not to go to the Olympics; her nation, Belarus, aided Russia in its invasion of Ukraine. So, she would have competed as a "neutral" athlete, like Medvedev. Swiatek is a five-time Grand Slam champion - including at the French Open in four of the past five years - and Gauff and Rybakina have won one major apiece. Gauff made the US

team for the Tokyo Games three years ago. But, she did not go because she tested positive for COVID-19. There are 64-player draws for women's and men's singles, and 32 teams each in women's and men's doubles. The 16 entries for mixed doubles will be determined on July 24. The draw to determine the brackets will be in Paris on July 25. Among the other players announced Thursday are three-time major champion Carlos Alcaraz - who will play doubles alongside Nadal for Spain - No. 1 Jannik Sinner (Italy), Tokyo Olympics gold medalist Alexander Zverev (Germany), 2008 doubles gold medalist Stan Wawrinka (Switzerland), four-time Grand Slam winner Naomi Osaka (Japan), 2019 US Open champion Bianca Andreescu (Canada) and 2018 Australian Open champion Caroline Wozniacki (Denmark).

PETTY REPAIRING OF ELECTRICAL INSTALLATION OVER RANGIYA DIVISION

E-Tender Notice No. RNY-EL-T-02-2024-25. E-Tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following works: **Name of work:** At Rangiya Division:- Petty repairing of electrical installation over Rangiya division for a period of two years. **Tender Value:** ₹2,38,01,865.52/- **Earnest Money:** ₹2,69,000/- **Date & Time of closing of tender:** 13.00 hrs. of 31-07-2024. For details please visit www.ireps.gov.in.
Sr. DEE, Rangiya
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY
Serving Customers With A Smile

CORRIGENDUM NO. 1, 2 & 3 FOR TENDER NOTICE NO. N_2_HQ_2024-25 AGAINST TENDER NO. N_2_HQ_EPC_ABS_2024-25 DTD. 11-06-2024			
Corrigendum against Tender No.: N_2_HQ_EPC_ABS_2024-25 has been modified as under:			
NIT HEADER		CORRIGENDUM NO. 1	
Field Name	Existing Value	Modified Value	
Advertised Value (INR)	₹ 2517338111.32	₹ 2513058771.51	
NIT SCHEDULE			
Code	Field Name	Existing Value	Modified Value
Schedule-01 Item-01	Basic Value	₹ 2517338111.32	₹ 2513058771.51
NEW ITEMS ADDED			
S. No	Document Description	File Name	
1	FSR Section I and II and Draft CA Schedule G and other modification	Corrigendum File to be uploaded 1.pdf	
NEW ITEMS ADDED		CORRIGENDUM NO. 2	
S. No	Document Description	File Name	
1	FSR Section II Para 2 Scope of Work Relay Room Extension	extension of relayroom_1.pdf	
NEW ITEMS ADDED		CORRIGENDUM NO. 3	
S. No	Document Description	File Name	
1	TRD JPO for AT Provision	Joint Procedure Order for supply installation testing and commissioning of Auxiliary Transformer by SNT1.pdf	
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY Serving Customers With A Smile			